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Article

Chinese Oil Painting Perspectives: Conceptual Analysis and Guideline Development for Artists

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Abstract: In contemporary oil painting, moving beyond superficial Sino-Western fusion to construct a spatially and culturally grounded artistic language remains a central challenge for Chinese artists. This study focuses on Chinese oil paintings produced between 1966 and 1976, aiming to analyze how traditional Chinese pictorial perspective concepts were integrated into these works and, based on this analysis, to develop a practical guideline for contemporary artists. Employing an interpretive qualitative design, the research combines literature review, visual analysis of representative "Red Classic" works, and semi-structured interviews with three expert practitioners and educators. The findings reveal that key leader images, revolutionary history paintings, and thematic works on workers, peasants, and soldiers from this period formed a hybrid spatial system. While Western linear perspective structures near space, traditional Chinese devices—such as the Three-Far Method, scattered perspective, viewing big from small, virtual-real interplay, anti-perspective, and temporal perspective—shape narrative depth, emotional tone, and the viewer's "roaming" experience. Based on this historical analysis, the study develops a practical guideline that reframes these traditional concepts as a flexible toolkit for designing eye routes, spatial hierarchy, and mood in contemporary oil painting. This guideline provides artists and educators with a structured path to move beyond camera-dependent, single-point perspective and cultivate an internalized sense of Chinese spatial and temporal logic.

Keywords: traditional Chinese painting perspective, Chinese oil painting, 1966-1976, hybrid space, artistic guideline

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1. Introduction

As an imported art form, oil painting has undergone more than a century of development in China. Despite its current prosperity and stylistic diversity, it continues to face persistent challenges. On one hand, Western realist standards still dominate under the influence of globalization, leading to a certain degree of homogenization in the overall landscape of Chinese oil painting [1]. On the other hand, many attempts at "fusion" remain superficial, often limited to the direct incorporation of traditional Chinese visual motifs—such as pandas or paper-cutting—without engaging with deeper cultural or philosophical dimensions. As a result, such works frequently lack genuine cultural resonance and conceptual depth [2]. The question of how to internalize traditional Chinese aesthetics within the oil painting medium and construct an oil painting system with Chinese characteristics has therefore become a central concern in contemporary artistic and academic discourse [3].

The perspective theory of traditional Chinese painting-including concepts such as the Three-Far Method, scattered perspective, and "viewing the large from the small"-offers a distinctive approach to spatial organization. It functions not merely as a set of technical principles but as a philosophical mode of perceiving nature, interpreting reality, and expressing conceptual awareness [4]. Integrating this spatial framework into oil painting may provide a unique language of spatial expression that differs fundamentally from Western linear perspective, thereby contributing to the development of an oil painting system rooted in Chinese cultural traditions.

However, a clear gap remains in existing research. Most studies either concentrate on classical painting theory itself or are limited to analyses of contemporary artistic practice, lacking a systematic examination of transformative experiences within specific historical contexts. The period from 1966 to 1976 represents a particularly distinctive and influential stage in the development of Chinese oil painting. Although artistic production during this time was shaped by specific historical conditions, it also generated unique explorations of visual language. Representative works demonstrate how artists, while employing oil painting techniques, absorbed elements of traditional Chinese painting and developed new artistic characteristics [5]. Re-examining artistic practices from this period provides a valuable historical foundation for analyzing how traditional spatial concepts can be translated into oil painting.

In response to these theoretical gaps and contemporary challenges, this study aims to establish a connective framework between traditional perspective theory and oil painting practice.

2. Research Objective and Methodology

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative paradigm, which is particularly suited for exploring complex human issues, artistic intentions, and the nuanced ways in which cultural traditions are transformed within specific historical and social contexts. The research design consists of three interconnected components:

Literature Review: A systematic review of both Chinese and international scholarship on traditional Chinese painting perspective theory (e.g., the Three-Far Method, scattered perspective, viewing big from small) and the historical development of Chinese oil painting from 1966 to 1976 [6].

Scope of Research: Research scope: six traditional Chinese painting perspective methods: three far method, scattered point perspective, seeing the big from the small, virtual and real, anti-perspective, concept of time perspective, painting skills, application in oil painting, and five representative theme categories of works from 1966 to 1976: leader theme paintings (such as chairman Mao to Anyuan by liuchunhua and Chairman Mao in Jinggangshan by Luo Gongliu); Revolutionary historical paintings (such as occupy the presidential palace by Chen Yifei and Gutian Conference by Wei Jingshan); Life paintings of workers, peasants and soldiers (such as the struggle never to give up by tangxiaoming and the new doctor of fishing port by chenyaning); Model operas and poster style paintings (such as tangxiaohu's "marching through the wind and waves"); And recessive "nationalization" experimental works (such as Wu Guanzhong's "the Three Gorges of the Yangtze River"). The analysis focuses on the composition structure, spatial level, scale processing and the integration of Chinese and Western perspective logic [7].

Semi-Structured Expert Interviews: Interviews were conducted with three key informants: Professor Gao Zhongli (Vice Dean, Chengdu College of Chinese & ASEAN Arts, Sichuan Conservatory of Music), Associate Professor Chen Song (Chongqing Normal University), and Associate Professor Chen Hualin (Southwest University). These experts were purposively selected for their extensive experience bridging traditional Chinese painting, oil painting practice, and art education. The interviews explored their understanding of traditional perspective concepts, their interpretations of 1966-1976 oil paintings, and their concrete suggestions for translating these historical practices into a

usable guideline for contemporary artists [8]. Interview data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis, supported by NVivo software, to identify recurring patterns and themes [9].

3. Results

3.1. Result of Study and Analysis Chinese Perspective Oil Painting

The visual analysis of representative works and the insights from expert interviews reveal that Chinese oil painting between 1966 and 1976 developed a sophisticated hybrid spatial language. Rather than simply copying Soviet socialist realism, artists quietly absorbed and transformed key elements of traditional Chinese pictorial thinking [10]. The analysis identifies six core traditional perspective concepts that were actively translated into the oil medium.

1. The Three-Far Method: The classical concepts of high-far, deep-far, and level-far provided a fundamental vocabulary for organizing layered space and guiding the viewer's eye.

High-far: In Liu Chunhua's *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan*, the composition is structured as a vertical ascent. Mao's figure stands on a narrow mountain path that rises in steps from the lower right to the upper left, while misty peaks climb behind him. The foreground is compressed, and the spectator's gaze must "look up" to fully read the image, creating a sense of towering verticality and spiritual height.

Deep-far: In Luo Gongliu's *Chairman Mao on Jinggangshan*, overlapping mountain masses, a receding path, and tonal gradation pull the viewer's eye from the foreground, past Mao's figure, and into the layered depths of the landscape. This creates a sense of "walking into" the scene, following the route the painted figure seems to be taking (As shown in Figure 1).



Figure 1. Chairman Mao on Jinggangshan from Zheng Hongliu.

Level-far: In Tang Xiaohe's *Advancing in the Great Wind and Waves*, the deck of the ship and the horizon line create a long, sweeping level distance, suggesting vastness and breadth [11].

2. Viewing Big from Small: This principle involves using a small, carefully selected "micro-site" to stand for a much larger world.

In *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan*, a single mountain path is treated as a microcosm for the entire revolutionary turning point of the Anyuan miners' strike. Mao's figure is

slightly oversized relative to the path, visually emphasizing his symbolic centrality and inviting the viewer to read a whole historical narrative into this compressed scene (As shown in Figure 2).

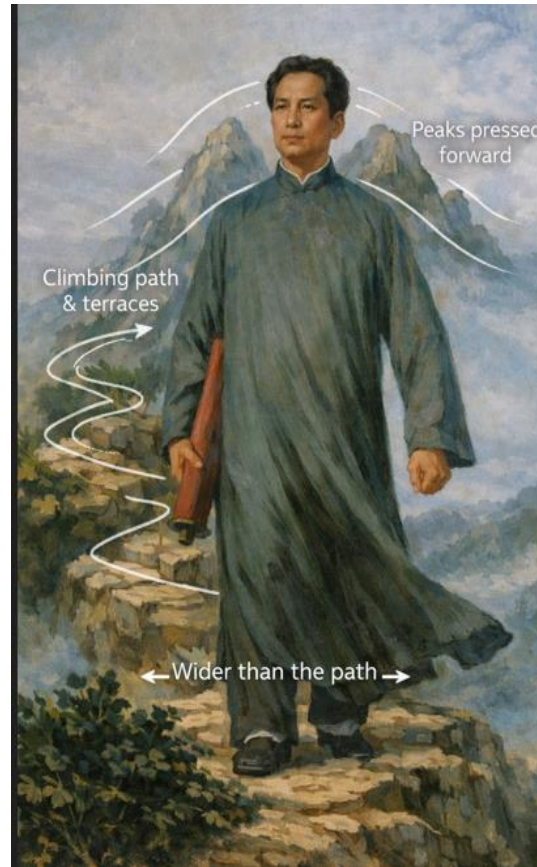


Figure 2. Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan from Liu Chunhua.

In Chen Yanning's *New Doctor at the Fishing Port*, a short strip of quay with a few figures becomes a symbol of the nationwide transformation of rural healthcare. The surrounding sea and sky are simplified into broad color zones, functioning like the "void" in traditional painting, which pushes the "real" forms of the doctor and fishermen forward and concentrates the narrative weight.

3. *Scattered Perspective (Moving Viewpoint)*: Instead of a single fixed viewpoint, many compositions from this period combine several local viewpoints to create a mobile, journey-like space.

In *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan*, the viewer's eye does not lock onto a single vanishing point. Instead, it first meets Mao's illuminated face, then follows the zigzag path inward and upward, and finally reaches the high mountains and sky. This designed visual route stitches together different vantage points, allowing the viewer to "move through" the scene.

In *Advancing in the Great Wind and Waves*, the sweeping diagonals of the waves and Mao's dynamic pose pull the gaze around the canvas in an S-shaped movement. The sea becomes less a literal deep space and more a rhythmic, patterned field that the eye traverses, echoing the experience of unrolling a handscroll (As shown in Figure 3).

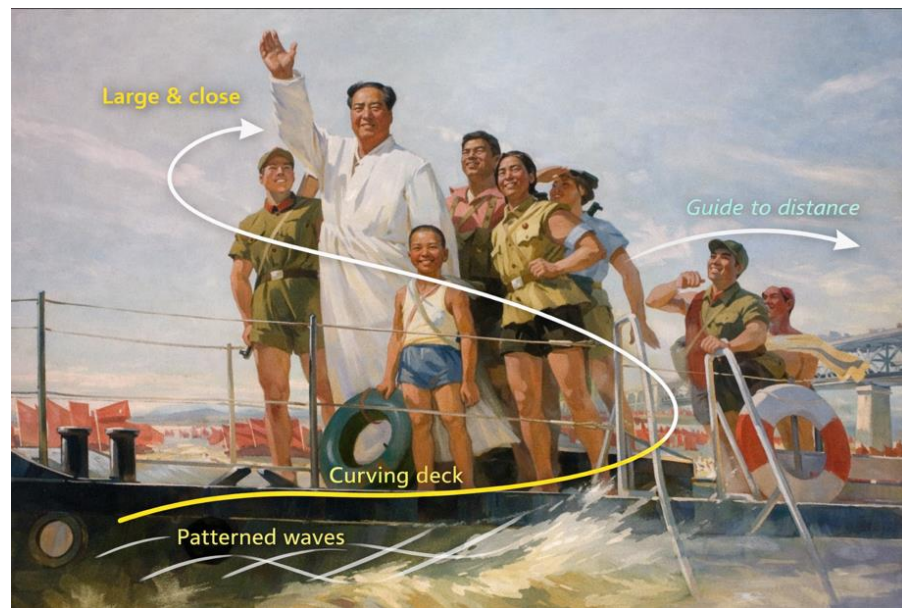


Figure 3. Great Wind and Waves from Tang Xiaohu.

4. Virtual-Real Interplay: The traditional interplay of "full" and "empty" is translated into oil through the contrast of densely rendered forms and simplified, atmospheric fields.

In Fang Zengxian's *Arouse Millions of Workers and Peasants*, more than half of the picture surface is left as an open, pale background, with only minimal detail in the sky. This large "virtual" zone pushes the cluster of "real" figures forward, creating a sense of vast surroundings and focusing attention on the revolutionary group (As shown in Figure 4).



Figure 4. Arouse Millions of Workers and Peasants from Fang Zengxian.

In Tang Xiaoming's *Never-Ending Struggle*, the wall and furniture around Lu Xun are rendered with broad, even tones, while his face and hands receive the most intense modeling and contrast. This contrast between the "virtual" surrounding and the "real" figure establishes a powerful spatial hierarchy and emotional intensity.

5. Anti-Perspective: This refers to spatial strategies that prioritize symbolic meaning and narrative clarity over strict optical realism, including planarization and hierarchical scaling.

In He Kongde's Gutian Conference, space is deliberately planarized. Rows of delegates and benches are stacked vertically on the canvas, with only modest reduction in scale, rather than receding sharply into depth. The floor tilts forward, and desks are drawn with oblique projection, keeping all figures and objects legible. This shallow, stage-like space echoes traditional murals and New Year prints (As shown in Figure 5).



Figure 5. Gutian Conference from He Kongde.

Hierarchical scaling is evident in many leader images. In Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan, Mao's body is anatomically convincing yet slightly oversized in relation to the path and landscape, a subtle enlargement that emphasizes his symbolic centrality. This echoes the "main large, subordinate small" principle of traditional Chinese figure painting.

6. Temporal Perspective: Some works attempt to suggest the passage of time within a single, fixed canvas, moving beyond the depiction of a single frozen moment.

In Shen Jiawei's Standing Guard for Our Great Motherland, the deep snow and harsh wind indicate a long winter and the continuing hardship of frontier duty. The upright pose and sweeping diagonal of the landscape together produce a rhythm that suggests endurance and repetition over months and years, implying a temporal duration beyond the literal moment (As shown in Figure 6).

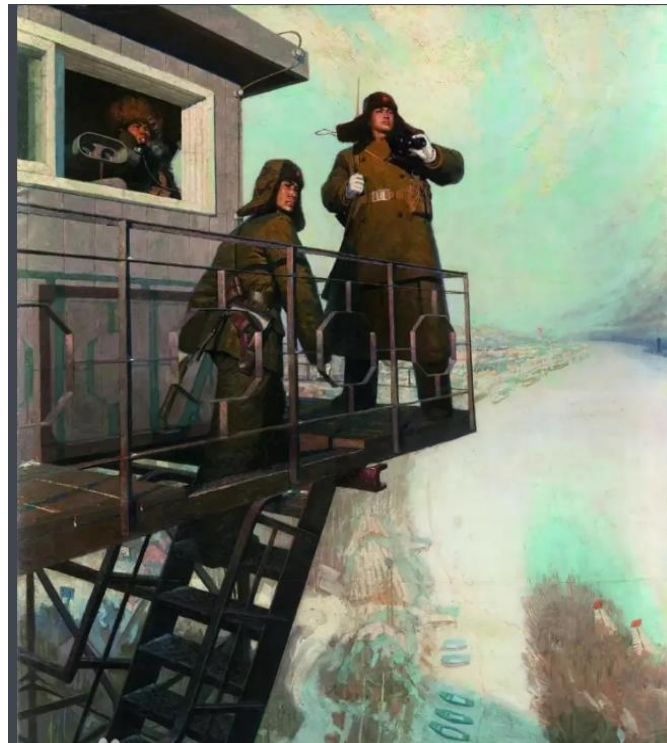


Figure 6. Standing Guard for Our Great Motherland from Shen Jiawei.

Revolutionary history paintings often use spatial zones to imply temporal sequence. The foreground depicts the climactic "now" moment, while the middle and far distance show scenes of approach or aftermath, encoding a "before-after" narrative chain within one frame.

Taken together, these analyses confirm that Chinese oil painting between 1966 and 1976 developed a robust hybrid spatial language. It did not form a fully autonomous technical system, but it created a powerful working model of how traditional perspective could be translated into oil on canvas, providing a valuable historical precedent for contemporary practice.

3.2. Result of Chinese Perspective Oil Painting Guideline for Artist Development

Based on the historical analysis and the insights from expert interviews, a practical guideline was developed to help contemporary artists consciously integrate traditional Chinese perspective into their oil painting practice. The guideline is designed as a bridge between theory and studio work, offering a structured yet flexible approach.

1. Core Philosophy of the Guideline:

The guideline first reframes traditional Chinese perspective not as a set of rigid formulas, but as a flexible "grammar" of space—a worldview and a way of thinking about the relationship between the viewer, the image, and the world. It proposes a "functional division" model: linear perspective can be used to stabilize near space and construct convincing, realistic forms for foreground figures and objects. In the middle and far distance, or for creating overarching narrative and emotional tone, traditional Chinese principles can be introduced to "bend" and enrich the spatial experience. The goal is to move the viewer from being a passive observer at a fixed point to an active participant who "roams" through the picture.

2. Operationalizing the Six Core Concepts:

The guideline translates the six traditional concepts into a series of actionable steps and design choices for artists:

Applying the Three-Far Method:

High-far: For a heroic or monumental subject, compress the foreground and create a clear vertical ascent. Place the key figure lower in the composition and use diagonally rising paths, stacked rocks, or architectural elements to lead the viewer's eye upward toward a focal point, evoking a sense of awe and elevation.

Deep-far: For a narrative that involves a journey or a process, create a layered recession into the picture plane. Use overlapping planes, a winding path or road, and gradations of color and detail to guide the viewer's eye from a near entry point into the middle and far distance, inviting them to "walk into" the scene.

Level-far: For open, expansive scenes like seascapes, plains, or large gatherings, emphasize horizontal extension. Use a low or middle horizon and long, band-like arrangements of figures or landscape elements to create a sense of breadth and calm.

Applying Viewing Big from Small:

Step 1: Identify the "largeness" (a historical period, a social movement, an emotional world) you wish to imply.

Step 2: Select a single, highly typical "small" location or situation that can stand as its embodiment (e.g., a single dock, a corner of a workshop, a mountain pass).

Step 3: Adjust scale, stacking, and environment design to make this small fragment feel saturated with references to the larger whole. The key figure(s) can be subtly enlarged, and background elements compressed and simplified.

Applying Scattered Perspective:

Design an eye route: Before starting a composition, sketch the intended path you want the viewer's eye to take (e.g., S-shaped, zigzag). Group elements into viewing "stations" along this route.

Combine local viewpoints: Allow for slight, gradual shifts in viewpoint between these stations. For example, a foreground group might be viewed frontally, while a distant landscape is viewed from a slightly higher angle, as long as overall coherence is maintained through consistent lighting and tonal hierarchy.

Applying Virtual-Real Interplay:

Plan your "breathing spaces": At the thumbnail stage, identify which areas of the composition will be densely detailed and highly contrasted ("real") and which will be simplified, softly treated, or opened up ("virtual").

Execute with intention: In oil, build up "real" zones with thicker paint, sharper edges, and stronger contrasts. Treat "virtual" zones with thin, soft layers of pigment, blurred outlines, and reduced detail. The contrast between these zones creates depth, mood, and visual rhythm.

Applying Anti-Perspective:

Planarization for clarity: When narrative clarity and collective presence are paramount, arrange figures and elements in shallow, stacked layers rather than deep recession. Tilt ground planes slightly toward the viewer to enhance legibility.

Hierarchical scaling for emphasis: To mark a figure's symbolic importance, allow them to be slightly enlarged relative to their environment, even if this breaks strict optical proportion. This must be done subtly enough to maintain the overall realist illusion.

Applying Temporal Perspective:

Map the narrative: Identify the key moments of your story (before, during, after).

Assign moments to spatial zones: Allocate these moments to different areas of the canvas. For example, the "preparation" in the foreground, the "climax" in the middle ground, and the "outcome" in the distance.

Use repeated motifs: Recurring figures, flags, or objects can be used to link these zones and signal progression in time. Use light and color cues (e.g., warmer colors for the "present," cooler tones for the past or future) to reinforce the temporal narrative.

3. Structure of the Guideline:

The guideline is structured to be user-friendly for artists and students. For each of the six concepts, it provides: (a) a clear, concise explanation of the traditional idea; (b) a visual analysis of how it was applied in a canonical 1966-1976 oil painting; and (c) a set of

step-by-step "how-to" suggestions and exercises for applying it in a contemporary work. The guideline emphasizes that these are flexible tools to be combined and adapted, not rigid rules to be followed.

4. Conclusion

This study set out to address the practical and conceptual problem of how to build a culturally grounded spatial language in contemporary Chinese oil painting. Through a focused analysis of the 1966-1976 period and dialogue with expert practitioners, it arrives at the following conclusions:

Regarding Objective One: The analysis confirms that a sophisticated hybrid spatial language was actively developed in Chinese oil painting between 1966 and 1976. Artists creatively absorbed and transformed six core concepts from traditional Chinese painting—the Three-Far Method, scattered perspective, viewing big from small, virtual-real interplay, anti-perspective, and temporal perspective—layering them onto a framework of Soviet-inspired realism. This historical practice provides a rich and concrete precedent for understanding how traditional spatial thinking can be translated into the modern oil medium.

Regarding Objective Two: The practical guideline developed in this study translates these historical lessons into a flexible and usable toolkit for contemporary artists. By reframing traditional perspective as a set of principles for designing eye routes, spatial hierarchy, and mood, the guideline offers a structured path for artists to move beyond superficial "Chinese elements" and camera-dependent composition. It encourages a return to the "roaming" mode of spatial experience central to Chinese aesthetics, providing both a conceptual foundation and practical steps for cultivating a deeply localized oil painting practice.

The road towards a more distinctive and confident Chinese oil painting does not lie in choosing between "Western" and "Chinese" systems, but in learning to move fluently between them. This study offers a historical model and a practical tool for that journey.

5. Discussion

5.1. Discussion of Objective One

The findings of this study provide a more nuanced understanding of the period from 1966 to 1976 in Chinese art history. They challenge narratives that interpret this decade solely through the lens of political propaganda and aesthetic stagnation. Instead, the analysis demonstrates that artists, even under strong ideological constraints, continued to engage with cultural traditions in subtle yet meaningful ways. The hybrid spatial language that emerged—combining Soviet-influenced realism with traditional Chinese perspectival thinking—was not a simple imitation of either system but rather a creative recombination shaped by specific historical conditions and artistic problem-solving.

These findings support the view that the "nationalization" of oil painting in China should be understood as a dynamic and continuous process of recombination. This study further specifies this process by identifying concrete spatial strategies—such as stacked planes, mobile viewpoints, symbolic scaling, and contrasts between virtual and real space—through which such integration was realized. It demonstrates that traditional concepts, including scattered perspective and the Three-Far Method, functioned not merely as theoretical constructs but as practical tools that enabled artists to fulfill demands for clarity, monumentality, and emotional expression in visual representation. The widely discussed aesthetic of "red, bright, and shining" is thus shown to possess an underlying spatial logic rooted in traditions of planar organization and symbolic hierarchy.

In addition, the study aligns with comparative perspectives that describe Chinese spatial representation in terms of multiple viewpoints and axonometric projection. It contributes to this body of research by providing concrete case analyses that illustrate how these spatial principles were effectively translated into the material and technical

language of oil painting within a specific historical context. Representative works from this period demonstrate a form of "recessive nationalization," in which traditional spatial logics—such as the sequential unfolding of handscroll compositions and the vertical layering of landscape space—are subtly embedded within oil painting surfaces, indicating a continuity of aesthetic thinking beneath overt thematic frameworks.

5.2. Discussion of Objective Two

The guideline proposed in this study directly addresses a key gap identified in both domestic and international research, namely the absence of clear and operational methodologies for integrating non-Western aesthetic principles into contemporary artistic practice. While existing theoretical discussions on Sino-Western integration and imagery-based oil painting provide valuable conceptual insights, they often lack practical applicability in studio contexts. This study translates such abstract frameworks into a more structured and actionable set of design strategies.

The guideline emphasizes a principle of functional division, whereby linear perspective is employed to stabilize foreground space, while traditional Chinese spatial logic is used to organize distant space and the overall viewing experience. This approach offers a practical resolution to the perceived tension between the two systems and avoids common misunderstandings, such as the superficial addition of cultural symbols onto Western spatial frameworks or the complete abandonment of linear perspective without a coherent alternative.

The significance of this guideline also lies in its pedagogical implications. Contemporary art education often separates Western perspective training from traditional Chinese spatial concepts, resulting in a fragmented understanding of spatial representation. By introducing structured guidelines, historical case studies, and step-by-step exercises into composition and painting courses, it becomes possible to bridge this divide. Such an approach can help students move beyond passive, image-based observation and develop a more active and internally grounded understanding of spatial construction informed by cultural traditions.

Nevertheless, the implementation of this guideline faces several challenges. One major obstacle is the entrenched reliance on photographic references in artistic practice, which limits the development of independent spatial thinking. Addressing this issue requires not only methodological guidance but also sustained pedagogical efforts involving iterative practice, critical feedback, and reflective learning. Furthermore, the guideline remains inherently interpretative, and its effectiveness ultimately depends on the creative capacity and sensitivity of individual practitioners.

Future research should therefore focus on applying and testing this guideline in real educational and studio environments, collecting user feedback, and refining the framework through practice-based evaluation.

6. Recommendations

6.1. Recommendations for Current Practice and Education

For Artists: It is recommended to approach the guideline as a "thinking tool" for the studio. During the conceptual phase of a work, consciously ask: What is the intended "eye route" for the viewer? Could a "high-far" structure serve my thematic intention? Which elements should be "real" (dense, detailed) and which "virtual" (simplified, atmospheric) to create spatial rhythm and mood? Experiment with designing a composition twice—once with strict linear perspective and once using a hybrid approach—and reflect on how the viewer's experience changes.

For Art Educators: It is recommended to integrate the case studies and exercises from this guideline into existing oil painting and composition curricula. Develop specific studio projects that ask students to "redraw a photograph using scattered perspective" or "re-imagine a historical scene using the Three-Far Method." This can help bridge the current

gap between guohua theory and oil painting practice, encouraging students to see traditional perspective as a living, usable resource rather than a historical relic.

6.2. Recommendations for Future Research

Practice-Based Validation of the Guideline: The most important next step is to empirically test and refine the guideline. Future research should involve implementing the guideline in a series of workshops or semester-long courses with art students and emerging artists. Data from participants' artworks, reflective journals, and focus group discussions should be collected and analyzed to assess the guideline's usability, effectiveness, and areas for improvement.

Expanding the Scope of Inquiry: This study focused on oil painting. Future research could fruitfully explore how traditional Chinese spatial concepts, such as scattered perspective and temporal perspective, can be translated into other contemporary media, including digital art, animation, interactive installation, and virtual reality. Such investigations would explore how ancient ways of seeing can inform and enrich the new visual languages of the 21st century, ensuring the continued vitality of Chinese aesthetic traditions in a rapidly changing technological landscape.

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