



Art in its Era: Appreciating Art Against Its Historical Context Teaching “Established Convention and Aesthetic Charm” in Senior Secondary Art Appreciation

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Abstract

This paper addresses the current situation in senior secondary art appreciation teaching where students experience alienation and detachment from traditional Chinese artistic concepts such as established convention and aesthetic charm (程式和意韵, cheng shi he yi yun). It proposes adopting “Art in its Era” as the core pedagogical principle. The thesis contends that only by situating artworks within their specific historical, social, and intellectual-cultural contexts can their form, content, and spiritual essence be thoroughly comprehended. Taking established convention and aesthetic charm, a core category of traditional Chinese art, as its pedagogical case study, this paper systematically constructs a teaching framework centred on “historical context” spanning the Wei-Jin to Ming-Qing periods. It meticulously analyses how established convention emerged and evolved within distinct historical eras, and how they served the expression of specific aesthetic charm. The paper further explores the dual value of this pedagogical approach: not only does it enable students to gain profound insights into tradition, but it also guides them in reflecting upon contemporary visual culture. This enhances their humanistic literacy and critical thinking abilities, thereby elevating art appreciation courses from mere knowledge transmission to the cultivation of cultural understanding and value construction.

Keywords: art in its era; established convention; aesthetic charm; senior secondary art appreciation; Chinese painting; cultural identity.

Introduction

The senior secondary art appreciation curriculum plays a pivotal role in cultivating students’ aesthetic literacy and nurturing their cultural identity. However, when encountering traditional Chinese arts such as ancient painting, calligraphy, and opera, students frequently encounter two predicaments. Firstly, they find these works obscure and difficult to comprehend due to their unfamiliarity with the unique linguistic systems employed (e.g., brushwork, texture techniques, and theatrical roles). Secondly, they tend to judge them simplistically by modern standards of “innovation” and “individuality”, misinterpreting the “established convention (程式, cheng shi)” inherent in traditional art as “rigidity” and “obsolescence”. The fundamental challenge in teaching practice lies in guiding students to transcend temporal barriers, to truly enter the spiritual realm of classical art, and to comprehend why it stands as a treasure of Chinese civilisation.

The pair concepts of established convention (程式, cheng shi) and aesthetic charm (意韵, yi yun), central categories within traditional Chinese art theory, epitomise this challenge. The established convention denote highly refined, standardised artistic languages and formal norms that have been passed down through generations. Such convention can be observed in various artistic traditions, including the “Eighteen Brushstrokes (十八描, shi ba miao)” and “Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting 《芥子园画传, Jie Zi Yuan Hua Chuan》” in Chinese painting, or the “singing, reciting, acting, and fighting” techniques and facial makeup systems in Peking Opera. The concept of aesthetic charm (意韵, yi yun) encapsulates the transcendent ethos, emotional atmosphere, and infinite charm that is intrinsic to artistic works, representing the very lifeblood and soul of art. On the surface, the terms “established convention (程式, cheng shi)” and “aesthetic charm” appear to be contradictory, with the former implying constraint and the latter pursuing freedom. Nevertheless, the zenith of Chinese art is to be found precisely

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in achieving soaring aesthetic charm within strict established convention, the proverbial “dance with shackles”.

The resolution of this paradox is contingent upon the adoption of a historical perspective and appreciation method centred on “art in its era (艺术当时代, *yi shu dang shi dai*)”. As art historian Gombrich (2008) emphasised in *The Story of Art*: The assertion that “art is non-existent; artists are the only entities that can be considered to be artistic” is one that is frequently made. The purpose of this statement is to provide a repositioning of art within its particular creative context. It is an irrefutable fact that no art form materialises in a cultural vacuum; rather, it is an inevitable consequence of its historical period, profoundly influenced by the prevailing political landscape, economic conditions, philosophical thought, aesthetic trends, and technical capabilities of the era. Consequently, the teaching of Established Convention and Aesthetic Charm must never be detached from its historical backdrop through isolated, purely formal analysis. It is imperative to elucidate to students that the establishment and evolution of every classical form is representative of that era’s foundational responses to the questions of “what constitutes beauty” and “why art exists”. Furthermore, every pursuit of aesthetic charm is indicative of the collective spirit and individual sensibilities of its time.

The objective of this paper is to propose a teaching model for the Established Convention and Aesthetic Charm unit in senior secondary art education, guided by the principle that “art in its era”. The book employs a clear historical narrative, combined with specific texts and case studies, to enable students to understand how established convention are generated and aesthetic charm conveyed. This process serves to translate the abstract artistic concepts into a cultural lineage that is perceptible, comprehensible, and resonant.

Conceptual Analysis and Pedagogical Challenges of Established Convention and Aesthetic Charm

Prior to embarking on teaching practice, it is imperative to furnish a lucid and accessible delineation of the concepts of established convention and aesthetic charm within the classroom setting, thereby addressing and dispelling students’ preconceptions.

Established convention (程式, *cheng shi*): not a constraint, but the crystallisation of wisdom

In the context of teaching, it is imperative to eschew an approach that is characterised by a negative perspective, namely the notion that established convention (程式, *cheng shi*) serves as a hindrance to creativity. Instead, the focus should be on guiding students to comprehend the universality and necessity of established convention across a broader range of domains.

Analogical understanding: Examples of this include poetic metre (tone patterns, parallelism), musical forms (sonata structure, rondo), sporting regulations (basketball’s three-step rule, football’s offside law) and linguistic grammar. These

established convention form the bedrock of efficient communication and expression within their respective domains, ensuring both the possibility of exchange and the recognisability of works.

Essential Explanation: Art theorists Yu and Ye (2018) note in *Symbols: Language and Art* that artistic symbols (established convention) represent the abstraction and crystallisation of emotional forms of imagery. Established convention are defined as the optimal formal models and aesthetic common denominators distilled by predecessors through prolonged practice from natural phenomena and human emotions. These systems are considered to form a “code” system, recognised and transmitted by specific cultural groups. It is only through the mastery of this code that creators can effectively engage in dialogue with audiences and facilitate their understanding of the work. Established convention thus function as vehicles for the transmission of culture and platforms for artistic dialogue.

Aesthetic charm (意韵, *yi yun*): not abstruse, but the very breath of life

The abstract nature of aesthetic charm frequently results in students experiencing a sense of confusion. The act of teaching should strive to render abstract concepts concrete and sensory, thereby facilitating a more profound and effective learning experience.

Sensory Synesthesia: It is imperative to guide students to engage multiple senses so that they may experience the artwork not only visually, but also through other senses such as touch. To illustrate this point, consider the experience of viewing a painting of a solitary angler on a frigid river. Can the viewer “sense” the chill in the air? The question arises as to whether the sound of the water can be perceived amidst the pervasive silence. The question that arises is whether it is possible to “experience” the angler’s inner solitude and tranquillity. This comprehensive psychological experience, which transcends mere vision, marks the inception of aesthetic charm.

Conceptual definition: As posited by Zhang (2011) of the Tang dynasty in *Records of Famous Paintings Through the Ages*, the notion that “intention precedes the brushstroke (意在笔先, *yi zai bi xian*)” is a fundamental principle in the realm of artistic creation. Ouyang (2001), a painter of the Song dynasty, is quoted as having advocated that “ancient paintings captured meaning rather than form (古画画意不画形, *gu hua hua yi bu hua xing*)”. Meanwhile, Su (1982) is recorded as having declared that “to judge paintings by their resemblance to form is to see as a child sees (论画以形似, *lun hua yi xing si*, 见与儿童邻, *jian yu er tong lin*)”. The concept of aesthetic charm (意韵, *yi yun*) encapsulates the “spirit (神, *shen*)”, “vitality (气, *qi*)”, and “realm (境, *jing*)” of an artistic creation. This concept can be described as the “image beyond the image (象外之象, *xiang wai zhi xiang*)”, and the “meaning beyond the words (言外之意, *yan wai zhi yi*)”. The following aspects are encompassed: (1) *Spiritual Essence:* The intrinsic spiritual quality of figures or objects is a concept that

has been expounded upon by Gu (2011) in his work “On Capturing the Spirit (传神论, *chuan shen lun*)”; (2) *Vitality and Rhythm*: The work’s overall vitality and sense of rhythm (the foremost of Xie’s (2011) “Six Principles”) are particularly noteworthy; (3) *Poetic Realm*: The evocative, habitable poetic space born from the fusion of emotion and scenery (as defined by Wang (1998) in “Critique of Lyric Poetry”).

Core teaching dilemmas and breakthrough points

Conventional pedagogical approaches frequently portray established convention (程式, *cheng shi*) and aesthetic charm as static aesthetic concepts, accompanied by illustrative materials. This approach, however, risks the dissociation of knowledge from emotion. Students may commit to memory terms such as “hemp-fibre texture (披麻皴, *pi ma cun*)” or “axe-chop texture (斧劈皴, *fu pi cun*)” without comprehending the rationale behind Song dynasty painters’ adoption of these techniques. They may also recite the concept of “vitality and rhythm (气韵生动, *qi yun sheng dong*)” without fully apprehending its manifestation within a painting.

The key to overcoming this impasse lies in situating static concepts within the dynamic currents of history. The fundamental pedagogical question that should be addressed is as follows: The question that needs to be addressed is why this particular era gave birth to, and necessitated, such a set of established convention to express this particular aesthetic charm. Thus commences our exploration through time and space, charting the origins of art.

Constructing the Core Curriculum under the Concept of “Art in its Era”: The Historical Transformation of Established Convention and Aesthetic Charm

The unit’s pedagogy will be structured across four pivotal historical periods, employing representative case studies to progressively reveal the interplay between established convention and aesthetic charm within distinct eras.

The Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties: the awakening of individuality and the emergence of the “capturing the spirit” established convention *In-depth Analysis of the Historical Context*

Politics and Society: Centuries of division and warfare, the collapse of centralised authority, and the rise of aristocratic clans who seized cultural dominance. The scholar-official class engaged in profound reflection on the value of individual existence.

Ideas and Philosophy: The dominance of Confucianism was thus effectively dismantled. Metaphysical discourse flourished, exploring questions of “being and non-being (有无, *you wu*)” and “the distinction between words and meaning (言意之辨, *yan yi zhi bian*)”, and pursuing individual liberation and spiritual freedom (as illustrated by the anecdotes of scholars recorded in the *Shishuo Xinyu* 《世说新语, *shi shuo xin yu*》). The dissemination of Buddhism was

extensive, introducing the concepts of karma and reincarnation, as well as novel visual forms such as cave art.

Interactive Teaching of Established Convention (程式, *cheng shi*) and Aesthetic Charm (意韵, *yi yun*)



Figure 1 The Court Ladies 《女史箴图, *Nv Shi Zhen Tu*》, Scroll (detail), Coloured on silk, 24.8 cm × 348.2 cm, attributed to Gu Kaizhi, Eastern Jin dynasty, British Museum

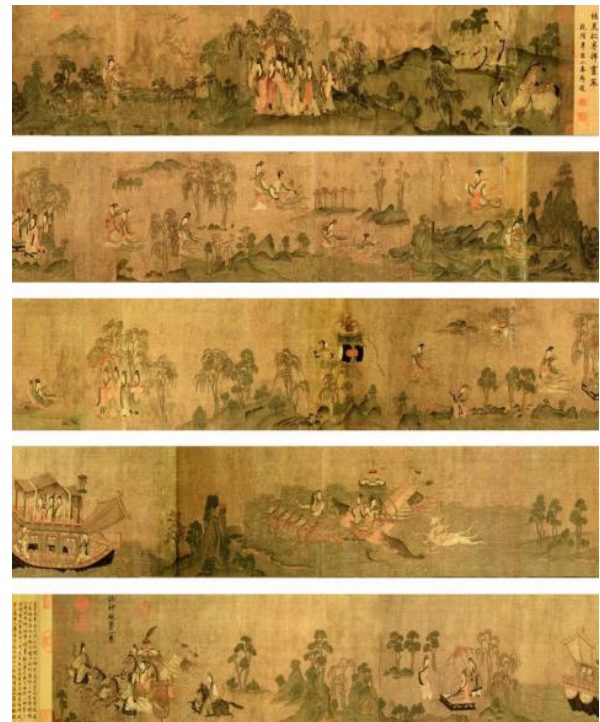


Figure 2 The Lady Luo 《洛神赋图, *Luo Shen Fu Tu*》, Scroll, Coloured on silk, 27.1 cm × 572.8 cm, Gu Kaizhi (Song dynasty copy), Eastern Jin dynasty, Palace Museum

Core Case Studies: Gu Kaizhi’s *Admonitions of The Court Ladies* 《女史箴图, *Nv Shi Zhen Tu*》 (Figure 1) and *The Lady Luo* 《洛神赋图, *Luo Shen Fu Tu*》 (Figure 2), alongside his theoretical principles of “Capturing the spirit lies precisely in the eyes (传神写照, *chuan shen xie zhao*, 正在阿堵中, *zheng zai a du zhong*)” and “Transforming imagination into exquisite realisation (迁想妙得, *qian xiang miao de*)”; Xie’s (2011) *Record of Ancient Paintings* 《古画

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品录, *Gu Hua Pin Lu*) and his Six Principles of Painting (六法论, *liu fa lun*).

Established Convention Analysis:

The established figure convention—Elegant Bone Structure and Ethereal Form (秀骨清像, xiu gu qing xiang): Taking the figures depicted by Gu Kaizhi as an example, they possess slender builds, gaunt features, flowing wide sleeves, and an air of graceful poise. This does not represent a realistic portrayal of all individuals of the era, but rather a visual distillation of the idealised scholarly spirit epitomised by the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, a blend of profound insight, penetrating vision, exquisite appreciation, and deep emotion. It constitutes an elite, symbolic aesthetic formula. Documentary Evidence: *The Record of Famous Paintings Through the Ages (历代名画记, Li Dai Ming Hua Ji)* notes that Gu Kaizhi's portrait of Pei Kai featured "three hairs added to the cheek, which viewers perceived as rendering the spirit exceptionally sublime" (Zhang, 2011).

The line-drawing established convention—Ancient and Exquisite Fine-Line Brushwork (高古游丝描, gao gu you si miao): Gu Kaizhi's lines are characterised by their tautness, continuity, and cyclical transcendence, which has been likened to "silk spun by spring silkworms". This uniform, fluid, and resilient line style perfectly embodied the ethereal, transcendent, and spiritual aesthetic pursued by Wei-Jin literati.

The Capturing Spirit established convention (程式, cheng shi)—Capturing Spirit Through the Eyes (阿堵传神, a du chuan shen): Gu Kaizhi regarded the depiction of eyes as pivotal to the success of figure painting. This extreme focus on and method of rendering eyes itself became a significant established convention. In the execution of his figures, he would, on occasion, leave the pupils unfinished for extended periods of time, sometimes spanning years. When questioned on the rationale behind this decision, he provided the following response: The aesthetic quality of the limbs is irrelevant to the fundamental nature of artistry. The capture of spirit and the rendering of likeness are precisely achieved in the eyes.

Pursuit of aesthetic charm:

At this juncture, the pursuit of aesthetic charm centred upon capturing the "spirit" and "character" of subjects. The objective of art underwent a transition during the Han dynasty, shifting from the didactic function that characterised it in previous eras. Instead, it began to serve the purpose of capturing and expressing the inner spirit, wisdom, bearing, and individual temperament of the subject. This aesthetic charm is attributed to the individual's "spirit," rather than the collective's "appearance". In the *The Lady Luo (洛神赋图, Luo Shen Fu Tu)* (Illustrated Ode to the Goddess of the Luo River), the melancholy and pathos of divine-human love are conveyed through the imagery of "graceful as a startled wild goose, elegant as a gliding dragon." This imagery is a manifestation of the intertwined romanticism and sorrow that is characteristic of the Wei-Jin era's spirit.

Classroom Questions and Discussion:

A comparative analysis of Han dynasty relief carvings, such as the *Jing Ke Assassination of Emperor Qin (荆轲刺秦王, Jing ke Ci Qin wang)*, which emphasise dynamism, narrative and ritualistic function, and Gu Kaizhi's *The Lady Luo (洛神赋图, Luo Shen Fu Tu)*, which emphasises emotion, atmosphere and personal lyricism, can provide an intuitive understanding of the shift in artistic function from "educating the masses and upholding social order" to "delighting the spirit". In what ways can the established convention of "elegant bone structure and ethereal form" be said to reflect the Wei-Jin literati's disdain for mundane affairs and pursuit of spiritual transcendence, transcending social conventions to embrace natural instincts (越名教而任自然, *yue ming jiao er ren zi ran*), as a prevailing ethos of the era?

Tang and Song Dynasties: the imperial atmosphere and the perfection of the "intentional realm" paradigm

In-depth Analysis of the Historical Context Politics and Society: The Tang Dynasty is notable for its inclusiveness and might. The two Song Dynasties are distinguished by their scholar-official governance and prosperity. Despite its military weakness, the Song era was characterised by remarkable economic and cultural flourishing. This period is notable for the establishment of a well-developed civil bureaucracy and a sophisticated imperial painting academy system.

Philosophy and Thought: The coexistence of three religions during the Tang period is widely regarded as a significant catalyst for the cultural confidence that characterised this era. In contrast, the Song witnessed the rise of Neo-Confucianism, a philosophical movement that emphasised the pursuit of knowledge through rational means. This intellectual movement permeated all spheres of society, contributing to a deeper level of intellectual and spiritual enlightenment. Concurrently, the Chan Buddhist approach of "directly pointing to the original mind" profoundly influenced the artistic concepts of literati.

Interactive Teaching of Established Convention (程式, cheng shi) and Aesthetic Charm (意韵, yi yun)

Core Case Studies: Fan Kuan's *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams (溪山行旅图, Xi Shan Xing Lv Tu)* (Figure 3), Guo Xi's *Early Spring (早春图, Zao Chun Tu)* (Figure 4), and Emperor Huizong's *Hibiscus and Golden Pheasant (芙蓉锦鸡图, Fu Rong Jin Ji Tu)* (Figure 5) are notable examples of this genre.



Figure3 *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* 《溪山行旅图, Xi Shan Xing Lv Tu》, Hanging scroll, Ink on silk, 206.3 cm × 103.3 cm, Fan Kuan, Northern Song Dynasty, National Palace Museum, Taipei

Established Convention Analysis:

“The established convention of Landscape Painting: The Maturation of Texturing Techniques (皴法, *cun fa*) and the Three Distances Method.”

Texturing Techniques: Fan Kuan’s *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* 《溪山行旅图, Xi Shan Xing Lv Tu》 employs “raindrop texturing (雨点皴, *yu dian cun*)” or “bean-shaped texturing (豆瓣皴, *dou ban cun*)”, utilising dense, abrupt brushstrokes to depict the hard texture and substantial volume of the loess mountains and rocks in the Guanzhong region, thereby creating an oppressive visual effect where “the distant view remains within arm’s reach.” Guo Xi’s *Early Spring* 《早春图, Zao Chun Tu》 employs the artistic device of “circular cloud-like texturing (卷云皴, *juan yun cun*)”, utilising rounded, undulating lines to vividly render the drifting mist and the reawakening of life amidst the mountains in early spring. It is evident that these texturing techniques embody the pinnacle of abstraction and symbolisation of natural geological textures. This is achieved through artists’ sustained engagement with nature as their primary educator. Documentary Evidence: In his treatise *The Sublime Ambition of the Hermit* 《林泉高致, Lin Quan Gao Zhi》, Guo (1993) expounds on methodologies for the observation of seasonal landscapes and the mutable light of dawn and dusk, emphasising that “one must become the mountains and rivers to capture their essence (身即山川而取之, *shen ji shan chuan er qu zhi*)”.



Figure4 *Early Spring* 《早春图, Zao Chun Tu》, Hanging scroll, Ink on silk, 158.3 cm × 108.6 cm, Guo Xi, Northern Song Dynasty, National Palace Museum, Taipei

Composition: Guo Xi systematically proposed the three distances method in *The Sublime Ambition of the Hermit*: To gaze upon the summit from the mountain’s base is called height and distance; To peer from the mountain’s front towards its rear is called depth and distance; To view distant mountains from near ones is called level distance (Wang, 2010). This established a classic compositional framework for spatial treatment in landscape painting, enabling artists to construct a credible, navigable, and habitable cosmic space within a single painting. *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* 《溪山行旅图, Xi Shan Xing Lv Tu》 exemplifies height and distance, while *Early Spring* 《早春图, Zao Chun Tu》 synthesises all three distances.

· *The Established Convention of Flower-and-Bird Painting: Methodical Sketching (格法写生, ge fa xie sheng) and Poetic Themes*

Song court painting was characterised by an extreme emphasis on form resemblance. The Academy of Fine Arts, under the auspices of Emperor Huizong, was known to frequently utilise poetic lines as the foundation for examination themes. A notable example of this practice can be found in the following lines: “Returning through blossoms, horse hooves fragrant (踏花归去马蹄香, *ta hua gui qu ma ti xiang*)” (Deng, 2010). It was imperative for painters to not only depict forms with precision, but also to convey vitality and poetic charm. Documentary evidence: The *Xuanhe Catalogue of Paintings* emphasised that “The subtlety of painting often lies in this very expression of feeling, which is closely intertwined with the poet’s art (绘事之妙, *hui shi zhi miao*, 多寓兴于此, *duo yu xing yu ci*, 与诗人相表里焉, *yu shi ren xiang biao li yan*)” (Xuan he hua pu, 2012). The notion of poetry and painting as one (诗画一律, *shi hua yi lv*) can be regarded as a sophisticated established convention of aesthetic charm.

Pursuit of aesthetic charm

· *Northern Song Landscape Painting:* The grand artistic conception of “majestic mountains and vast waters, encompassing the entire realm as a unified whole” was

sought. Fan Kuan's *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* 《溪山行旅图, Xi Shan Xing Lv Tu》 conveys an overwhelming sense of pressure that not only manifests the power of nature but also symbolises the imperial domain and cosmic order. The aesthetic charm of the subject can be attributed to its majestic grandeur, sublime dignity, and eternal quality. In his *Dream Pool Essays* 《梦溪笔谈, Meng Xi Bi Tan》, Shen (2003) thus appraised it: "Mountain Peaks Excel in Dense Forests, Henceforth Tending Towards Withered Age; Water's Edge Thrives on Abrupt, Towering Rocks, Henceforth Tending Towards Fierce Rigidity", offers a technical interpretation of this sublime aesthetic.

· *Song Dynasty Flower-and-Bird Painting and Southern Song Landscape Painting*: The pursuit of the poetic realm of poetry and painting as one (诗画一律, shi hua yi lv) and the boundless vitality of nature are the central themes of this study. Emperor Huizong's *Hibiscus and Golden Pheasant* 《芙蓉锦鸡图, Fu Rong Jin Ji Tu》 artfully juxtaposes the pheasant's resplendence with the lotus's delicate beauty, while the inscribed poem's reference to the "Five Virtues (五德, wu de)" seamlessly intertwines opulence, auspiciousness, and moral instruction. Conversely, the "one corner, half a side (一角半边, yi jiao ban bian)" composition of Southern Song artists Ma Yuan and Xia Gui elicit boundless imagination from constrained perspectives. Employing the principle of "treating white space as black," their work embodies ethereal subtlety, restraint, and Zen-like contemplation, reflecting the refined, introspective aesthetic sensibilities of literati after the dynasty's retreat to a corner of the realm.



Figure5 *Hibiscus and Golden Pheasant* 《芙蓉锦鸡图, Fu Rong Jin Ji Tu》, Hanging scroll, Coloured on silk, 81.5 cm × 53.6 cm, Zhao Ji, Northern Song Dynasty, Palace Museum

Classroom Activities and Inquiry:

“Comparative Analysis: Juxtaposing Fan Kuan's *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* (Northern Song Dynasty,

panoramic and monumental) with Ma Yuan's *Solitary Angler in Cold River* 《寒江独钓图, Han Jiang Du Diao Tu》 (Figure 6) (Southern Song Dynasty, corner-focused and ethereally sparse), students are guided to analyse how differing compositional approaches shape starkly contrasting artistic atmospheres (majestic unity versus ethereal solitude). This exploration further examines their potential resonance with the political landscape of the Song dynasties and the intellectual mindset of their literati.”



Figure6 *Solitary Angler in Cold River* 《寒江独钓图, Han Jiang Du Diao Tu》, Scroll, Coloured on silk, 27.6 cm × 50.6 cm, Ma Yuan, Southern Song dynasty, Tokyo National Museum

Thematic Discussion: This study employs Emperor Huizong's *Hibiscus and Golden Pheasant* 《芙蓉锦鸡图, Fu Rong Jin Ji Tu》 as a case study, with the objective of examining the manner in which the spirit of “investigating things” is manifested in the finer details of the pheasant's plumage and the hibiscus leaves. The fundamental purpose of this extreme “investigating things” must be called into question. (Answer: The objective is not merely to achieve resemblance, but rather to attain the “principle” and “vital energy” that express the rhythmic vitality and harmonious order of all things in the cosmos through exhaustive inquiry into physical properties.)

Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties: the inscription of the mind and the emergence and consolidation of the “ink and brush” paradigm

In-depth Analysis of the Historical Context:

Politics and Society: During the Yuan Dynasty, when the Mongols were in power, the Han literati, who were the educated and literate members of the Chinese community, found themselves unable to progress in their careers. As a result, many of them chose to retreat to secluded mountain locations. The Ming and Qing eras are notable for the prevalence of autocratic imperial rule, characterised by frequent literary persecutions. A significant number of scholars, disillusioned by the lack of success experienced in their official careers, opted to channel their energies into literary and artistic pursuits.

Thought and Artistic Circles: Literati painting became the dominant artistic form. There was a shift amongst artists from serving the court to expressing their innermost thoughts, transforming art into a vessel for emotional expression and spiritual solace. The market for calligraphy and painting

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underwent a gradual maturation process, with works serving as a medium for intellectual exchange among literati.



Figure 7 *Autumn Clearings at the Fisherman's Village* 《渔庄秋霁图, Yu Zhuang Qiu Ji Tu》, Hanging scroll, Ink on paper, 96.1 cm × 46.1 cm, Ni Zan, Yuan dynasty, Shanghai Museum

Interactive Teaching of Established Convention (程式, cheng shi) and Aesthetic Charm:

Core Case Studies: The following texts are of particular interest in this context: Ni Zan's *Autumn Clearings at the Fisherman's Village* 《渔庄秋霁图, Yu Zhuang Qiu Ji Tu》 (Figure 7), Xu Wei's *Ink Grapes* 《墨葡萄图, Mo Pu Tao Tu》 (Figure 8), Zhu Da's *Lotus, Rocks and Waterfowl* 《荷石水禽图, He Shi Shui Qin Tu》 (Figure 9), and *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* 《芥子园画传, Jie Zi Yuan Hua Chuan》。

Established Convention Analysis:

· *The Autonomy of Ink and Brushwork:* Calligraphic brush techniques became fully integrated into painting. Zhao (1982) asserted: "Rocks are reminiscent of flying white; wood is reminiscent of ancient script. In order to paint bamboo, one must master the eight brush techniques. Should this be comprehensible, it should be recognised that painting and calligraphy are fundamentally one (石如飞白木如籀, shi ru fei bai mu ru zhou, 写竹还应八法通, xie zhu hai ying ba fa tong. 若也有人能会此, ruo ye you ren neng hui ci, 须知书画本来同, xu zhi shu hua ben lai tong)". The formal aesthetic of lines, their weight, rhythm, and tension, along with the dryness, wetness, density, and lightness of ink, attained unprecedented elevation. The subject matter became secondary; the technique (brushwork and ink) became the focal point and the criterion for appreciation. It is evident that Ni Zan's folded-belt texture (折带皴, zhe dai cun), executed with dry-brushed side-stroke, has been achieved in such a manner as to convey a sense of sparse elegance. In contrast, Xu Wei's grand freehand style, with its lavish splashes of ink and serpentine brushwork, has been employed in such a manner as to demonstrate the expressive power of brush and ink to its zenith.

Diagrammatisation and Popularisation: The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting 《芥子园画传, Jie Zi Yuan Hua Chuan》 systematically organised the painting techniques for a range of subjects, including landscapes, plum blossoms, orchids, bamboo, chrysanthemums, figures, and architecture from throughout the ages (Wang et al., 1998). The manual broke down these techniques into step-by-step diagrams for copying. The text proved to be a double-edged sword in its impact. While it achieved significant popularity in terms of disseminating knowledge of painting techniques and establishing a systematic approach to learning, it also exerted a profound influence on painting manuals. However, it is important to note that it also led subsequent generations of artists to adopt established convention in a mechanical manner, potentially compromising the depth and originality of their work. This detachment from nature and spirituality led to creations that were rigid and formulaic, resulting in criticism from subsequent eras.

Pursuit of aesthetic charm:

· *Yuan Dynasty:* The pursuit of the "unrestrained spirit" and "ancient charm" is encapsulated in "casual brushwork, unconcerned with literal resemblance". Ni Zan's *Autumn Clearings at the Fisherman's Village* 《渔庄秋霁图, Yu Zhuang Qiu Ji Tu》 is a prime example of this phenomenon, as illustrated by its signature composition of a river flanked by two banks. The artist has rendered vast expanses of blank space to represent lake waters, using sparse ink and brushwork to evoke a desolate atmosphere. This aesthetic charm mirrors his noble self-restraint and refusal to collaborate with the Yuan rulers. Ni's (2010) own inscription: My bamboo serves as a mere expression of the unrestrained spirit that resides within my heart; it is of no consequence to me whether its manifestation bears resemblance or not, the density or sparseness of its foliage, the curvature or linearity of its branches (余之竹聊以写胸中逸气耳, yu zhi zhu liao yi xie xiong zhong yi qi er, 岂复较其似与非, qi fu jiao qi si yu fei, 叶之繁与疏, ye zhi fan yu shu, 枝之斜与直哉, zhi zhi xie yu zhi zai)."

· *Ming and Qing Dynasties:* The pursuit of intense emotional catharsis and individual expression is of paramount importance. Xu Wei's *Ink Grapes* 《墨葡萄图, Mo Pu Tao Tu》, rendered in a style of cursive brushwork that evokes calligraphic wild cursive script, bears the inscription: "Having endured a considerable period of disorientation, I find myself in the advanced stages of senility. Ensnared in my study, I contemplate the passage of time and the vicissitudes of life, my thoughts giving way to a state of profound melancholy as I hear the evening wind howl through the environs. The pearls that emerge from my brush are devoid of commercial value; they are cast idly and then cast among wild vines (半生落魄已成翁, ban sheng luo po yi cheng weng, 独立书斋啸晚风, du li shu zhai xiao wan feng. 笔底明珠无处卖, bi di ming zhu wu chu mai, 闲抛闲掷野藤中, xian pao xian zhi ye teng zhong)" (Xu, 1983). The artist's oeuvre, encompassing painting, calligraphy and poetry, collectively articulates a cry of anguish, reflecting a life unrecognised and cynical towards

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the world. In Zhu Da's depictions of fish and birds, their eyes are depicted as being rolled skyward. These creatures are rendered in grotesque forms and precarious compositions, which express the artist's sense of twisted, solitary pride of his anguish. This sense is born of the artist's nation's ruin and his family's loss. At this juncture, the aesthetic charm is profoundly personalised and emotional.



Figure 8 *Autumn Clearings at the Fisherman's Village* 《渔庄秋霁图, Yu Zhuang Qiu Ji Tu》, Hanging scroll, Ink on paper, 96.1 cm × 46.1 cm, Ni Zan, Yuan dynasty, Shanghai Museum



Figure 9 *Lotus, Rocks and Waterfowl* 《荷石水禽图, He Shi Shui Qin Tu》, Hanging scroll, Ink on paper, 114 cm × 38.8 cm, Zhu Da, Qing dynasty, Lushun Museum

Classroom Discussion and Critical Thinking

Comparative Analysis: The juxtaposition of Ni Zan's *Autumn Clearings at the Fisherman's Village* 《渔庄秋霁图, Yu Zhuang Qiu Ji Tu》, characterised by its austere and detached aesthetic, with Xu Wei's *Ink Grapes* 《墨葡萄图, Mo Pu Tao Tu》, embodying a sense of wildness and unrestraint, serves to highlight the diversity of artistic expression within the contemporary Chinese painting tradition. Students should be encouraged to observe how identical brushwork conventions can yield divergent aesthetic charm, ranging from austere

detachment to unbridled abandon. They are then prompted to consider what factors account for this divergence: The interplay of historical fate and personal experience is a concept of significant theoretical and practical importance.

In-depth Debate: *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* 《芥子园画传, Jie Zi Yuan Hua Chuan》 is the subject of this debate, and the central question is whether it is a benefactor or a villain. What dual role has it played in the preservation and advancement of traditional Chinese painting? This prompts the enduring query of whether one should adhere to established convention or challenge them, and whether it is beneficial to draw upon the knowledge of the past or to observe nature. Examples of this include modern masters such as Pan Tianshou, who both studied *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* 《芥子园画传, Jie Zi Yuan Hua Chuan》 and vigorously advocated “nature in hand” as a means of guiding students towards dialectical thinking.

Summary, Extension and Value Enhancement of Teaching Models

Summary of the teaching framework

This historical overview enables students to discern a clear evolutionary trajectory.

Wei-Jin (figures): The established convention (程式, *cheng shi*) serves to convey spirit, and the aesthetic charm (意韵, *yi yun*) lies in individual vitality.

Tang-Song (landscape): The function of established convention is to create landscapes, and the aesthetic charm can be found in the natural ambience and imperial grandeur.

Yuan, Ming, Qing (flower-and-bird, landscape): The established convention is defined as the expression of the heart. The aesthetic charm of the work is attributed to the brushwork, emotion and personal inner world of the artist.

This particular thread provides a compelling illustration of the notion that established convention serves as the medium through which the objective is realised, with aesthetic charm representing the ultimate objective. In this context, established convention can be regarded as the physical manifestation, while aesthetic charm can be seen as the intangible essence that gives it life. The concept of linking, signifying the connection between the end and the beginning, the physical and the ethereal, is representative of the aforementioned “era”. The art historian Wölfflin (2015) proposed that stylistic evolution is derived from the historical transformation of the “visual mode” itself, which is profoundly rooted in the spirit of the era. The pedagogical objective is to elucidate this intrinsic connection.

Extensions into contemporary life

The ultimate purpose of learning is to comprehend the present. As the course draws to a close, students are encouraged to redirect their attention from the past to the present, reflecting on the “established convention (程式, *cheng shi*) and aesthetic charm (意韵, *yi yun*)” of the contemporary era.

Identifying Contemporary Established Convention

Visual Culture: The Hero's Journey narrative structure in Hollywood films; The six-second golden rule and rapid-fire editing on short-form video platforms; The aesthetic of filters and photo editing techniques on social media; Internet memes and emojis.

Lifestyle Aesthetics: Nordic minimalist home décor in the style of IKEA; Starbucks' "third space" experiential model; and "check-in" interior design for influencer-friendly venues.

Analysing Contemporary aesthetic charm

The collective aesthetic charm conveyed by these established conventions in relation to our current era. The following factors have been identified as contributing to this phenomenon: efficiency, speed, instant gratification, circle-based identity, playful deconstruction, pursuit of "standardised beauty" and seeking identity in virtual spaces.

Ultimate Reflection

The central question is whether contemporary established convention unconsciously shape our behaviour, or whether, as with ancient masters, we can proactively utilise or even transform them to express our unique aesthetic charm. The question of whether studying traditional "established convention and aesthetic charm" has provided a means to examine contemporary cultural phenomena and the critical faculties to assess them is the subject of this study. To illustrate this point, consider the application of "filters" in the context of "aesthetic charm". The present study seeks to establish the differences, if any, between this pursuit and the ancient practice of creating "aesthetic charm" through brush and ink.

Elevation of educational value

The value of this pedagogical model extends far beyond the discipline of fine arts itself.

From Knowledge to Understanding: The concept of fragmented art is woven into a coherent cultural tapestry, enabling students to grasp the intrinsic forces driving artistic evolution and construct a comprehensive, chronological framework for artistic cognition.

From Aesthetics to Humanities: The appreciation of art is an endeavour that extends beyond the mere act of observing paintings. It serves as a portal into the annals of Chinese history, the tenets of Chinese philosophy, and the ethos of the literati. The lesson has been found to transform into a dynamic interdisciplinary lesson integrating literature, history, and philosophy, profoundly embodying the core competency of 'cultural understanding and heritage'.

From Tradition to Contemporary: The establishment of a dialogue between heritage and the present has been demonstrated to cultivate students' capacity for cultural reflection and critical thinking, thereby empowering them to become conscious participants and creators of modern culture rather than passive consumers.

Conclusion

The assertion that "art in its era (艺术当代, *yi shu dang shi dai*)" is not an empty slogan, but rather a profound historical perspective and an effective teaching methodology, is one that is supported by substantial evidence. In the appreciation teaching of "established convention (程式, *cheng shi*) and aesthetic charm (意韵, *yi yun*)" in senior secondary school art, the implementation of this principle is of paramount importance. The construction of a clear historical narrative thread, the introduction of relevant art historical texts, and the supplementation of these with rich, detailed visual examples serve to effectively bridge the disconnect students often feel towards traditional Chinese art. When pupils recognise that every stroke and every wash of ink represents the very thought, emotion, and pulse of its era, dormant paintings awaken and ancient established convention begin to speak anew. This constitutes not merely a triumph in aesthetic education, but a profound journey of cultural roots-seeking and identity-building. The programme has been developed to enable students to examine tradition through a historical lens and to face the future with cultural self-awareness, thus achieving the educational goal of "understanding the present through the past".

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3. Figure3 *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* 《溪山行旅图, Xi Shan Xing Lv Tu》, Hanging scroll, Ink on silk, 206.3 cm × 103.3 cm, Fan Kuan, Northern Song Dynasty, National Palace Museum, Taipei
4. Figure4 *Early Spring* 《早春图, Zao Chun Tu》, Hanging scroll, Ink on silk, 158.3 cm × 108.6 cm, Guo Xi, Northern Song Dynasty, National Palace Museum, Taipei
5. Figure5 *Hibiscus and Golden Pheasant* 《芙蓉锦鸡图, Fu Rong Jin Ji Tu》, Hanging scroll, Coloured on silk, 81.5cm × 53.6cm, Zhao Ji, Northern Song Dynasty, Palace Museum
6. Figure6 *Solitary Angler in Cold River* 《寒江独钓图, Han Jiang Du Diao Tu》, Scroll, Coloured on silk, 27.6 cm × 50.6 cm, Ma Yuan, Southern Song dynasty, Tokyo National Museum
7. Figure7 *Autumn Clearings at the Fisherman's Village* 《渔庄秋霁图, Yu Zhuang Qiu Ji Tu》, Hanging scroll, Ink on paper, 96.1 cm × 46.1 cm, Ni Zan, Yuan dynasty, Shanghai Museum
8. Figure8 *Ink Grapes* 《墨葡萄图, Mo Pu Tao Tu》, Hanging scroll, Ink on paper, 165.4 cm × 64.5 cm, Xu Wei, Ming dynasty, Palace Museum
9. Figure9 *Lotus, Rocks and Waterfowl* 《荷石水禽图, He Shi Shui Qin Tu》, Hanging scroll, Ink on paper, 114 cm × 38.8 cm, Zhu Da, Qing dynasty, Lushun Museum

Reference Plate

1. *Figure 1 The Court Ladies* 《女史箴图, Nv Shi Zhen Tu》, Scroll (detail), Coloured on silk, 24.8 cm × 348.2 cm, attributed to Gu Kaizhi, Eastern Jin dynasty, British Museum
2. *Figure2 The Lady Luo* 《洛神赋图, Luo Shen Fu Tu》, Scroll, Coloured on silk, 27.1cm × 572.8cm,