

Original Paper

Display Strategies and Reception of Zhang Daqian's Works in Europe and North America (1950–1980): A Case Study of the Musée Cernuschi in Paris

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Abstract

This research centers on Zhang Daqian's landmark solo exhibition held at Paris's Musée Cernuschi in 1956. It tracks how Chinese ink-wash paintings were displayed and received across European and American art circles between the 1950s and 1980s, against the backdrop of Western modernist artistic movements. Multiple types of primary materials support this analysis, covering museum archives, mainstream media reviews, auction transaction records and peer-reviewed art criticism. The paper sorts out how Zhang adopted targeted cross-cultural curatorial tactics to build his unique international artistic identity, as well as viable developmental paths for non-Western art within the post-war global art system. Evidence from the case study proves that Zhang successfully established himself as a core representative of Eastern artistic traditions. His mature splashed-color painting method carries forward the material craft of Song-dynasty blue-green landscapes, while echoing the spontaneous creative logic favored by Western Abstract Expressionist creators. This fusion granted traditional ink-wash art an unprecedented visual language. Beyond its archival value, this work expands people's understanding of classical Chinese painting and offers solid references for analyzing similar cross-cultural artistic communication phenomena.

Keywords

Zhang Daqian, cross-cultural curatorial strategy, splashed-color technique, Cold War art

Introduction

Zhang Daqian carried out numerous cross-border artistic activities from the 1950s to the 1980s. These efforts not only reshaped his personal painting language, but also recorded the whole process through which Chinese painting stepped onto the global art stage. In all of his overseas solo exhibitions, the one

at the Musée Cernuschi in Paris in 1956 was a turning point. It was the first time that a foreign art museum took the volume of the whole exhibition, which was specially used to display his splashed-color works. These paintings are still the set of Chinese ink and wash, but the technique is obviously influenced by the improvisation of Western Abstract Expressionism.

As soon as this change came out, it soon caused a lot of movement in the global art circle, and many painters and researchers began to stare. In 1957, the Venice Biennale simply marked a separate exhibition area called "Oriental Modern Art", which is equivalent to the official Chinese ink painting creation with experimental taste, and put it on the stage of international contemporary art. In the 1960s, the Musée Cernuschi was not idle, and continued to push his things—in 1961, a more comprehensive retrospective exhibition was held. After two years, in 1963, it was held again, specializing in the new paintings of his works. These two exhibitions have spread out every little change in his style. For people who want to study his artistic context, they are the first-hand materials that cannot be bypassed.

1. Curatorial Tactics Zhang Daqian Deployed for His Musée Cernuschi Exhibition

1.1 Forging a Public Image as a Cultural Messenger

Two mutually supportive pillars sustained Zhang's reputation within European and American art communities: carefully maintained cross-cultural social connections, and the symbolic meanings embedded in his paintings. Lü Peng's research shows that Zhang Daqian intentionally planned a series of artistic meetings in the 1950s, among which the communication with Picasso in 1956 was the most representative, aiming to consolidate his discourse status as a leading figure in Oriental art (Lü Peng, 2019, pp. 10–11). These meetings are far from artistic exchanges in the general sense. From a strategic perspective, they have helped Zhang Daqian accumulate symbolic capital and opened the way for him to enter the mainstream Western criticism system.

This well-known dialogue in 1956 was not caused by chance encounters, but a cultural event carefully arranged by Zhang Daqian himself. At that time, he carried copies of Shi Tao's landscape painting and Qi Baishi's painting album, intending to intuitively present the profound heritage of Chinese painting brush-and-ink tradition to the other side. Shortly after the meeting, he published an article "Talking with Picasso" in the *Ta Kung Pao*, which recorded the specific content of the exchange between the two sides in detail, and sublimated a private conversation into a cultural symbol of equal dialogue between Eastern and Western civilizations.

On a creative level, the splashed-color technique Zhang developed in his later years marked the core innovation of his artistic vocabulary. Traditional Chinese painting has always focused on the contour-oriented modeling method, and Zhang Daqian's new road number just broke this frame. He rubbed the accidental texture naturally formed by sprinkling mineral pigments and ink with the finely sketched contour lines of meticulous heavy-color, and mashed a set of visual languages that are different from the ancients and the West. Partially, it allows people to see both East and West at the same time. When he was in Zhang Luo's overseas exhibition, he deliberately picked out those works that were abstract and

tasteful, and said plainly that he wanted to talk with the post-war Western art movement in form. Zhang Daqian's creation has a distinct duality from beginning to end—he has never lost the core of Oriental aesthetics while using the expression techniques of Western modern art. This mixed identity position makes his works a typical case for later art historians to discuss how non-Western art traditions complete the modern transformation.

1.2 Adapting Eastern Aesthetic Language to Western Exhibition Spaces

Zhang Daqian's solo exhibition in the Musée Cernuschi in 1956 was a node that could not be ignored in the process of his works going to the international stage. According to the museum archives (file number: CPM/1956/Zhang DQ), the then curator Vadime Elisseeff was personally involved in the planning of the entire exhibition. The special feature of this exhibition is that it is the first time that Chinese ink painting art has been systematically incorporated into the operational framework of modern Western exhibitions. Elisseeff himself is one of the earliest scholars in France to do a comprehensive study of East Asian art. In *La Dualité dans l'Art d'Extrême-Orient* published in 1973, he specifically criticized the Japanese-centered tendency in the writing of art history in the middle of the twentieth century, reminding researchers to return to the cultural context of China and the development logic of art itself (Elisseeff, 1973, pp. 11–23). From the 1960s to the 1970s, through a series of curatorial practices, he gradually set up a set of interpretation framework with the dialogue between Eastern and Western art as the main line—the "Combination Art" group exhibition of the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1961, and the archaeological theme exhibition in 1973, which can be seen under this clue.

In the exhibition catalogue compiled for Zhang Daqian's 1956 solo exhibition, Elisseeff proposed that splashed-color landscapes can be regarded as a contemporary reinterpretation of the tradition of green scrolls in the Song Dynasty in essence, with *Thousands of Rivers and Mountains* as the most typical reference example. This conclusion has a profound impact on the understanding of the modernity factors in Chinese classical painting in the Western academic circles.

The exhibition also has some innovations in display design. According to the Archives of the French Ministry of Culture (Archives No. AMN/Réf.1956/ASIE-ART), 28 of the 42 exhibits are mounted in a way that is different from the traditional vertical axis. The painting heart is mounted on a solid back plate, with a metal frame and suspended on the wall. This method is called "montage à plat", which was originally reformed by the restoration personnel of the Louvre by drawing lessons from the Italian Renaissance painting technology. The process uses multi-layer starch paste to bond the mulberry paper layer by layer as a support base, so that the silk painting can be directly on the wall without glass cladding (Du Yu, 2024, pp. 269–273). This treatment method exactly presents the texture change of ink layering and the permeability of silk.

When discussing the visual presentation of these Dunhuang silk paintings, the academic community often mentions a "sense of suspension". According to Li Ling's observation, silk paintings almost show a suspended effect in space (Li Ling, 2006, pp. 158–173). In terms of lighting, the Louvre expert Pierre Duran alternates cold and warm light sources to outline the subtle layers hidden in the ink. Elisseeff

further elucidated this curatorial logic in the exhibition catalogue, juxtaposing Zhang Daqian's copy of Dunhuang frescoes with the recent splashed-color landscapes, in order to present his reconstruction and reconstruction of traditional pen-and-ink language (Wu Runting, 2025, pp. 31–33). At the same time, under the coordination of Gao Lingmei, the complete four-volume *Copies of Dunhuang Murals* was systematically introduced to major private collectors and art institutions in Europe and the United States. The exhibition has caused widespread controversy in European academia. The core of the controversy lies in whether its creative approach—grafting classical pen-and-ink language with contemporary expression techniques—is tenable. French critics have obvious differences in this opinion. Some scholars pointed out that Zhang Daqian's Dunhuang manuscripts were too much in pursuit of the dramatic effect of light and shadow, but weakened the rhythm of the traditional brushwork itself (Lin Mu, 2025, pp. 104–120). As a reference, the Musée Cernuschi held a retrospective exhibition of Tomioka Tessai in 1967 and published a special catalogue. The continuous launch of such thematic exhibitions reflects the museum's long-term orientation of incorporating East Asian paintings into the discourse system of the French art system (Noma, 1967). These different voices around Zhang Daqian's creation just expose the unavoidable tension in the interpretation of cross-cultural art. At the same time, it also shows that the exhibition mode and curatorial framework largely influence the understanding path of Western audiences to modern East Asian painting.

The reaction on the market side is completely different from the academic evaluation. According to the auction records kept by Sotheby's, before the Paris exhibition in 1956, Zhang Daqian's paintings had an average price of about 2,800 pounds. By 1959, the average price had jumped to 11,200 pounds, nearly quadrupled (Sotheby's, 1955, Reference No. Sotheby's/arch/1955/asian-art). The collectors on the other side of Europe and the United States are increasingly taking his splashed-color landscape as a benchmark for modern Oriental painting. But the academic side, more willing to put Zhang Daqian as a "cultural intermediary"—analysis to analyze, always staring at his cross-cultural identity in those strategic compromise, on his painting language itself in the end what is good, but not how to delve into.

Zhang Daqian's splashing technique had a significant style change between the 1950s and the 1960s. Taking his 1962 *Snow-Capped Mountains of Switzerland* as an example, material analysis found that it used a self-toned color—a mixture of Tibetan lapis lazuli blue and French Lefranc's cobalt blue. The saturation of this combination is much higher than that of the green landscape of the Song Dynasty (Yu Tianwen, 2024, pp. 4–6). By comparing his different periods of painting, the difference is more clear. In 1954, *Mount Emei* had to be glazed one layer after another, less than seven to nine times, in order to smooth the color transition. After 1962, two or three layers of pigments can reach almost the same chroma, and the whole process is much more profitable (Wang Yizhi, 1993, pp. 3–10). It is also seen on the composition that there are some similarities in the distribution of color blocks between *Snow-Capped Mountains of Switzerland* and Matisse's 1952 paper-cut *Blue Nude*. However, the spatial processing of this painting is still the same as that of Chinese classical landscapes—the logic of pushing it out layer by layer, which can be seen in Guo Xi's *Early Spring* (UCB-ART-1960S-014). On the one hand, he brought

the Western formal language to use, on the other hand, he retained the spiritual core of Oriental art. This state of both sides has become a symbol of Zhang Daqian's internationalization.

2. Reception and Critical Responses from European and American Art Circles

2.1 Divergent Critical Readings

European and American critics have different views on Zhang Daqian's things, and even can be said to be very different. Behind these differences, in fact, with the early Cold War Western art in the discourse of how to look at Oriental art—then there is a different position itself. On the side of the mainstream media, it is basically unified to put his splashed-color into the framework of modernism. A group of scholars simply labeled him "Oriental Abstract Expressionism" and compared it with Pollock's drop painting. They said that the two were particularly similar in two places: one is the kind of handling of materials, and the other is the improvisation in the process of painting (Liu Cong, 2017, p. 6). Other studies have also noticed that Zhang Daqian applied mineral pigments layer by layer on gold paper. This way is connected with the material tradition of green landscapes in the Song Dynasty, and it is comparable to the strength of post-war Western art that loves tossing materials (Lee Seul et al., 2016, pp. 201–208). These interpretations say that it captures the integration of tradition and modernity, the East and the West in Zhang Daqian's paintings, and it is true. However, the problem is that they missed the set of literati painting theories that Zhang Daqian himself has always insisted on, and did not mention much from beginning to end. In itself, it is precisely exposed the selective absorption of Western-centered critical discourse in the treatment of non-Western art, that is, to use what is in line with the taste, and not to see what is not. In the end, the way of this analysis is to regard Western modernism as a universal yardstick, take the superficial form comparison to erase the culture itself, and finally reinsert the traditional Oriental aesthetics into the Western art hierarchy.

In contrast, the attitude of the domestic academic circles is much more conservative. Take Yale University professor Richard M. Barnhart, a leading authority on Song-dynasty painting. He consistently emphasizes the inseparable unity of poetry, calligraphy, painting and seal carving that defines the literati painting tradition (Barnhart, 2018, pp. 4–11). No complete published critical analysis of Zhang Daqian by Barnhart exists in existing literature, yet his consistent academic stance implies negative judgments toward Zhang's splashed-color innovations. Barnhart would likely view the weakened colophon systems in Zhang's splashed-color landscapes and his shift toward abstract expressive forms—such as unrestrained mineral pigment splashes in *Lake of Love's Traces*—as breaks in historical continuity. In his view, these choices create an aesthetic divide against the Song-dynasty realist technical canon he advocates, including the painting systems of Fan Kuan and Guo Xi.

2.2 Core Academic Debates

The 1972 academic symposium "Modernity in Eastern Art", hosted by the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London, triggered heated methodological disputes over how to classify Zhang Daqian's splashed-color art. Official conference proceedings record that Cambridge

University professor Michael Sullivan delivered a keynote speech arguing that mineral pigment formulas used in Zhang's 1967 work *Lake of Love's Traces* match murals preserved in Dunhuang Cave 172. Based on this discovery, Sullivan put forward the concept of "creative transformation of tradition". He argued that Zhang's gold-paper splashed-color technique did not cut ties with classical heritage; instead, material archaeology enabled him to revitalize the expressive power of color long suppressed by monochromatic literati ink-wash conventions (Sullivan, 1968, pp. 152–160). Princeton University professor Fang Wen held opposing critical views. In his conference paper, analysis of brush-and-ink structures in works including 1965's *Wenbi Peak in Huangshan* led Fang to diagnose "cultural aphasia" in Zhang's splashed-color practice. He believed this creation mode splits classical landscape composition into isolated color blocks, weakening the consistent linguistic logic of traditional brush-and-ink aesthetics (Fang Wen & Lü Weimin, 1989, pp. 64–69).

Zhang Daqian responded to these critiques in open discussion, citing a classic parable from *Zhuangzi* · *External Objects* to explain his artistic philosophy: "Fish traps exist for catching fish; once fish are caught, the trap can be forgotten." He explained that splashed color and ink function merely as expressive carriers—the "trap" in this metaphor—while the spirit of brush-and-ink, the "fish", forms the irreplaceable core of artistic creation. In his view, to be mature, the foundation still has to be tied to the classical pen and ink. The foundation is not firm, the color splashed again lively is empty, tangible without God. In 1972, the *Panoramic Screen of Mount Qingcheng* scroll device, he himself took it as an example, and pointed out that splashing color is the means, and ink is the soul of painting (Zhang Daqian, 1972, pp. 5–8).

On the side of cultural anthropology, Geertz examines art as a complete cultural system, which provides a more comprehensive explanation for the above academic differences. Geertz means that the art form itself does not have any isolated meaning, and all symbolic meanings grow out of specific social and cultural experiences (Geertz, 1976, pp. 1473–1499). According to this logic, Zhang Daqian's splashed-color cannot be simply thrown into the basket of Western Abstract Expressionism, nor can he discuss the length of classical pen and ink only by the set of aesthetic standards. It is more appropriate to say that this set of creative ways is regarded as an intentional cultural operation—Zhang Daqian rearranged the Chinese local symbolic language, modern visual form, and international exhibition that set of operating mechanisms to one, the purpose is to enable the East and the West to catch up. In this way, the focus of the discussion is shifted from the surface form judgment to the level of how the cultural meaning is produced, and it can be said that how Zhang Daqian has preserved the identity of Oriental art while going international.

2.3 Paradigm Shifts in Cross-Cultural Art Dissemination

The Western acceptance of Zhang Daqian's works, which is hot and cold at times, reflects an obvious shift in the communication strategy of Chinese art in the 20th century in the process of moving towards the world. Mei Lanfang went to North America to tour in the 1930s, copying the traditional opera from beginning to end, without moving at all. Zhang Daqian is different. He chose a way to actively adapt to

each other's aesthetic habits, rather than holding on to a set of so-called "cultural authenticity." This turn is not out of thin air. It is his judgment after he has thoroughly understood the institutional artistic operation of the West. In a private letter to his disciple Feng Ye, he said of his observation of the curation and collection logic of the Museum of Modern Art in New York: "Their definition of modernity is not the same as ours. Without the label of 'modernity', the door of the system will not open to Chinese art" (quoted from Liu Cong, 2017, p. 5). In order to take this step forward, he consciously implanted a translatable value in his works—the kind of abstract texture made by splashing color, which is equivalent to a ticket to the discourse of Western modernism. And those pen-and-ink efforts hidden under the color, and quietly his own set of cultural foundation to retain.

This dual coding communication strategy, put into the actual operation of cross-cultural communication, itself with a layer of internal contradictions. On the one hand, Tao Changping and other scholars believe that it breaks the rigid binary opposition between Eastern and Western aesthetics (Tao Changping, 2016, pp. 64–65). On the other hand, however, some researchers have warned that some of this ostensible reconciliation is based on unilateral cultural compromise (Peng Yongxin, 2016, pp. 32–34). It is interesting to note that by the 1990s, when the neo-Confucian intellectuals were re-energized, the Western academic community had re-examined Zhang Daqian's splashed-color landscape. Wu Hung, an art historian in the United States, has noticed that these abstract mountain landscapes actually quietly contain the old cosmology of "harmony between man and nature"—they give modern people a new understanding of the traditional Chinese value system and provide a tangible image reference (Wu Hung, 2022, pp. 56–57). This belated criticism and recognition exposes the problem of time difference in cross-cultural communication—something has to wait for decades to be truly "seen" by the other side.

The single, monolithic modernist narrative of the Western academic community has slowly loosened over the years. Zhang Daqian's early splashed-color works, which were previously described as something that gave way to Western aesthetic tastes, are now an inextricable case under the framework of post-colonial criticism. When they are used to re-examine cross-cultural artistic practice, they are often brought up for discussion.

Semiotic analysis frames Zhang's creative practice as a carefully planned act of cultural translation. Literati painting relies on the organic integration of poetry, calligraphy, painting and seal carving; Zhang split this unified structure and rebuilt its components into a symbolic system readable within modern art contexts. There are several key symbolic elements: the formal experiment of splashing color, the seal representing the Oriental aesthetic interest, and the inscription as a time marker (Zhu Haoyun, 2012, pp. 18–23). The number of ways in which this set of symbols was reorganized was revealed at the 1956 Paris solo exhibition. The silk core mounted flat with a Western-style metal border, the traditional vertical hanging scroll that set the entire set to be replaced—the composition from the calligraphy pen frame out of the linear structure of the loose binding. Western critics have logically classified such things into "Oriental Abstract Expressionism". However, Ban Zonghua reminded that although this re-arrangement of symbols has made cross-cultural communication a lot easier, the most core thing in literati painting—

seeking philosophical understanding through painting—has been worn out (Ban Zonghua et al., 2014, pp. 19–35). This academic lawsuit that has been fought for so long, in the end, the root is between the two forces—on the one hand, the cultural inertia that continues on the line of classical realistic aesthetics, and on the other hand, the fracture of modernism marked by abstraction. Zhang Daqian's skill is that he squeezed two sets of things into one piece: the copy of Dunhuang painted murals (made between 1941 and 1943), and the number of ways to use gold paper in a large area. These archaeological and traditional efforts were taken by him to and from the modern visual symbol language, which was forced to put in a thick layer of history (Song Sijie, 2019, pp. 15–19). In this way, the new things in form and the traditional line can also coexist in his hands.

3. Conclusion

The creation of Zhang Daqian's whole life, hard to wade out of a road of their own—cross-cultural artistic exchange, in the end how to go, he gives a different answer. He tried it over and over for years, and finally took it to build a bridge, one end connected to the Chinese ink painting tradition, the other end connected to the global modern art. The reason why the Paris solo exhibition is important is that in those works, two things stand at the same time: the material foundation and ink spirit of classical painting are not lost, and the visual pursuit of Western Abstract Expressionism is not avoided. He is not one-sided, nor does he die holding old things, so he walked a middle way. This approach removes the either-or frame of Orientalism and Western centralism, and relies on the initiative to reorganize its own artistic language to achieve a reciprocal dialogue between the two sides. The splashed-color landscape is popular again, and the core of Oriental aesthetics has never been lost.

In this way, his works have become an unavoidable case to study how traditional art turns to modern times. This case also shows that non-Western art does not have its own development space on the plate of global art. Artistic innovation does not necessarily have to follow Western standards, nor does it have to cling to a fixed set of traditional definitions. What is truly valuable often grows out of adaptive adjustment and equal cross-cultural dialogue. Zhang Daqian's coming down this way just proves one thing—cross-border artistic communication, in the final analysis, is a cyclical process of mutual interpretation, active adjustment and common generation of new meanings. This conclusion provides an analytical perspective for understanding how contemporary art flows around the world.

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