

Original Paper

A Preliminary Discussion on the Diversity of Line Art in Flower and Bird Painting

Zihao Wang¹

¹ School of Fine Arts and Design, Lingnan Normal University, Zhanjiang, Guangdong, China

E-mail: 1465483695@qq.com

Received: October 19, 2025 Accepted: December 03, 2025 Online Published: December 16, 2025

doi:10.22158/assc.v7n6p160

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/assc.v7n6p160>

Abstract

Line art represents the most fundamental and enduring expressive technique in Chinese painting, embodying the very soul of Eastern art. "Regarding lines, the Chinese focus on the subtle variations inherent in lines themselves, along with the rich linear forms and applications developed, is unique in the world. The primary characteristic of Chinese painting lies precisely in lines and their linear transformations." This paper explores the origins of line artistry in traditional flower-and-bird painting, its diverse innovations and continuities, and exemplary artists and works. Using the "Eighteen Brushstrokes" as a case study, it analyzes various expressive forms and fundamental concepts of line as a modeling technique; the enrichment and development of line artistry through variant techniques like cun (texture rendering) and dian (dotting); the relationship between the initiation, continuation, and transition of lines and the structural form of depicted subjects; the relationship between stylized line expressions, their inherent rhythmic forms, and the volume and texture of depicted subjects; the connection between line organization and pictorial space; the "spirit of calligraphic expression" in line art guided by the principle of "incorporating calligraphy into painting"; and the evolution and innovation of the "meaning" conveyed by lines. Furthermore, drawing on the development of traditional line art, the article briefly outlines contemporary trends in line art within modern and contemporary flower-and-bird painting, addressing challenges concerning tradition and innovation.

Keywords

Detailed-brush flower-and-bird painting, Diversity, Eighteen Descriptions, Tradition, Development

1. Introduction

Line, as the most primordial and essential visual language of painting, carries the weight of cultural connotation and artistic spirit across civilizations. In the vast landscape of global art, Chinese painting

distinguishes itself by its unparalleled emphasis on line artistry—an emphasis that transcends mere form to become the very soul of Eastern aesthetic expression. As a core tenet of Chinese painting theory, the proposition that "the primary characteristic of Chinese painting lies precisely in lines and their linear transformations" encapsulates the centuries-long pursuit of generations of artists, who have explored the subtle variations, rich forms, and profound implications of lines with tireless dedication. Among the diverse genres of traditional Chinese painting, flower-and-bird painting stands as a particularly vivid and enduring field for the practice and evolution of line artistry. Unlike landscape painting, which often relies on grand spatial narratives, or figure painting, which focuses on human demeanor, flower-and-bird painting centers on the depiction of natural organisms—delicate petals, gnarled branches, fluttering wings, and dewdrops on leaves—demanding that lines not only outline the external form of subjects but also convey their inherent vitality, texture, and spiritual essence.

The history of traditional Chinese flower-and-bird painting can be seen as a history of the continuous development of line artistry. From the concise and vivid line drawings of flower and bird motifs on silk paintings of the Han and Wei dynasties, to the elegant and refined "fine-line painting" (gongbi) of the Tang and Song dynasties, where lines were rendered with meticulous precision to capture the subtle details of feathers and petals, and then to the free and unrestrained "freehand brushwork" (xieyi) of the Ming and Qing dynasties, which used bold, expressive lines to convey the spirit of subjects beyond their physical form, line art in flower-and-bird painting has undergone a process of inheritance, transformation, and innovation. Throughout this process, artists have not only accumulated a wealth of technical methods, such as the renowned "Eighteen Brushstrokes" that systematize the techniques of line drawing for different subjects, but also integrated calligraphic elements into painting practice, giving rise to the principle of "incorporating calligraphy into painting"—a principle that endows lines with the rhythmic beauty and expressive spirit of calligraphy, elevating line art from a modeling tool to a carrier of artistic temperament and cultural philosophy.

2. Overview of Line Art in Flower-and-Bird Painting

2.1 Line as the Soul of Chinese Painting

When tracing their origins, it becomes evident that Chinese and Western painting arts emerged from the same artistic form. (Wen, 2012) However, with historical shifts and the evolution of Eastern and Western ideologies, they developed distinctly different interpretations of line art: Western lines serve solely to depict the light, shadow, and volume of subjects or to establish initial forms in compositions. Chinese painting, however, uses lines to shape forms, transforming objects into traces while seeking the artistic interest and spiritual value inherent in lines themselves. Lines not only capture form but also convey spirit, existing as an independent aesthetic entity. "Chinese painting is neither Lipps's 'transference theory,' which merely imbues objects with spirit, nor Wölfflin's abstract impulse that emphasizes intuition while excluding reason, resulting in artistic will. Rather, it is the union of objective subject and subjective spirit." (Lin, 2010) Thus, the use of line in Chinese painting is an

"imaginative form" that unites subject and object.

It must be said that line is the soul of Chinese painting. "The use of line in Chinese painting is neither a subjective act of whim nor an objective process of imitation; it is a shared visual convention crystallized through centuries of historical sedimentation." (Li, 2005) Within the line lies the accumulated wisdom and philosophy of millennia of Chinese civilization, expressing through form an emotional "intention" that embodies a social and humanistic spirit. Lines shed the dazzling splendor of color, traveling light and unencumbered to directly grasp the contours of objects, their movement, and their very soul. Abstract line patterns are the aesthetic internalization of form, the materialization of the inner world. They exist in objects and in the mind, where subject and object mutually generate each other, ultimately merging into a state of mutual oblivion.

The vitality of Chinese painting lies in the diversity of its lines. The uniqueness of its material medium determines that ink and brush convey emotion, while the distinctiveness of its aesthetic sensibilities drives the continuous evolution and refinement of lines. The aesthetic principle of "incorporating calligraphy into painting" masterfully expresses the artistic conception of literati painting, establishing the beauty of lines as an independent art form within the artistic pantheon and guiding Chinese painting toward timelessness.

2.2 From "Outline Drawing" to "Freehand Brushwork": The Evolution of Line Techniques in Flower-and-Bird Painting

The origins of line in traditional Chinese painting can be traced back to the painted pottery of the Yangshao period, the silk paintings of the late Zhou dynasty, the lacquer paintings on Chu vessels, and the murals of the Han and Tang dynasties. The painted pottery patterns of the Yangshao culture represent China's earliest works employing line, characterized by their distinct, vivid, and vigorous strokes. Before the unification of writing systems in the Qin and Han dynasties, line served as the most fundamental means of representation for ancient peoples. Through the technique of outline drawing, they depicted objects and conveyed emotions, naturally embodying the primitive, naive beauty of early art. Thus, painting remained painting—devoid of conscious artistic awareness or standardized pictorial conventions.

Alongside the expression of imagery and symbolic lines, the art of calligraphy emerged during the Shang Dynasty. The composition and structural principles of lines evolved from the abstraction of images. This purified beauty of lines flowed naturally in that era. Thus, images were rendered in stylized, schematic outlines. Yet these linear patterns lacked individuality; the lines traced the forms, atmospheres, and traces of objects—a conscious inheritance within established rules.

By the Tang Dynasty, flower-and-bird painting had matured into an independent genre. Numerous artists of this era achieved lasting renown for their mastery. Xue Ji of the early Tang excelled in depictions of cranes, while Cao Ba, Han Gan, and Chen Hong dominated equine painting during the Kaiyuan and Tianbao periods. Han Huang and Dai Song gained fame for their portrayals of oxen, capturing the essence of their wild spirit and muscular structure. The lines in these paintings are simple

and steady, following the contours of the forms. Even when rendered in light colors, they do not obscure the beauty of the lines' vigor and elegance. The forms of the lines—their beginnings and endings, lengths and widths, thicknesses and thinnesses, squareness and roundness, curves and straightness—are expressed with perfect precision. They combine the rhythmic beauty of the lines with the spatial perspective, the sense of mass and volume of the objects.

The Five Dynasties period witnessed the emergence of two stylistic schools in flower-and-bird painting: the "opulent elegance of the Huang family" and the "wild, untamed spirit of Xu Xi," marking the art form's maturation. The advent of bone-less painting techniques and the expression of untamed, natural charm propelled the development of freehand brushwork and expanded the freedom of line and ink expression. Throughout the Song dynasty, bird-and-flower painting predominantly favored realistic, from-life depictions. This tendency stemmed from the aesthetic standards of the Hanlin Academy, which upheld the Huang school as orthodox. Though artists like Yi Yuange and Cui Bai introduced naturalistic charm and lively, free-spirited expressive tendencies, the dominant approach remained meticulously crafted lines—precise, rigorous, and elegantly poised. Emphasis was placed on the depth of "expressing the heart," with greater attention to subtle variations in form and structure, enhancing the expressive power of line drawing to achieve greater accuracy and vitality. The emphasis on thematic focus and highly abstracted expression elevated line drawing during this period into an independent genre of painting with profound aesthetic value.

With the emergence of freehand painting and the development of literati painting, Yuan Dynasty flower-and-bird painting delved into the inner world of viewers with specific cultural sensibilities. The depicted flowers and birds distanced themselves from their real-world counterparts, embodying simplicity, tranquility, and profound contemplation. First, subject selection centered on the "Four Gentlemen" led by ink bamboo, symbolizing the personification of literati integrity. This shifted from traditional freehand expression of emotions to embodying moral ideals—a transcendent insight and inner release. Second, the shift from "poetry, calligraphy, and painting as one" to "incorporating calligraphy into painting" emphasized the spirit and charm of brushwork. After the Yuan dynasty, painters recognized that the formation and development of line as an independent language required dialogue between the inner self and nature—a state of self-forgetfulness and object-forgetfulness—ultimately returning to and elevating the language of line itself.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, flower-and-bird painting increasingly valued the charm and rhythm of lines, pursuing freedom and individual expression. Xu Wei pioneered the bold, freehand style of flower-and-bird painting with its vigorous, unrestrained brushwork; and Yun Nantian's unique "boneless" style, where color, ink texture, and bone-method brushwork coalesce to form the subject with a single stroke. He advocated that "the law of no law is the true law," where the lawless represents a fresh understanding of new life and one's own existence.

Through historical transformations and developments, regardless of how the form of Chinese painting has evolved, the application of lines and aesthetic principles remain systematically transmitted. More

importantly, its aesthetic standards have never changed due to shifts in external form. It is a process from unconsciousness to consciousness, from lawlessness to lawfulness, and then back to lawlessness. Therefore, the diverse development of lines will continue unabated, keeping pace with the times to explore new forms of line expression and generate new spiritual imagery.

3. Manifestations of Line Diversity and Principles of Application

3.1 Manifestations of Line Diversity

3.1.1 Brush Techniques: The Application of the Eighteen Brush Strokes in Flower-and-Bird Painting

During the Ming Dynasty, Zou Dezhong systematized the "Eighteen Brushstrokes" and proposed that "the art of brushwork has remained constant through eighteen generations." (Zou, n.d.) As eras evolved, the application of lines developed new connotations, gradually revealing their diverse characteristics. Through meticulous observation and mental memorization of diverse subjects, artists achieved profound abstraction of form and spirit, endowing each line with unique and irreplaceable qualities. Early flower-and-bird paintings predominantly featured backgrounds. The two silk paintings unearthed from the Changsha Chu tombs of the Warring States period—Figure Riding a Dragon and Figure with Dragon and Phoenix—represent the earliest known depictions of birds on silk. The forms were primarily rendered with lines, featuring mixed techniques, iron-wire strokes, and ancient floating-thread strokes. The brushwork was fluid, the lines simple, and there was a growing awareness of volume, using lines to distinguish inner and outer contours.

Historical records indicate that Gu Kaizhi of the Eastern Jin Dynasty created works such as "Geese and Swans" and "Wild Ducks and Waterfowl." "Waterfowl and Wild Geese," and "Waterfowl and Wild Geese." During the Southern Dynasties' Liu Song period, Gu Jingxiu gained fame for his mastery of painting Zen sparrows. Records also mention his works "Zen Sparrows on Hemp Paper" and "Parrot on a Painting Fan," though unfortunately, no authentic examples of these paintings survive today.

Gu Kaizhi perfected the "ancient flowing-thread brushwork" technique that had developed since the Warring States period. His lines flowed seamlessly with a rhythmic quality, described as "silk-spinning silkworms in spring, floating spring clouds, and flowing water traversing the earth." By the Tang Dynasty, flower-and-bird painting had evolved into an independent genre. Within traditional meticulous brushwork, artists employed the interweaving, arrangement, and combination of lines, coupled with the contrast of thick and thin ink strokes, to express the structure of subjects, spatial relationships, and the overall effect of the composition. The Eighteen Brushstrokes embody the synthesis of various forms of dynamic beauty, the variation and unity of lines, rhythm and cadence, symmetry and cohesion. Han Huang's Five Oxen (Fig. 1) employs ink lines with subtle color washes, executed with a robust and steady brushwork that renders the subjects powerful and substantial. The lines combine the vigorous clarity of iron-wire strokes with the moist, plump texture of earthworm-like lines. These sinuous variations aptly convey the oxen's musculature and the texture of their hides. Song Dynasty flower-and-bird painting centered on Emperor Huizong, whose imperial academy emphasized

meticulous, rigorous lines. His "Slim Gold Style" featured slender, vigorous strokes dominated by iron-wire brushwork, with precise, detailed structures. Song miniatures achieved remarkable accuracy and vitality, pushing the flat beauty of Eastern line art to its pinnacle with enduring influence. Take "Bamboo Grove with White-Headed Cranes" as an example: bamboo leaves are outlined with fine, centered brushstrokes using the nail-head-mouse-tail technique, creating rhythmic pauses and accents; bamboo stems employ the double-outline-and-color method with iron-wire strokes, rendering them vigorous and powerful. The brushwork is meticulous and rigorous, with subdued tones. Cui Bai's Double Happiness Painting follows Xu Xi's wild and unconventional style, emphasizing the spirit of sketching from life. It breaks free from the decorative patterns of traditional flower-and-bird paintings, pioneering a new direction. It employs freehand brushwork for outlining, blending multiple techniques: the nail-head-and-mouse-tail method, side-brush strokes, and frequent use of the bald-brush technique to conceal the brush tip, all executed in one fluid motion. It also incorporates broken-reed strokes, willow-leaf strokes, and mixed techniques throughout. The brushwork is dry and austere, blending meticulousness with freehand execution. While demonstrating a loose and flexible brush technique, it also vividly and exquisitely conveys the bleak and desolate scenery of autumn.



Figure 1. Five Oxen, ink on paper, 20.8 cm × 139.8 cm, Palace Museum, Beijing

Figure 2. "Two Sheep" is one of Zhao Mengfu's most celebrated works. The sheep are rendered with elegant forms and vivid expressions, with distinct techniques employed to reflect different breeds. Two distinct brush techniques are employed for the wool: a perfectly balanced dry-wet scattered brushstroke and a luminous layered ink application. Both approaches draw inspiration from natural variations. The left sheep, with its rounded, substantial form, is first outlined with a uniform, fine flowing-thread contour. The inner contours are rendered using varied sizes of date-seed strokes, creating a sense of broken lines yet continuous intent. The sheep's head employs a technique of layered dry ink, meticulously dotted with walnut-kernel strokes to achieve both weightiness and vitality. The goat's wool on the right utilizes an ancient floating-thread technique, rendering it ethereal and natural. This approach not only distinguishes the goat's wool in layers but also effectively conveys its texture.



Figure 2. Two Goats, by Zhao Mengfu, Yuan Dynasty, 25.2 cm × 48.4 cm, currently housed at the Freer Gallery of Art, United States

As eras evolve, lines continuously transform and develop. Their expressive power endures and advances through expanded techniques, elevating painting brushwork to the realm of calligraphy. As Yu Jianhua states in *Compilation of Chinese Painting Theories*: "Outline lines must constantly pulsate—opposing both detached, abstract manipulation of lines and rigid contour strokes. Each stroke must possess exaggeration and emotion, yet each stroke must also originate from reality." (Yu, n.d.) It is precisely this vitality of the line that drives artists to continually contemplate the interplay between creation and the painted world, seeking the convergence point between inner resonance and nature, thus propelling the stylization and innovation of line.

In the late Qing dynasty, Ren Bonian frequently employed the nail-head-mouse-tail technique, producing lines that were graceful and spirited, executed with effortless control over pressure and release. The technique employed in *Phoenix Descending to the Ground* (Fig. 3) is remarkably diverse: the paulownia trunk is rendered with a freehand brushstroke, while its leaves are outlined with a nail-head-mouse-tail technique that perfectly captures their texture. Rocks are depicted using a folded-door stroke, combining both angular and rounded qualities. The phoenix beneath the tree combines bamboo-leaf, orchid-leaf, and nail-head-mouse-tail techniques. Its feathers are resplendent, its form graceful, and its posture vividly animated. This demonstrates Ren Bonian's extraordinary skill in organizing and applying line techniques. Despite the variety of methods, the composition remains harmonious and orderly, effectively organizing the subjects and expressing their essential characteristics.

Modern painter Chen Zifen employs dry-line drawing for floral subjects, utilizing the zhanbi technique with water-pattern strokes. Applying the brush with a centered tip, he alternates between pressing and lifting, skillfully balancing concealed and revealed elements. The vivid forms, harmonious density, and subtle interplay of strength and softness stem primarily from the unique texture and quality of the brushstrokes achieved through the integration of seal engraving techniques into painting. Contemporary artist Su Baijun also employs the war-brush technique in his works, particularly in depicting withered trees. His strokes break yet maintain continuity, with the brush tip shifting fluidly between center and side. This perfect fusion of hesitation and fluidity, roundness and desolation, steadiness and vitality,

solidity and ethereality, simplicity and sincerity vividly expresses the tactile quality and spatial depth of the subject while capturing the spiritual essence of life drawing.



Figure 3. Phoenix Descending, Ren Bonian, Chinese People's Revolutionary Military Museum

3.1.1 Texturing Techniques

Cunfa emerged as an idealized, stylized line technique in late Song landscape painting, driven by the pursuit of spatial depth, volumetric presence, and material weight. It represents the evolution of line diversity. In contemporary Chinese painting, this linear form is termed linear cunfa, extending beyond landscape painting to figure and flower-bird genres. The integration of cun techniques with flower-and-bird painting enriches the expressive language of lines and enhances the artistic impact of such works. Since the late Qing dynasty, the eastward spread of Western learning has influenced traditional Chinese painting to varying degrees, with the Lingnan School experiencing particularly profound effects. Against this historical backdrop, cun techniques, as a traditional method, have partially served as a bridge, becoming an entry point for Sino-Western fusion.

The forms and textures of landscapes fall into two primary categories. One features hard, block-like stones, where techniques like Axe-Chop Texturing and Folded-Belt Texturing are employed to convey their rugged, coarse, and even majestic beauty. These techniques can also be applied in flower-and-bird painting to depict the rough textures of branches, trunks, and stones. The other category depicts the lush, rounded landscapes of southern China, characterized by dense vegetation and exposed earth. Techniques like the hemp-fiber brushstroke and cloud-head brushstroke are employed. In flower-and-bird painting, these methods can render delicate flowers, soft foliage, and the feathers or fur of birds and beasts.

In small-scale freehand painting, the "outline-and-texture" technique evolves from line variations. Ren Bonian introduced the small outline-and-texture method into flower-and-bird painting, enhancing the

expressive power of lines. Sometimes, using dry brush and light ink to depict mountains, rocks, trees, and bird feathers, it simultaneously captures the relief structure and the essence of brushwork. This effectively anchors the content within the form, elevating the work to a refined aesthetic.

The stylized development of line techniques—outline, linear texture, and stippling—continued to enrich over time. Some innovations stemmed from insights into the internal texture and quality of subjects, others from the visual synthesis and abstraction of contrasts between objects, while others were direct expressions of form, taking shape with the brushstroke. Yet, despite these innovations, the essence remains a description of form. The inheritance of line and ink techniques is a continuous evolution. In flower-and-bird painting, lines form the backbone, serving as the skeletal framework of the composition. Texturing and dotting techniques branch off as stylistic variations or extensions of lines, enriching the pictorial structure. These three elements mutually reinforce each other, perpetuating, developing, and innovating to showcase the diversity of line expression.

3.2 Principles for Applying Line Diversity

3.2.1 The Structural Relationship Between Line and Form

The lines in Chinese fine-brush painting underwent tremendous development early on: evolving from flat, static lines into dynamic, spirited strokes. It is precisely through this sense of movement that the works express such powerful vitality. Lines became the fundamental means by which painters extracted and generalized natural forms for artistic representation. As Zong Baihua noted in his aesthetic musings: "The Chinese character for 'form' (形) is composed of three strokes resembling hairs, symbolizing the lines that define physical form. This illustrates how the organization of imagery in Chinese art is fundamentally linear." (Zong, 1981) For instance, in 's "Pomegranate and Oriole" (Fig. 4), the Eastern artistic technique of flat treatment is taken to its ultimate expression. Both the oriole and the pomegranate possess a rounded structural volume, conveying a rich, substantial weight. Every line and stroke depicting the feathers on the bird's body is rendered according to its circular structure, tightly following the curves of its form. The long lines, arcs, and curves on the bird's body, short lines, arcs, curves, large color blocks, and small color blocks all interact to subtly suggest the direction of the form's structure. Though rendered with flat color, the thickness and volume of the forms are not diminished. The short lines and structural dots within the pomegranate also follow the form: large dots in the center, small dots on the sides. The lines' shape and perspective are tightly integrated with the structural form. The composition is simple yet rich, with content that is sparse yet refined. The sharpness of the bird's beak and claws contrasts with the suppleness of its body, while the dense lines of the pomegranate in the lower right counterbalance the simplicity of the bird's form—opposites that achieve unity. In Chinese gongbi painting, lines adapt to the changing planes of the form. To depict objects through lines, one must meticulously observe their internal structure, distinguish the primary and secondary relationships of lines expressing form, and harmonize the whole with its parts.



**Figure 4. "Pomegranate and Yellow Bird," Anonymous, Album Leaf, Colored Ink on Silk.
Height: 24.6 cm, Width: 25.4 cm, Collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing**

3.2.2 The Relationship Between Line and Object Texture

The Eighteen Descriptions of Figure Painting and the techniques of cun painting in landscape art are both abstracted systems of line application derived from the artist's understanding of form and texture. Similarly, meticulous flower-and-bird painting emphasizes "applying lines according to the subject," employing distinct brushwork concepts and techniques for different subjects. The diverse textures of lines and their orderly progression can also convey a sense of space. Through the interweaving, overlapping, concealment, and exposure of lines, along with the arrangement of different textures, rich layers can be expressed. For instance, in *Beggar in the Cloud-Shrouded Mountains* (Fig. 5), the hair texture varies: near the roots, short, stiff lines are loosely arranged; in the middle section, medium-length lines are soft and dense; side strands feature curved lines that appear light and flowing. Combined with the distinct texture of the woven bamboo hat, the layered spatial progression feels natural and comfortable.



Figure 5. Detail from "Beggar in the Cloud-Shrouded Mountains," 1868

3.2.3 The Relationship Between Line and Spatial Depth

Though lines possess strong planarity and decorative qualities, their spatial expression should not be underestimated. Chinese painting employs scattered-point perspective rather than the focal perspective of Western art. It adapts to the viewer's appreciation by utilizing diverse forms to convey spatial depth through lines.

First, flower-and-bird paintings utilize long scrolls or screen-like compositions. Though lines are flat, they expand spatial diversity and compositional richness through "shifting views with each step," depicting subjects from multiple perspectives to clearly convey information about their height, depth, and lateral dimensions.

Moreover, in detailed brushwork paintings—particularly in detailed brushwork flower-and-bird paintings depicting branches—the spatial expression of lines often manifests as a microscopic space. The diversity of lines—their solidity and hollowness, density and sparseness, thickness and thinness, curvature and straightness, fragmentation and wholeness, and varying intensity—is harmoniously presented within a single composition. It is precisely the varied lengths and thicknesses of lines that segment the pictorial space, while the interplay of sparse and dense lines, solid and hollow lines, creates a rhythmic spatial cadence within the painting. For instance, in "Lotus Emerging from Water," the composition centers on the flower's heart, with all lines radiating outward and converging at this focal point.

And the interplay of solid and void establish the spatial rhythm of the composition. For instance, in the composition of "Lotus Emerging from Water," the flower's center serves as the focal point, with all lines radiating outward toward it. The petals divide the composition into numerous irregular triangles, overlapping in varying lengths—some inverted, others upright. The contours of these lines form an aesthetically pleasing structure, achieving beauty through asymmetry within symmetry. The internal layers are clearly defined while simultaneously creating a layered, overlapping relationship with the external space. The arrangement of the lotus stems is particularly ingenious. The orderly placement of long, medium, and short stems, along with their varying densities and interplay with the lotus leaves, creates a spatial relationship of foreground, middle ground, and background.

3.2.4 The Relationship Between Line and Calligraphic Brushwork

Zong Baihua observed: "'Dance' epitomizes the artistic realm of all Chinese art. Chinese calligraphy and painting both aspire toward a sense of flight and movement. Even solemn architecture expresses dance through its soaring eaves." Throughout Chinese painting history, the concept of "painting and calligraphy sharing the same origin" has prevailed. Both are different forms of the same essence, utilizing common expressive tools. Their techniques in brushwork and ink application, as well as their methods for conveying emotion and meaning, are fundamentally interconnected.

Zhang Yanyuan of the Tang Dynasty wrote in *Records of Famous Paintings Through the Ages*: "The essence of depicting objects lies in capturing their form. To achieve form, one must fully express their bone structure and spirit. Both bone structure and form stem from artistic conception and are realized

through brushwork. Hence, many painters excel at calligraphy," and "The brush techniques of painting and calligraphy share the same principles." Chinese painting theory emphasizes the importance of "bone method brushwork" in painting, a principle equally applicable to calligraphy. "Bone method" refers to structural composition and formative elements, primarily expressed through lines. Lines serve as the artist's electrocardiogram—an externalization of inner thought—while brushwork embodies the distillation and sublimation of subject matter. In calligraphic creation, the understanding of line's "form" is rooted in classical masterpieces yet transcends mere replication. It involves conscious reinterpretation of ancient techniques and nature, achieving spiritual elevation. As a formative tool in Chinese painting, line embodies a distinct consciousness of "learning from nature and drawing from the heart"—an abstraction and transformation of imagery. Calligraphic lines, however, emphasize the expression of their inherent richness and the brush-spirit continuity between lines. Regardless of stylistic evolution across dynasties, Chinese painting consistently upholds brushwork and line as its essence. Thus, variations in line thickness, length, and curvature; rhythmic dynamics, tempo, and pace; and structural arrangements—parallel, intersecting, or directional—all resonate with calligraphic brush techniques.

In Chinese line drawing, lines not only serve to shape forms but also possess high aesthetic value in their own right—a defining characteristic of this art form. Zhao Mengfu's work *Ancient Trees, Bamboo, and Rocks* exemplifies the integration of calligraphy into painting. Depicting ancient trees, mountain rocks, and graceful bamboo, the rocks are rendered with the "flying white" brush technique, appearing naturally weathered yet vibrantly dynamic. The ancient trees are painted with seal script brushwork, appearing vigorous, towering, and vividly expressive. Bamboo is drawn with continuous strokes. The entire work is permeated with "calligraphic lines."

As Yuan Dynasty artist Ke Jiusi noted in his *Treatise on Painting Bamboo and Rocks*: "Bamboo stems are rendered with seal script, branches with cursive script, leaves with clerical script or Lu Gong's sweeping strokes, while rocks and trees retain the essence of broken hairpin strokes and dripping-roof traces." Xu Wei's paintings inherited and developed the characteristics of his predecessors, frequently employing brush techniques from various calligraphic styles. Incorporating cursive script into painting, his brushwork was unrestrained and free-spirited. When painting peonies, lotus leaves, or grapes, his strokes were swift and decisive, turning with ease. What appeared chaotic was, in fact, meticulously ordered. His *"Miscellaneous Flowers Scroll"* (Fig. 6) exemplifies this integration, pulsing with the rhythmic vitality of cursive script. Here, form and brushwork merge into a unified spirit, executed in one fluid, exhilarating stroke. Wu Changshuo devoted his life to studying the Stone Drum Inscriptions, innovating upon tradition. He integrated the brushwork, knife techniques, composition, and form of calligraphy and seal carving into his flower-and-bird paintings, creating a style that is vast, unrestrained, and rich in the flavor of bronze and stone.



Figure 6. Miscellaneous Flowers Scroll, Ming Dynasty, Xu Wei, 30 cm tall, 1053.5 cm wide, Collection of the National Museum of China, Nanjing

Brushwork emphasizes "spirit, strength, and rhythm," with the process requiring the continuous sequence of "initiation, continuation, transition, and conclusion." It demands three twists within one stroke, revealing the bone-like vitality of the line—such as "penetrating the paper," "like a needle drawing in sand," "bending a hairpin," or "the trace of a leaking roof."

Painting is not synonymous with calligraphy, nor is the art of painting lines equivalent to the art of calligraphy. Yet the emotion, charm, and intent inherent in painting lines often resonate with the brushwork of calligraphy. Both express shared cultural concepts of society. The evolution of calligraphic brushwork has propelled the development of freehand spirit and the unity of lines "depicting objects" and "expressing the heart," thus converging painting and calligraphy.

4. Continuity and Innovation in Contemporary Line Diversity

4.1 The Significance and Value Orientation of "Line Diversity" in Contemporary Chinese Painting

The diverse expressions in modern painting collectively reflect shifts in artists' thinking methods and societal aesthetic consciousness. Whether perceiving the world intuitively or observing it from diverse, macro perspectives, art ultimately seeks not objective representation but the manifestation of subjective spiritual expression. Line is the lifeblood of Chinese painting—the skeletal framework expressing form, the conduit for subjective consciousness, emotional depth. It also serves as a medium for expressing character, virtue, spirit, and aspiration—the most fundamental, concise, and abstract artistic language in Chinese painting. Line is the root of Chinese painting, and the spirit of line diversity lies at its very essence. Within the line flows the artist's profound sentiments and delicate artistic sensibility, a creative visual language distilled through understanding and imagination.

Rooted in Chinese artists' unique aesthetic concepts and methods of observing and understanding objects, line has become the most fundamental pillar of Chinese painting. The technique of depicting objects entirely through line is called "white-line drawing." The diversity of white-line drawing also

stems from subjective creation based on a profound understanding of natural forms, achieving the purpose of expressing emotion and conveying meaning. It is a product of the fusion of subjectivity and objectivity—a state where spirit and form intertwine, and self and object merge into oneness—which cannot be comprehended through a naturalistic lens. The consolidation of line as the central element, the inheritance of fine traditions, and the development of diversity distinguish Eastern art from Western painting. This has formed its own unique artistic language, standing tall among the world's artistic traditions.

4.2 The Current State of Line Development in Contemporary Flower-and-Bird Painting

Contemporary Chinese painting evolves line work incrementally, preserving traditional schematic forms while developing new variations that imbue lines with fresh meaning and vitality.

Shang Tao's paintings borrow the printmaking technique of "reserving black space," employing special treatments for the forms of objects. Through skillful composition, he uses contrasting styles—such as lush density and sparse simplicity—to highlight the thematic style, achieving the distinctive artistic effect of printmaking. "As a uniquely individualized visual form, the formal methodology in Shang Tao's paintings fundamentally employs complete 'block-like' structures as its basic units. He rarely sacrifices visual structural layers in pursuit of the integrity of the 'brushstroke' found in calligraphy. On the contrary, whether using light or heavy ink, he deliberately emphasizes the arrangement and contrast of water stains and ink stains to achieve rhythmic transitions." [7] Shang Tao's work (Fig. 7) employs lines as planes and integrates lines with planes. It emphasizes the rustic brushwork of calligraphy while placing greater emphasis on the modeling constructed by the orderly arrangement of lines and the overall artistic impact reminiscent of printmaking.

Chen Yongqiang's work "Pumpkin" (Fig. 8) features vigorous, expressive lines. Employing dry-brush techniques to depict plants, the line work is steady and vigorous, reminiscent of the dry-brush techniques in landscape painting—rustic and composed. Like the three-dimensional structure of rocks in mountain compositions, with their yin-yang orientations and front-back perspectives, the lines exhibit a seamless progression of starting, connecting, turning, and ending strokes, blending solid and void elements. Blending Eastern and Western techniques, this work embodies the Lingnan School's innovative and realistic spirit. The composition is richly layered; though the subject matter is singular, the unadorned brushwork and naturalistic forms sufficiently anchor the entire painting.



Figure 7. "The Birds Sing Softly" by Shang Tao, 2015, ink on paper, 197 cm × 97 cm



Figure 8. Pumpkin, by Chen Yongqiang, 1989, ink on paper, 68 cm × 68 cm

Artist Su Baijun inherits and develops traditional techniques by employing the Eighteen Brush Strokes. In his work "Autumn Gathering of Birds" (Fig. 9), the line drawing primarily uses the chai brush stroke and zhan brush stroke with water ripple effects. However, the artist adopts the method of layered ink application, repeatedly rendering the lines with varying degrees of density. This technique lends the composition a substantial weight and rich variation.

Lin Ruoxi employs contemporary floral-and-bird line techniques that organize strokes to achieve a decorative, flat aesthetic, merging traditional bird-and-flower painting with flat decorative art. His artistic approach does not seek variation within the line itself, but rather unifies the canvas through the skillful contrast of various contradictions in line length, density, solidity/transparency, and curvature—creating a harmonious, decorative whole. In the work Spring Flowers Everywhere (Fig. 10),

while adhering to the principles of bone-method brushwork, he Sinicizes the art of flat composition while skillfully integrating it with naturalistic floral and bird art. The organization of lines geometrizes the subjects, creating a rhythm of density and openness with powerful visual impact. In the interplay of partial lines, the composition forms polygons of varying sizes, appearing as permutations of the same motif. This represents an innovative application of Eastern floral-bird line art within Western graphic art, opening new horizons for the development of line diversity.

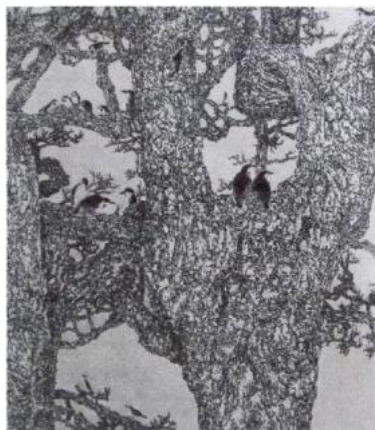


Figure 9. "Autumn Gathering of Birds," Su Baijun, ink on paper

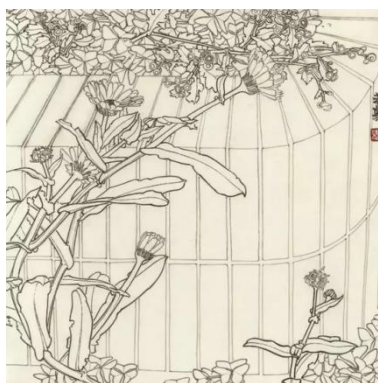


Figure 10. Spring Flowers Everywhere, Lin Ruoxi, 28x28cm, ink on paper, 2014

With the advancement of modern society, the platform for developing the line artistry of flower-and-bird painting has broadened significantly, expanding its dimensions. Yet it also faces the dilemma of balancing traditional inheritance with contemporary evolution. Overly constrained by formulaic line techniques, works lose artistic vitality and contemporary resonance; conversely, pieces devoid of formal beauty principles become wildly unrestrained yet pale and lifeless. "Innovation in flower-and-bird painting should not rely on seeking novel subjects, nor on developing isolated techniques in isolation, nor on mere craftsmanship. Instead, it should create new thematic content and generate fresh imagery and spirit, unifying these with the brushwork and ink." [8] For an accomplished artist, studying old conventions serves to pioneer new ones. It relies on the painter's emotions and ideas, actively applied to provide an unending source of energy for the development of diverse lines in

flower-and-bird painting.

5. Conclusion

This study has systematically explored the line artistry in traditional Chinese flower-and-bird painting, unraveling its historical origins, technical evolution, aesthetic connotations, and contemporary relevance through a multi-faceted analysis. As the soul of Chinese painting, line art in flower-and-bird painting is not merely a modeling tool but a carrier of cultural spirit and artistic philosophy, whose development trajectory reflects the continuous pursuit of "form, spirit, rhyme, and meaning" in Eastern aesthetics.

References

- Guo, Y. Z. (2008). *Sketching and Creation in Chinese Flower-and-Bird Painting* (p. 58). People's Fine Arts Publishing House.
- Li, A. D. (2005). Reflections on Modernity in Chinese Painting. *Journal of Nanjing University of the Arts*, 139.
- Li, W. M. (2011). Chinese Artists. *Creation Review*, 3, 36.
- Lin, R. X. (2010). *The Will of Line in Chinese Painting* (p. 6). Renmin University Press.
- Wen, W. S. (2012). *Form and Expression in Line Drawing* (p. 27). Southeast University Press.
- Yu, J. H. (n.d.). *Compilation of Chinese Painting Theories* (Volumes 1 & 2, p. 232), People's Fine Arts Publishing House.
- Zong, B. H. (1981). *Aesthetic Ramblings* (p. 81). Shanghai People's Publishing House.
- Zou, D. Z. (n.d.). *Guide to Painting*.