

Original Paper

A Comparative Study of Yuanti Flower-and-bird Paintings and Western Classical Still-life Paintings: A Formal and Thematic Analysis of Li Song's "Basket of Flowers" and Caravaggio's "Basket of Fruit"

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Abstract

In the context of globalization, cultural exchange between the East and West is becoming increasingly frequent, and painting serves as a unique perspective for exploring cultural differences. In particular, flower-and-bird paintings and still-life paintings, as two major traditional painting genres, share similarities in selecting the subject and pursuing realism while maintaining their artistic characteristics, which both act as effective research models for cross-cultural comparative studies. This paper selects Li Song's "Basket of Flowers", a representative of Yuanti flower-and-bird paintings, and Caravaggio's "Basket of Fruit", an iconic one of the 17th-century Western classical still-life paintings. Through visual interpretation and cultural tracing, it analyzes the differences between the two in terms of color application, spatial organization, modelling techniques, and artistic spirit, to reveal the heterogeneity of floral subjects in Yuanti flower-and-bird paintings and Western classical still-life paintings, and to examine the different artistic values and humanistic spirits manifested in Chinese and Western paintings.

Keywords

"Basket of Flowers", "Basket of Fruit", Yuanti flower-and-bird paintings and Western Classical Still-life paintings

1. Introduction

Yuanti flower-and-bird paintings in the Song dynasty and 17th-century Western classical still-life

paintings represent the artistic peaks of their respective art histories, embodying the unique charm of their respective cultures. Yuanti flower-and-bird paintings, characterized by meticulous brushwork, exquisite coloration, and profound artistic conception, showcase the scholar-official's unique perception of natural beauty and spiritual pursuit of Neo-Confucianism of the Song Dynasty, while Western classical still-life paintings, on the other hand, featuring rigorous compositions and vibrant colors, emphasizes scientific observation and precise perspective. The two share similarities in selecting subjects and pursuing realistic style; however, the differences in their techniques and artistic concepts are the key to their unique aesthetic and expressive qualities.

When we juxtapose the masterpiece “Basket of Flowers” created by Li Song, a court painter awaiting imperial audience, with the famous “Basket of Fruit”, the work of the 17th-century Baroque art giant named Caravaggio in Rome, the similarities in their exquisite compositions and detailed treatments are indeed striking. The extant three scrolls of “Basket of Flowers” (Spring Flowers, Summer Flowers, and Winter Flowers) by Li Song, through their meticulous depiction of seasonal flowers, attentively arranged compositions, and refined and transcendent color applications, vividly demonstrate the exceptional mastery of Yuanti paintings in the Southern Song dynasty. Moreover, it also pioneers flower arrangement vessels as independent subjects, exerting a profound influence on future posterity. Similarly, Caravaggio’s renowned still-life painting “Basket of Fruit” employs naturalistic techniques, from which the painting not only presents the realistic textures of the object but also is imbued with religious symbolism and philosophical reflections on life, marking the flourishing of Western still-life painting. However, beyond the differences in tools and materials, “Basket of Fruit” and “Basket of Flowers” still exhibit distinctions in their respective creative techniques and artistic essences. Therefore, by comparing the differences in color, space, form, and artistic spirit between “Basket of Flowers” and “Basket of Fruit”, this paper aims to reveal the heterogeneous traits of floral subjects between the two, as well as the philosophical thoughts and cultural differences in the artistic representations of nature between China and the West.



Figure 1. (Song dynasty) Li Song, Basket of Flowers (the Winter flowers scroll), colored on silk, 26.1*26.3cm, in National Palace Museum, Taipei



Figure 2. (Italian) Caravaggio, Basket of Fruit, Oil on canvas, 64*46cm, in Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana Museum, Milan

2. Matching Colors according to Objects and Precise Coloring: A Comparative Analysis of Coloring

Due to vastly different historical, regional, and cultural backgrounds, the color expression in Yuanti flower-and-bird paintings in the Song dynasty differs vastly from that in the 17th-century Western classical still-life paintings. An ancient book named *Shangshu Yiji* states, “I wish to observe the images of the ancients’ clothes - the sun, the moon, stars, mountains, dragons, and pheasants painted; with tiger, algae, fire, white rice, black and white axe-shaped pattern, black and blue “self” pattern (the Chinese character “ji”) on my dress. You should do your utmost to display the five colors in all their splendor and clarity.” (Note 1) Deeply rooted in the ancient Chinese theory of Yin-Yang and the Five Elements, Chinese painting’s use of color has been deeply influenced by the philosophical thoughts of Confucianism, Taoism, Xuan-Xue philosophy of the Wei and Jin dynasties, and Buddhism. The Yuanti flower-and-bird paintings in the Song dynasty followed these color principles, where the shades of colors painted are more based on the painter’s subjective consciousness, aiming for elegance rather than completely imitating nature, reflecting an aesthetic of abstraction and generalization. In contrast, Western painting’s color concepts are rooted in respect for the natural order, treating the scientific culture and formal logic as its theoretical foundation.

Influenced by renowned philosophers like Socrates, who believed “painting is a representation of what is seen... using colors to imitate the concave and convex, the shadows and lights, the hard and soft, the flat and uneven, reproducing them accurately” (Note 2), the 17th-century Western classical still-life paintings emphasize the objective representation and realistic description of color. Aiming to achieve vivid and intense visual effects, it focuses on dealing with light and shadows to bring a distinctive stereoscopic effect. “Basket of Flowers” and “Basket of Fruit” vividly embody this color comparison.

An ancient painter in the Southern Dynasty, Xie He proposed the principle of “matching colors according to objects” (Note 3) in *the preface of Record of the Classification of Old Paintings*, which laid the foundation for the traditional Chinese color theory system. This principle advocates coloring objects based on their category, not demanding strict fidelity to details, emphasizing the inherent colors,

and ignoring the influence of light sources and environmental colors. “According to objects” is the painter’s act of recognizing the colors of objects; “matching colors” is the painter’s act of using colors to create the object itself, in which the two together constitute the complete process of the painter’s subjective behavior, from recognizing colors to expressing colors. (Note 4)

Besides, Kong Liuqing pointed out that the ability of painters in the Song dynasty to deliver emotions through flower and bird images was pretty talented, often reflecting integrated thinking of human life and nature life. (Note 5) In Li Song’s “Basket of Flowers” (especially the Winter Flowers scroll), the coloring does not rigidly adhere to the natural color relationships of the flowers and basket, nor does it intentionally pursue changes in warm and cool tones. Instead, it focuses on the objects in themselves, excelling in using various techniques like color shading, overlaying, flat application, etc. In the painting, the camellia flowers are first colored with rouge red through color shading, cleverly presenting the folds and layers of the petals, then overlaid with a thick red to fix the base color, with the thick and silty pigment used to dot the anthers, contrasting obviously with the surrounding flat and dyed colors. In terms of the leaves, the front is colored with light ink and blue-green through shading, complemented by three different greens to distinguish front and back, while a single withered leaf on the right is specially color-dyed from the edge inward using ochre. As for the white flowers, white powder is applied flat on the corresponding positions on the back of the canvas, allowing the background color to slightly show through, giving the overall painting a sense of depth after mounting.

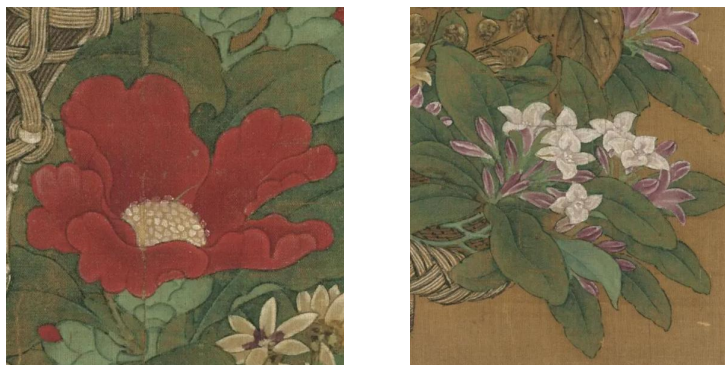


Figure 3. (Song dynasty) Li Song, Basket of Flowers (the Winter flowers scroll), partial, colored on silk, 26.1*26.3cm, in National Palace Museum, Taipei

In the field of the 17th-century Western classical still-life paintings, coloring use entered a new phase of systematization and scientification. The artists strictly followed the color properties of the objective objects, pursuing the life-like reproduction of the inherent colors of the objects as well as the environmental colors produced by the mutual influence between objects. Caravaggio’s “Basket of Fruit” featuring a single-toned design for the background and the tabletop, contrasts with the plump forms of the central objects, precisely highlighting the Western painting’s ultimate pursuit of color authenticity.

The basket is filled with grape clusters of varied colors, including black, red, blue, and yellow. The apples show worm-eaten marks, the pears have scattered holes, and even each leaf is depicted with subtle differences in its sickly state. Every flower and leaf in the painting is meticulously rendered according to the actual lighting conditions. Even among the same type of flowers, the color gradients differ due to variations in the angle and intensity of the light. In terms of color treatment, the white flowers display delicate pink tones under different lighting conditions. The apples, varying in shape, present a contrast between warm and cool colors. The leaves exhibit careful color changes based on their fresh or withered state. All these details profoundly embody the interaction between the inherent colors, environmental colors, and light colors, as well as the painter's precise mastery of color and chiaroscuro.



Figure 4. (Italian) Caravaggio, Basket of Fruit, partial, Oil on canvas, 64*46cm, in Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana Museum, Milan

Compared to the flattened treatment in Li Song's, Caravaggio's work displays a more complex chiaroscuro structure. Both of the two use inherent colors to depict the basket, but somewhat different is that Caravaggio's endows it with a three-dimensional form through the striking contrast of light and dark areas. Therefore, this reveals the distinct approaches to color expression between Yuanti flower-and-bird paintings in the Song dynasty and the 17th-century Western classical still-life paintings: the former tends towards the evocative representation of imagery and atmosphere, pursuing the inner harmony and symbolic meaning of color; the latter, however, is dedicated to the realistic reproduction of color and the physical accuracy of chiaroscuro, emphasizing the three-dimensional effect and depth perception of the painting.

3. Scattered Point Perspective and Focal Point Perspective: A Comparative Analysis of Space

In the long history of art, the East and the West have each nurtured unique forms of spatial representation. Specifically, Chinese painting tends towards a scattered point perspective, not adhering to the direct reproduction of physical space but conveying the spiritual qualities of objects and the

philosophical ambiance of the scene based on the artist's inner understanding and reconstruction. Within the limited canvas, they express endless emotions and nuances. On the other hand, Western classical painting emphasizes the use of focal point perspective, striving to simulate the viewer's actual visual experience through a fixed vantage point, utilizing light, color, and shadow to recreate the object's texture and positioning.

As the aesthetician, Zong Baihua stated in *The Birth of the Artistic Realm in Chinese Art*, "The manifestation of the artistic realm is by no means a pure, objective, and mechanical imitation of nature, but rather 'having the painter's himself unique insight as the highest attainment'." (Note 6) Chinese flower-and-bird paintings intend to cast a sensory insight to verify the characteristics of an object's form within a specific time and space, emphasizing the subjective perspective to observe the objects and utilizing scattered point perspective to capture the image. In Li Song's "Basket of Flowers", the clever arrangement of visual experience and the superimposition of objects jointly constitute its layers. The flat and linear-shaped bottom of the basket, the curved handle pointing to the right, abandons the contrast of dark and light and instead focuses on the delineation of lines, complemented by color. The overall space is presented as a two-dimensional spread, with the front-back relationship of the objects conveyed through visual layering, emphasizing the aesthetic refinement of the basket form and the vivid charm of the flowers within.



Figure 5. (Song dynasty) Li Song, Basket of Flowers (the Spring flowers scroll), partial, colored on silk, 26.1*26.3cm, in Shanghai Long Art Museum, Shanghai

From the Renaissance to the late 19th century, the technique of focal point perspective was the common choice of Western painters. This technique is based on rigorous optical principles, ensuring that the scene depicted in the painting resembles what the human eye observes in nature. Through scientific reasoning, it establishes the correspondence between the drawing board and the real space, as well as the laws of image formation on the retina, thereby reconstructing on the canvas a realistic world with intense visual perceptions.

In Caravaggio's "Basket of Fruit", the fruits are arranged in a radiating layout centered on the focal

point of the painting, creating a clear sense of spatial depth and overlapping. The depiction of the grapes, in particular, exhibits a distinct contrast in size between the foreground and background, as well as the interweaving of the objects. Coupled with the use of warm tones and the gradation of colors, this not only enhances the naturalistic feel, but also, through the contrast of size, the relationships between foreground and background, and the central reflective composition, creates the illusion of distance, simulating the effects of natural lighting and making the objects appear to be at varying distances from the viewer.



Figure 6. (Italian) Caravaggio, Basket of Fruit, partial, Oil on canvas, 64*46cm, in Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana Museum, Milan

Consequently, in spatial expression, Yuanti flower-and-bird paintings in the Song dynasty and Western classical still-life paintings behave differently. The former favored the use of scattered perspective, unbound by physical constraints, and emphasized the fusion of the vibrant natural world and the artist's inner spiritual world. The objects depicted in these paintings are dynamic, with the viewpoint wandering according to the artist's emotions and the overall artistic conception. The blank-leaving (the Chinese phrase "liubai") in the background stimulates the viewer's imagination, embodying the spiritual expression of Eastern art. On the other hand, the 17th-century Western classical still-life paintings often employed the focal-point perspective to pursue the utmost realism. Through the scientific treatment of light and shadow, they endowed the objects with a convincing sense of volume, reflecting the static beauty and rational observation of the real world. The painters, acting as calm observers, fixed the viewpoint to ensure the stability and depth of the composition, manifesting the pursuit of precise naturalistic description in Western art.

4. Linear Modelling and Mass Modelling: A Comparative Analysis of Shaping

In the origins of art, both Eastern and Western traditions chose line as the fundamental element of shape art. However, as their respective cultural thought and material techniques evolved, the two diverged in their pursuit of shape art. Chinese painting further expanded the artistic tension of line and ink,

developing a unique aesthetic philosophy. Somewhat different is Western art gradually tended towards exploring a sense of space and volume, integrating light and shadow into the canvas and replacing linear construction with mass modelling.

In ancient Chinese art theory, the use of line, often described as “drawing on the sand with a cone”, “like a broken hairpin”, or “like the trace of a leaking roof” (Note 7), stresses the significance of brushwork and strength. In the symbiotic relationship between calligraphy and painting, the requirements for control of line strength and texture shaping in calligraphy have also been assimilated into painting. In “Basket of Flowers”, the painter uses ink lines to depict the outlines of the flowers. Those lines are graceful, upright, accurate, and forceful. The starting point of the strokes has a sharp tip; the ending has a return stroke; the turns have paused; the brush movements have elasticity; the pacing alternates between fast and slow. The bamboo basket and the darker leaves are rendered with heavy ink, while the lighter flowers are outlined with diluted ink, creating clear layers of forms in the painting. The artist uses the delicate and lightweight “silk-like” brushwork to express the softness of the petals, and the firm “iron wire-like” lines to depict the strength of the branches. Through the nuanced modulation of ink density, wet and dry, lines and curves, the artist constructs the structure and texture of the flowers. This mode of expression, using line as the skeleton and ink as the body, not only presents the objects but also conveys the artist’s inner emotions and aesthetic pursuits, thus deeply reflecting the infusion of the spirit of Chinese calligraphy into painting.



Figure 7. (Song dynasty) Li Song, Basket of Flowers (the Summer flowers scroll), partial, colored on silk, 26.1*26.3cm, in the Palace Museum, Beijing

In contrast, instead of using “the strength of brushwork” in Chinese painting, Western painters often use Western sketching, especially the combination of mass and surface, thus expressing the volume and spatial structure of objects. Western painting art shows a more rational attitude, regarding it as a tool or an auxiliary medium for shaping. They believe that “boundaries of objects are depicted but without lines on the boundaries. Therefore, Western paintings resemble real objects, while Chinese ones do not,

from which one can instantly recognize them as paintings.” (Note 8)

In Caravaggio’s “Basket of Fruit”, the utilization of lines is more focused on shaping the structure of objects and constructing a sense of space. In this painting, every line serves as an efficient tool for shaping the form and expressing a sense of volume. They may be hidden beneath the colors, in the sketch to draw the outlines and structures, or relying on the contrast of light and dark and delicate brushstrokes to bring out the texture of objects and the effects of light and shadow. Like the plump and juicy fruits, the coarse texture of the basket, and the smooth surface of the table, several details all rely on the artist’s precise mastery of mass and surface and the meticulous portrayal of light and shadow effects.



Figure 8. (Italian) Caravaggio, Basket of Fruit, partial, Oil on canvas, 64*46cm, in Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana Museum, Milan

Different aesthetic mindsets between the East and West have different art aesthetics and art practices and different thinking patterns of imitating nature and pursuing subjective expressions, making their aesthetic characteristics special and unique. Yuanti flower-and-bird paintings in the Song dynasty use “lines” to shape forms and combine with the traditional tools of the brush and rice paper, expressing the national spirit and style of Chinese painting through the subtle variations in line dynamics, linearity, brushwork, and ink rhythm. On the contrary, Western classical still-life paintings rely on focal perspective and the treatment of light and shadow, constructing the picture through “mass and surface”, thus achieving a perfect unity of artistry and scientificity.

5. “Studying and Acquiring” and “Seeking Knowledge”: A Comparative Analysis of Artistic Spirit

The diverse cultural philosophies, aesthetic pursuits, and ways of understanding nature in different civilizations cultivate unique artistic characteristics and expressions in their traditional painting systems. Affected by different cultural contexts and aesthetic preferences, Yuanti flower-and-bird paintings in the Song dynasty and Western classical still-life paintings have developed distinctive strategies of artistic expression. Due to the disparate cultural foundations, although “Basket of Flowers” and “Basket of Fruit” both belong to the realm of realist representation, they contain a fundamental

difference in the artistic spirit they embody.

From the perspective of the history of thought, the philosophical system of “studying things to acquire knowledge” (Gewu Zhizhi), Confucian scholars are required to study extensively to understand the unified natural law embodied in every specific thing, thereby clarifying the consistency between Confucian morality and the natural law, thus consciously put the essential principles of “cultivating oneself”, “regulating one’s family well”, “governing the state properly” and “bringing peace to all under heaven” into practice. (Note 9) As Zheng Wuchang pointed out, “The ancient in Song dynasty are good at painting, regarding the principle of “*Li*” as the main focus, which is probably influenced by the idea of Neo-Confucianism in the Song dynasty. It is because the ancient painters emphasize “*Li*” that they value reality; it is because they value reality that they emphasize vitality. Therefore, the concept of ‘lively charm and vivid expression’ is regarded as the golden rule of paintings. Eventually, this thought formed the painting style of emphasizing the spirit and yet not losing the principles of ‘*Li*’ in the Song dynasty.” (Note 10) Undoubtedly, under the requirement of “studying and acquiring”, the most superficial aspect is that scholars need to “enquire” into every specific object around them. “Basket of Flowers”, as a representative of Yuanti flower-and-bird paintings in the Song dynasty, although experienced by artistic processing, still retains its natural authenticity, exuding a sense of inherent harmony and vitality. Through the observation of the specific objects, one can understand the natural law, which fully illustrates the interpretation of the “studying and acquiring” thought.

It shows that bathed in the influence of this kind of thought, the meticulous observation and recognition of natural objects became scholars’ core standards when creating paintings. Meanwhile, every work presents the painters’ pursuit of perfection in painting skills, from the detailed weaving of the flower basket to the application of double-outline and color-filling techniques. Moreover, every detail witnesses their flexible utilization of methods such as “painting with colors directly without ink” and “dotting at will” on individual flower petals, stems, and centers. Every brush stroke strives for precision and fluency, vividly reflecting the ultimate pursuit of details.

Gradually liberated from the theological constraints of the Middle Ages, the spirit of rationality and curiosity in ancient Greece has returned to the general consciousness of society. Da Vinci pointed out that “painting is the sole imitator of all the visible things in nature” (Note 11). During the Renaissance, more painters were skilled at using perspective and coloring, driving classical oil painting to the realistic expression, reviving the Ancient Greek and Roman aesthetics, and giving birth to new styles that emphasized naturalistic drawings, such as academic classicism and realism. “Basket of Fruit”, using naturalistic techniques such as perspective and chiaroscuro, displays the high level of realistic painting techniques in the early Renaissance, reflecting the pursuit of science and rationality. Among the objects in the painting, whether the wrinkled figs, the blemished apples, or the distinct grapes and various leaves, these images are depicted as so life-like that they seem real. The use of light is simple yet powerful, making every vein of the leaves and every imperfection of fruits seem tangible, revealing the pure and unadorned face of nature.

However, Li Song's "Basket of Flowers" reflects the understanding of the harmonious coexistence between subjective imagery and nature, conveying the naturalistic law that transcends tangible forms driven by the "studying and acquiring" thought. On the other hand, Caravaggio's "Basket of Fruit" emphasizes the direct imitation of natural objects, reflecting Western art's scientific inquiry into the natural world by dealing with light and texture meticulously. The difference in artistic spirit between the two essentially reflects the different aesthetic pursuits of Chinese and Western cultures towards nature. The pursuit of "studying and acquiring" thought in Yuanti flower-and-bird paintings in the Song dynasty aims to observe the principles in things, while the "seeking knowledge" of Western classical still-life paintings focuses on rational observation and scientific representation of nature.

6. Conclusions

Through the analysis of "Basket of Flowers" and "Basket of Fruit" from the perspective of the use of color, spatial organization, modeling techniques, and artistic spirit, it follows that both pursue the realism and magnificence of the picture, but contain distinct cultural characteristics in their modes of expression respectively. Yuanti flower-and-bird paintings in the Song dynasty tend to convey the realm of imagery and meaning, emphasizing the inner harmony and symbolic significance of coloring, while Western classic still-life paintings seek to scientific reproduction of color, light, and shadow, emphasizing the three-dimensional effect and depth perception of the picture. As concerns spatial treatment, the former uses scattered-point perspective to create the subjective interest and the beauty of the artistic conception, while the latter pursues the ultimate visual realism through focal point perspective. Besides, the former uses line modeling, paying attention to the rhythm of lines and the rendition of ink, which reflects the influence of calligraphy on painting, while the latter uses the techniques of "mass and surface" to outline the painting, emphasizing color blocks, light, and shadow, which more manifests scientific realism. In terms of artistic spirit, Li Song's work reflects the "studying things to acquire knowledge"; nevertheless, Caravaggio's demonstrates the scientific understanding of nature. Although they have their unique artistic techniques, both similarly express their reverence for the beauty of nature.

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