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Research on the Artistic Features and Contemporary Value of Yan Ping's Oil Paintings

Qianqian Mo

Jingdezhen Ceramic University, Jingdezhen, Jiangxi, 333403, China

Abstract: *Yan Ping is a seminal figure in contemporary Chinese oil painting, renowned for his mature series such as Mother and Child and The Opera Troupe. His artistic practice is rooted in personal existential experience, synthesizing the techniques of Western modernism with the spirit of traditional Chinese Xieyi (freehand expression). Characterized by highly saturated subjective coloration, calligraphic brushwork, and fluid, dynamic compositions, Yan's oeuvre articulates profound emotional resonance while achieving a sophisticated synthesis of Eastern and Western visual languages. This paper examines the aesthetic distinctiveness of Yan's oil paintings through three analytical dimensions: chromatic language, gestural execution, and compositional structure. It elucidates the implications of his work for the innovation of contemporary Chinese oil painting discourse and the development of female artistic practice, thereby exploring its intrinsic artistic value to offer insights for current creative methodologies.*

Keywords: *Yan Ping; oil painting; colour language; free-hand brushstroke; female painting; contemporary Chinese oil painting*

1. Introduction

In the development of contemporary Chinese oil painting, Yan Ping stands out with her highly recognisable painting language. Her subject-matter range is broad. The Mother and Child series focuses on tender domestic life; the Opera Troupe series realises cross-boundary integration between traditional Chinese opera culture and the oil-painting medium. Her flower-and-still-life and landscape sketch series capture the vigorous vitality of nature, while her self-portrait series reflects inwardly on spiritual self-awareness. These bodies of work together construct her complete artistic profile.

Yan Ping's creations absorb artistic nutrition from both East and West. She learns from Western modern artists such as Gauguin and Bonnard, while internalising the free-hand spirit of traditional Chinese painting. Breaking free from the constraints of realistic representation, she places subjective emotion at the core of pictorial expression. Research on Yan Ping's oil-painting practice can clarify practical paths for integrating Chinese and Western elements in contemporary oil painting, offer referential linguistic paradigms for oil painters, and carry practical significance for understanding the development of contemporary female art.[1]

2. Yan Ping's Artistic Career and Creative Evolution

Born in Jinan, Shandong Province, in 1956, Yan Ping is one of the most representative female oil painters in China. She studied successively at Shandong University of the Arts and the Oil-Painting Advanced Studies Programme of the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Later, she taught at the School of Arts, Renmin University of China, balancing art education and creative output. She once served as Vice-Chairperson of the China Artists Association and Vice-President of the Chinese Oil Painting Society.

Since the 1980s, Yan Ping has repeatedly participated in major national fine-art exhibitions and won awards. Her early works leaned toward realism. After further academic training, she shifted toward expressive oil painting. Drawing on her lived experience as a woman and a mother, she successively produced series including Mother and Child, Opera Troupe, flower-and-still-life works, landscapes and self-portraits. By combining the colour theories of Post-Impressionism and the Nabis School with the spirit of Chinese free-hand painting, she formed a personal style marked by subjectively intense colours, calligraphic brushwork and deconstructed, free compositions. She has become a key practitioner of

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Chinese-Western integration in contemporary oil painting.

3. Artistic Features of Yan Ping's Oil Paintings

3.1 Subjectivized Expression of High-Purity Colour Fields

Yan Ping's painting language has evolved: her lines turned from soft to forceful, and her tonal palette shifted from muted grey tones to high-value colours. This transformation was greatly inspired by Western modern art, among which Gauguin's colour concepts exerted a particularly profound impact. Gauguin excelled at applying high-value and high-purity colours. He relied on juxtaposed colour blocks to convey inner emotions. In his masterpiece, *When Will You Marry?The* picture is generalised into large colour fields of yellow, green, blue-violet, and red. Visual balance is achieved through the interplay of colour blocks; colours express emotions directly rather than merely reproducing objective objects.[2]

Inspired by Gauguin's idea of generalised colour fields, Yan Ping also uses complementary colours such as red-green and yellow-violet to create visual tension. Nevertheless, obvious differences exist between them. Gauguin tended to juxtapose multiple high-purity colours of varied hues to construct pictures. By contrast, Yan Ping arranges layers mainly within analogous-colour systems to achieve harmony and unity inside high-purity colour ranges.

Take her 2003 oil-painting work *Mother and Child* as an example (Fig. 1). Large areas of high-purity cobalt blue shape the figures' garments and drapery, against a background of strong scarlet red. The contrasting red and blue colour blocks generate sharp visual counterpoint, yet hierarchical transitions among analogous colours ease the conflict, setting off the warm, intense emotional atmosphere between mother and child. The colour no longer serves realistic figuration; it becomes a direct medium for emotional expression.



Fig. 1. Yan Ping, Mother and Child, 2003, oil on canvas, 140 × 160 cm.

(Source: Collected Paintings of Yan Ping, People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2005, plate)

Instead of mechanically copying Gauguin's flat colour application, Yan Ping prefers to integrate colour fields while preserving the calligraphic quality of brushstrokes. Every large colour field contains abundant brushwork variations and chromatic gradations. The pictures retain the holistic power of summarised colour yet possess vivid vitality. This feature is especially prominent in her later flower-themed works. In her 2018 piece *Little Spring*, large blocks of rose-red, goose-yellow and cobalt-violet build the base for flower clusters. Within each dominant hue lie superimposed brushstrokes of analogous colours in varying shades. The paintings deliver strong visual impact without appearing gaudy owing to high colour saturation.[3]

Yan Ping's appropriation of Gauguin's colour ideas is never formal transplantation. Based on her own expressive demands, she selectively absorbs Gauguin's core notion that colours articulate inner

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feelings, and fuses it with the free-hand aesthetic of traditional Chinese painting. She ultimately forms her unique colour style: large-scale colour-field tension coexists with the warmth of brushwork, making colour a carrier of personal life experience and emotional temperature.

Yan Ping once stated: "My painting tones are mostly fantasy, subjective settings. Meanwhile, I absorb much from Western masters, for instance Bonnard's rendering where colour atmosphere merges with individual spirit." Bonnard's colour-rendering methods inspired her greatly. Colours can realise spatial flow, extending from interiors to exteriors and transmitting emotions on a psychological level.

In her work *Little Fish Are Free*, lemon yellow functions as the main tone for central figures, radiating outward in dots, lines and planes. Analogous yellows in the background create chromatic echo. Meanwhile, the complementary pairing of bright yellow and low-saturation purple-grey moderates the proportion of high-purity colours and prevents garishness. Harmonisation of intense colours is accomplished through controlling the area of colour blocks, manipulating virtual-real contours and balancing black patches.

Unity within high-purity colour pictures demands coordination among multiple painterly elements: differences in value and saturation establish primary-secondary hierarchies; light-shadow enriches details within solid-colour blocks; colour gradients enable soft transitions between hues; contour lines strengthen flat decorative qualities; and subjective aesthetic judgement modulates saturation to build individualised colour appearances.

3.2 Free-hand Brushwork Language: Enlightenment from Bonnard and Localised Transformation

Bonnard's explorations of brushwork, light-shadow and spiritual expression deeply influenced Yan Ping's practice. He weakened rigorous realistic figuration of classical painting, absorbed Impressionist pointillism and drew upon Eastern artistic thinking. He employed abundant nimble, fragmented brushstrokes. In *Woman with a Cat*, loose lines define forms; contours are rubbed and blended to produce hazy, diffused light-shadow. Fragmented dot-like strokes build backgrounds, and heavily diluted pigment yields watercolour-like transparency. Forms are decomposed into dots, lines, planes and geometric blocks; figures and surroundings interpenetrate. Brushstrokes themselves carry rhythmic cadence and convey inner spiritual temperament.

As an artist raised within local cultural traditions, Yan Ping was immersed in traditional Chinese painting. Bonnard's brush-work concepts naturally resonated with Chinese free-hand aesthetics. Absorbing Bonnard's picture-rhythm techniques, Yan Ping developed her own calligraphic brushwork.

Her 2020 work *Spring 2020-Stay-at-Home Order* demonstrates highly varied application: bold sweeping strokes coexist with concise dot-like touches. Variations in line thickness, pressure and density generate a strong musical quality.

Her brushwork carries free-hand tension and rejects meticulous imitation of objective reality. When depicting human figures, costumes and environments, the length, tempo and width of brushstrokes shape textural qualities. For flower subjects, unrestrained, agile brushstrokes render the exuberant growth of blossoms. The flourishing state of life is presented directly on canvas, achieving unity between formal brushwork and spiritual connotation.[4]

3.3 Free Composition Breaking Spatiotemporal Logic

Breaking the constraints of traditional single-point perspective, Yan Ping reconstructs pictorial space with interleaving and superimposed images. She does not seek reproduction of physical real-world space; instead she prioritises formal rhythm and emotional atmosphere. In interior-theme works, human figures, furniture and objects intertwine and overlap. Real-world space is fragmented and recomposed to build imaginative domestic scenarios.

Her oil painting *Autumn Wind Rises* well embodies her compositional ideas(Fig.2). Falling leaves and swaying branches constitute visual subjects. Straight lines of branches stabilise the picture framework. S-shaped flowing lines, dancing leaves, and wavering boughs guide viewers' eyes and infuse dynamism. Foreground grass and fallen leaves contrast with distant mountains and sky through virtual-real and size relationships to establish spatial depth. Appropriate pictorial blankness sets off the bleak, crisp atmosphere of autumn and endows breathing space to the canvas. Generally speaking, Yan Ping's compositions serve subjective emotional expression. She weakens physical perspective logic and constructs poetic visual space through the arrangement of lines, colour blocks and forms.

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Fig. 2. Yan Ping, Autumn Wind Rises, 2017, oil on canvas, 180 × 200 cm.

(Source: Westward on the Great Road: The 3rd Chinese Oil Painting Exhibition Catalogue, 2023)

4. Influence of Yan Ping's Oil Paintings on Contemporary Chinese Oil Painting

4.1 Expanding the Expressive Boundaries of Contemporary Female Painting

For a long time, public stereotypes of female painting tended toward delicacy and softness. Rooted in unique female life experience, Yan Ping transcends such aesthetic prejudices. Her pictures feature intense colours and rugged, unrestrained brushwork. She transforms domestic scenarios, inner female reflections and insights into life into visual imagery.[5]



Fig. 3. Yan Ping, Give Me Strength, 2020, oil on canvas, 80 × 100 cm.

(Source: Yan Ping: Ten Thousand Clusters in Bloom (exhibition catalogue), Shandong Fine Arts Publishing House, 2021, plate)

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On the one hand, her creations focus on domestic spheres and depict tender interactions between mothers and children. On the other hand, flower-and-still-life works prompt meditation on the transience of life and excavate inner spiritual strength of women. Her canvas *Give Me Strength* serves as a typical example. Highly saturated warm tones of red and yellow collide and intermingle; bold brushwork amplifies pictorial tension(Fig.3). The female figure occupies the visual centre, asserting female subjectivity. More than mere visual representation, this work projects spiritual awakening: women's longing for inner strength when confronting hardships in life.

Yan Ping's practice proves that female oil-painting creation is not limited to gentle lyricism but can embody grand, powerful spiritual temperament. She offers a model for domestic female artists, inspiring more female creators to express themselves from their own lived experiences and promoting pluralism within contemporary Chinese female painting.[1]

4.2 Enriching the Artistic Expressive Language of Contemporary Chinese Oil Painting

Yan Ping has carried out extensive experiments with colour, brushwork and composition. She combines Western modern painting achievements with traditional Chinese free-hand spirit and provides new approaches for the localisation of oil painting. Rather than copying Western masters'formal techniques, she absorbs Gauguin's colour-field generalisation and Bonnard'rhythmic brushwork while integrating Eastern free-hand spirit. Subjective expression always occupies her creative priority.

This creative path-grounding in native culture while embracing foreign experience- points out an important direction for young oil painters. It breaks the long-term formal shackles imposed by single-model realism in Chinese oil painting, encourages creators to step out of conventional mindsets, and re-examine pluralistic possibilities for the ontological language of oil painting in contemporary contexts. It further facilitates inclusive, diversified and mutually beneficial development for contemporary Chinese oil painting in both thematic choices and formal language.

Influenced by Yan Ping, more creators actively draw nourishment from indigenous cultural roots. They no longer regard Western oil-painting systems as unchallengeable norms. Instead, with native cultural perspectives, they select and transform foreign artistic experiences independently. Thus, oil painting, an imported art medium, truly takes root within Chinese cultural soil and becomes a vehicle conveying Chinese aesthetic tastes and spiritual emotions.[6]

5. Conclusions

Yan Ping occupies an indispensable position in the development of contemporary Chinese oil painting. Rooted in her unique personal life experience, she selectively absorbs achievements of Western modern painting and fuses the spirit of traditional Chinese free-hand art. Consequently, she has built a distinctive artistic identity through colour, brushwork and composition. Subjectively intense colours, calligraphic brushstrokes and freely deconstructed compositions together form the spiritual core of her works. Her creations not only enrich the linguistic system of contemporary Chinese oil painting but also expand the expressive dimensions of contemporary female painting.

Systematic research on Yan Ping's oil-painting art offers valuable references for present-day oil painters. Painting freezes fleeting moments of life. Artistic creation always stems from creators' passion for life. Painters express inner feelings via pictures and build bridges of emotional resonance with audiences. For contemporary creators, studying Yan Ping's art should not amount to simple imitation of external pictorial forms. It is vital to comprehend her perception of life behind her art, recognise personal creative limitations and persist in exploration to improve artistic competence through practice. Only by infusing passion for life into every stroke of colour and composition can artists break free from constraints imposed by techniques and stylistic conventions and forge genuinely individual artistic paths. This constitutes the most precious legacy Yan Ping's creation brings to contemporary Chinese oil painting.

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