

Research on the Excavation and Expression of Regional Cultural Symbols in Rural-Theme Paintings

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Abstract: Rural-theme painting is an important visual art form that carries regional cultural memory and constructs local cultural identity. Current creation is troubled by the superficial selection of symbols, the convergence of regional characteristics, the disconnection between symbols and painting language, and the lack of a verifiable method. This paper proposes a four-in-one method of field excavation, symbol coding, language translation and effect verification, and constructs (1) a four-dimensional classification system of regional cultural symbols, (2) a dual-dimensional screening model based on cultural importance and visualizability, and (3) a three-level translation mechanism operating through modeling, color, composition and material. The applicability of the framework is examined through the iconographical analysis of six documented works by four painters from different regions of China: Luo Zhongli's *Father and Spring Silkworm* (the Daba Mountains, Sichuan), Duan Zhengqu's *Zou Xi Kou and Legend of the Yellow River* (northern Shaanxi), Wang Yidong's *Letter from Afar* (the Yimeng Mountains, Shandong), and Xin Dongwang's *Golden Wedding* (Kangbao, Hebei). The analysis shows that these works consistently exemplify the proposed excavation–translation pathway; that Duan Zhengqu's documented shift from explicit regional markers to internalized overall imagery corroborates the highest level of the translation framework; and that symbol excavation rooted in long-term life experience is the common basis of expressive authenticity. The study provides an operable method reference for rural-theme creation and regional art research.

Keywords: Rural-Theme Painting; Regional Cultural Symbol; Symbol Excavation; Painting Language Translation; Case Analysis

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1. Introduction

Rural-theme painting takes rural natural landscapes, production and living scenes, and folk customs as its main expression objects, and is an important carrier for recording regional cultural memory and conveying rural emotions. Since the beginning of the 20th century, from realist rural sketching to contemporary new rural painting, rural themes have always been one of the most enduring motifs in Chinese art creation^[1-2]. With the acceleration of urbanization, a large number of material landscapes and folk events carrying regional cultural information are disappearing, and the cultural recording function and identity construction function of rural-theme painting have become increasingly prominent^[3].

However, the current creation of rural-theme paintings also faces prominent problems: the application of regional cultural symbols in some works stays at superficial collage, and the internal connection between symbols and regional culture is

weakened; the images of different regions tend to be homogeneous, showing a phenomenon of one thousand villages with one face; creators mostly select symbols based on personal experience, lacking systematic excavation methods and theoretical support; and after the creation is completed, there is no verifiable procedure to test whether the symbols are correctly recognized and identified by the audience ^[4].

Around the above problems, this paper raises three research questions. First, how should regional cultural symbols in rural-theme paintings be systematically excavated and scientifically classified? Second, how can the excavated symbols be effectively translated through painting language? Third, how can the applicability of the resulting framework be examined against representative works? The research methods include literature research and iconographical analysis of publicly documented representative works. The purpose of the research is to construct an operable framework for the excavation and expression of regional cultural symbols, to validate it against canonical cases, and to provide a method reference for rural-theme creation and regional art research.

2. Definition of Concepts and Problem Analysis

2.1 Definition of Core Concepts

Rural-theme painting refers to the painting creation that takes the natural landscape, village architecture, production labor, folk rituals and peasant life of rural areas as the main content, covering oil painting, Chinese painting, printmaking, watercolor and other painting types.

Regional cultural symbols refer to visualized carriers that have been formed over a long period within a specific geographical area, are commonly recognized by local groups, and can carry regional cultural information and awaken cultural memory, including material landscape symbols, production and living symbols, folk ritual symbols and spiritual belief symbols.

Symbol excavation refers to the process of discovering, identifying, screening and coding cultural symbols from the regional cultural ecology through systematic field investigation and literature review; symbol translation refers to the creative process of converting the connotation of cultural symbols into visual painting language (modeling, color, composition and material) ^[5].

2.2 Four Problems in Current Creation

Through the review of recent rural-theme painting exhibition works and related literature, the problems in the application of regional cultural symbols in current creation can be summarized into four aspects.

First, the selection of symbols is superficial. Some works only use regional symbols as embellishments of the picture, such as mechanically stacking elements such as cave dwellings, wheat stacks and red lanterns. The lifestyle and cultural connotation behind the symbols have not been touched, resulting in a hollow expression of having symbols but no culture.

Second, regional characteristics tend to converge. Influenced by the homogenization of image materials and popular painting styles, rural images of different regions imitate each other in theme, schema and color, and the uniqueness of regional culture is diluted, making it difficult for the audience to identify the specific region from the picture.

Third, symbols are disconnected from painting language. Creators pay attention to what to paint but neglect how to paint. Symbols are not internalized into the organic components of modeling, color and composition, and the picture presents a list of materials rather than an artistic construction.

Fourth, the verification of expression effect is lacking. The evaluation of creation mostly relies on comments from the art circle and award feedback, lacking a verifiable procedure to test whether symbols are recognized and identified, so the improvement of methods loses its basis.

The above four problems are interrelated: the absence of the excavation link leads to the randomness of symbol sources; the weakness of the translation link leads to the stiffness of symbol expression; and the absence of the verification link makes the creative process unable to form a feedback loop. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a complete method chain from excavation and translation to verification.

3. Excavation Mechanism of Regional Cultural Symbols

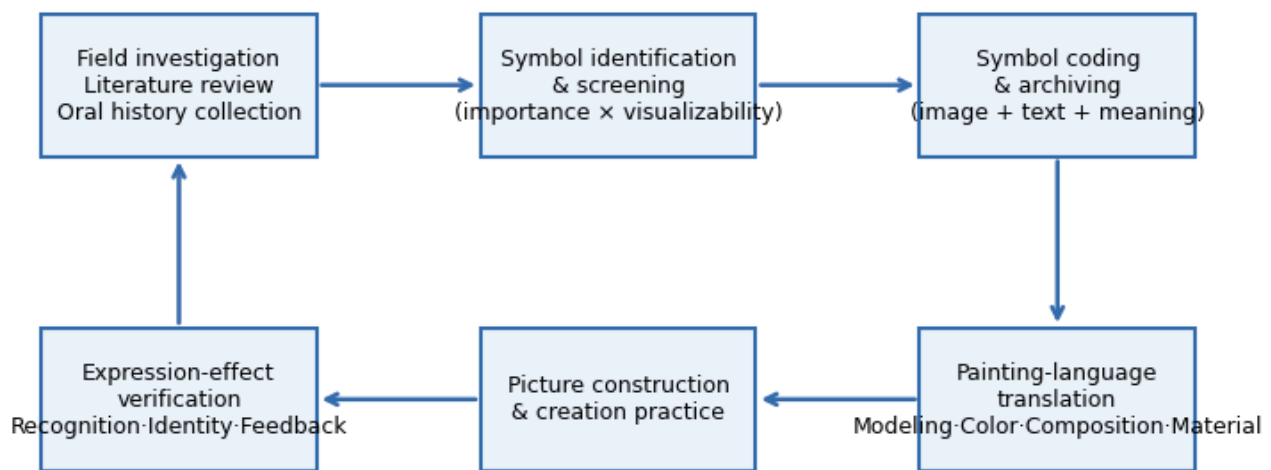
3.1 Overall Concept

Symbol excavation follows the principle of a holistic view of cultural ecology, regarding regional culture as an organic whole

composed of natural environment, production mode, social organization and spiritual belief, and examining the meaning generation of symbols in specific life situations. The excavation work is divided into three stages. The first stage is data preparation, in which the background cognition of regional culture is established through the review of local chronicles, folk records, village archives and existing image materials. The second stage is field investigation, in which the living cultural information that has not been written down is collected by means of participatory observation, semi-structured interviews and image recording. The third stage is symbol screening and coding, in which the candidate symbols are scored and ranked according to the dual-dimensional evaluation criteria of cultural importance and visualizability, and a symbol archive database is established.

The technical route is shown in Figure 1. The three links of excavation, translation and verification form a closed loop: the verification results feed back to the excavation link and correct the symbol screening weights and translation strategies.

Figure 1. Technical route of the excavation and expression of regional cultural symbols



3.2 Classification System of Regional Cultural Symbols

Based on field investigation and literature analysis, this paper summarizes the regional cultural symbols available for rural-theme paintings into four dimensions, forming a classification system (Table 1). The four dimensions are not isolated from each other, but have a progressive relationship from material to spirit and from external to internal.

Table 1. Classification system of regional cultural symbols for rural-theme paintings

Dimension	Symbol type	Typical symbols	Cultural connotation	Visualizability
Material landscape	Natural and architectural landscapes	Loess gullies, cave-dwelling courtyards, stone-paved alleys, old wells, ancient opera stages	Spatial imprint of the long-term adaptation between man and nature	High: distinct forms, easy to compose
Production and living	Farming labor and utensils	Terraced farming, threshing grounds, spinning wheels, stone mills, mule and horse transport	Production mode and survival wisdom	Relatively high: dynamic scenes with narrative quality
Folk rituals	Seasonal and etiquette activities	Shehuo performances, paper-cut window flowers, wedding and funeral processions, temple fairs	Bond of group memory and cultural identity	High: strong colors, strong emotional appeal
Spiritual belief	Folk beliefs and symbols	Door gods, land shrines, auspicious patterns in paper-cuts, sacred trees	Spiritual sustenance and value order	Medium: requires symbolic translation

3.3 Dual-Dimensional Evaluation Model for Symbol Screening

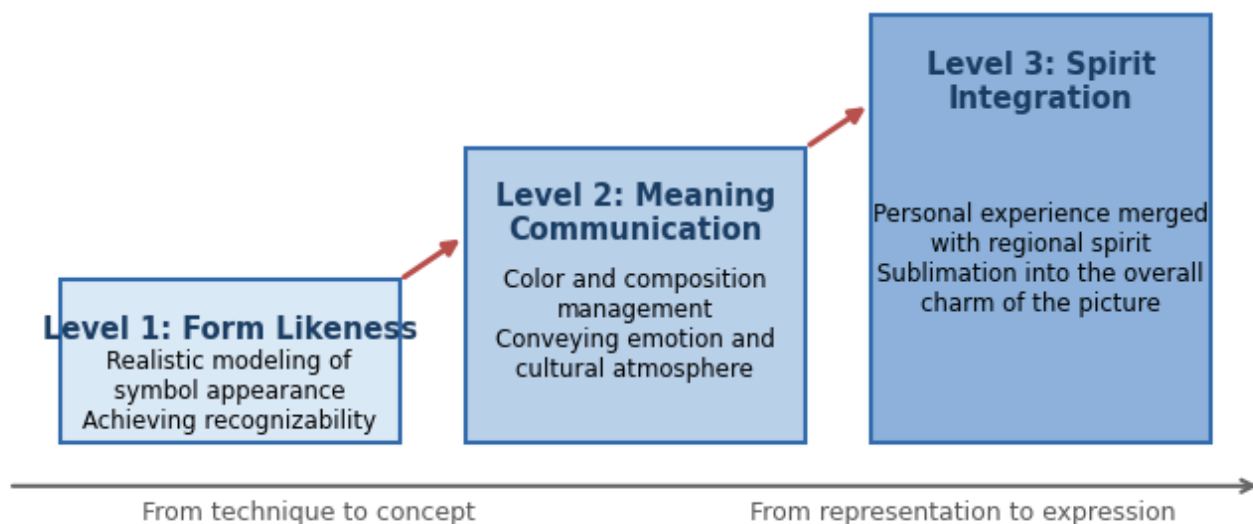
Candidate symbols are evaluated by the dual dimensions of cultural importance and visualizability^[6-7]. Cultural importance consists of cultural representativeness and inheritance urgency, reflecting the depth of regional culture carried by the symbol; visualizability consists of morphological uniqueness, color expressiveness and composition suitability, reflecting the difficulty of converting the symbol into painting language. The scores of the two dimensions are rated on a five-level scale. With cultural importance as the main weight (0.6) and visualizability as the auxiliary weight (0.4), the weighted sum is calculated, and those with the highest scores enter the priority creation sequence. The function of this model is to avoid two deviations: selecting superficial symbols only by focusing on visual effects, or selecting symbols that are difficult to visualize only by focusing on cultural significance.

4. Painting Language Translation of Regional Cultural Symbols

4.1 Overall Framework of Translation

Symbol translation is the process of converting the connotation of cultural symbols into visual painting language. This paper divides it into three progressive levels (Figure 2). The first level is form likeness, that is, to reproduce the appearance characteristics of symbols with realistic modeling to achieve the recognizability of symbols; the second level is meaning communication, that is, to convey the emotions and cultural atmosphere carried by symbols through the management of color and composition; the third level is spirit integration, that is, the creator integrates personal experience with regional spirit, so that the symbol sublimates into the overall charm and style of the picture^[8]. The three levels progress layer by layer from technique to concept and from representation to expression: form likeness solves being visible, meaning communication solves being felt, and spirit integration solves being memorable.

Figure 2. Three-level framework of painting language translation of regional cultural symbols



4.2 Translation Methods at Four Levels

Modeling translation: for symbols with distinctive morphological characteristics (such as cave-dwelling arches and mountain trends), the outline features can be appropriately exaggerated to strengthen the recognition of regional schemas; for scene symbols with narrative quality, group painting or long scroll composition can be used to unfold the time-space sequence.

Color translation: the main color tone of the regional environment is extracted as the keynote of the picture, such as the high-purity earthy yellow and ochre of the Loess Plateau and the grayish white and dark cyan of the Jiangnan water towns; the contrasting colors in folk symbols (such as the red of paper-cuts and the bright colors of shehuo) can be locally implanted as visual excitement points to form the cultural orientation of color.

Composition translation: composition motifs are selected according to regional spatial characteristics. Diagonal and depth compositions are suitable for gully areas, stable compositions of horizontal line expansion for plain villages, and frame-view and enclosed compositions for courtyard spaces, so that the formal structure itself carries regional information.

Material translation: the use of material texture is encouraged to echo the regional texture, such as expressing the thickness of loess with thick stacking and the wetness of water towns with transparent rendering, so that the materiality of materials becomes a component of symbol expression.

4.3 Basic Principles of Translation

The translation process must follow three principles. The principle of authenticity: the shape and connotation of symbols are based on field data, without unfounded fabrication. The principle of typicality: the most representative regional symbols are selected to enter the picture, avoiding the disorder of primary and secondary caused by symbol stacking. The principle of moderate reconstruction: creators are allowed to carry out artistic exaggeration and reconstruction on the premise of respecting the original meaning of the symbol, but the reconstruction amplitude is limited so as not to cause cultural misreading.

5. Case Analysis of Representative Works

5.1 Case Selection

To examine the applicability of the proposed framework, this paper conducts an iconographical case analysis of documented rural-theme works. Three criteria guided the selection: (1) regional representativeness — the painter is rooted in a clearly identifiable rural region of China; (2) symbolic richness — the work carries a distinctive system of regional cultural symbols rather than a single decorative motif; and (3) documentation availability — the work and its exhibition, collection or auction records are publicly documented and can be independently verified.

Four painters from four regions were selected. Luo Zhongli (born 1948) lived in the Daba Mountains of eastern Sichuan for ten years; his *Father* (1980) won the gold award of the 2nd National Youth Art Exhibition and entered the collection of the National Art Museum of China, and *Spring Silkworm* (1980, Long Museum collection) continues the same rural theme as the companion piece of *Father* ^[10]. Duan Zhengqu (born 1958) travelled to northern Shaanxi for fieldwork from the 1990s to 2008; *Zou Xi Kou* (1991) won an excellence award at the 1st China Oil Painting Annual Exhibition, and *Legend of the Yellow River* (2010, 180 cm × 350 cm) is a large-format work of his Yellow River series exhibited in his 2025 retrospective ^[11]. Wang Yidong (born 1955), a native of Shandong, has taken the Yimeng Mountains as his lifelong theme; *Letter from Afar* (2005) is a representative work of his Chinese-red series and was sold at China Guardian's autumn auction in 2010 for CNY 17.92 million ^[12,14]. Xin Dongwang (1963–2014) was born in a farming village in Kangbao County, Hebei, and worked as a folk painter in his early years; *Golden Wedding* (2008) portrays an elderly couple who sat as his models and was a key exhibit of his 2025 retrospective at the Art Museum of China Academy of Art ^[13].

5.2 Symbol Systems in the Case Works

The symbol systems of the six works are analyzed in Table 2 and below. In *Father*, the weathered face of an old farmer occupies almost the whole canvas; the coarse porcelain bowl in his hands, the pen behind his ear and the golden background of the fields translate the production-and-living dimension into a dignified image of labor. *Spring Silkworm* shifts the scene to an old woman tending a tray full of silkworms among mulberry leaves; the face is hidden in shadow while the silvery hair and the veined hands carry the toil of the rural mother, translating the same dimension into a metaphor of labor and renewal. In *Zou Xi Kou*, a dynamic group of northern Shaanxi farmers sets out against the loess setting; the rough brushwork, the heavy color and the deformed figures convey the hardship of migration and the tension between the weight of the body and the ascent of the soul. In *Letter from Afar*, a village girl in saturated red reads a letter beside a courtyard wall on a mountain path of the Yimeng Mountains; academic realism and the local red color code translate folk-ritual and daily-life symbols into a mood of longing and rustic warmth. *Golden Wedding* presents an elderly couple squeezed into a narrow vertical frame that was originally prepared for a single portrait: the man sits with closed eyes and tightly crossed arms while the woman gazes into the distance, and the psychological realism elevates an ordinary marriage of fifty years, with all its unspoken tension and endurance, into the dignity of common people. *Legend of the Yellow River* differs from the above in that no explicit regional marker is displayed: a giant carp, the waves of the Yellow River and small clusters of light on a dark ground internalize the folk belief and the struggle between man and nature into an overall northwest imagery.

Table 2. Symbol application in the six case works

Painter	Work (year)	Region	Core symbol	Secondary symbols	Translation strategy	Cultural orientation
Luo Zhongli	Father (1980)	Daba Mountains, Sichuan	Weathered face of an old farmer; coarse porcelain bowl	Pen behind the ear; golden field background	Photorealist modeling; enlarged bust composition; ochre-gold tonality	Dignity of labor; farmer-land bond
Luo Zhongli	Spring Silkworm (1980)	Daba Mountains, Sichuan	Old woman tending a tray of silkworms	Mulberry leaves; silvery hair and veined hands	Genre-scene realism; warm dark tonality	Maternal toil; life-renewal metaphor
Duan Zhengqu	Zou Xi Kou (1991)	Northern Shaanxi loess plateau	Dynamic group of farmers setting out	Loess setting; deformed figures	Expressionist modeling; rough heavy brushwork; strong light-dark contrast	Hardship of migration; weight of body and ascent of soul
Duan Zhengqu	Legend of the Yellow River (2010)	Yellow River, northwest	Giant carp; waves of the Yellow River	Small clusters of light on a dark ground	Free gestural composition; dark ground with light accents	Folk belief; human-nature struggle
Wang Yidong	Letter from Afar (2005)	Yimeng Mountains, Shandong	Village girl in red; the letter	Courtyard wall; mountain path	Academic realism; saturated local red; soft diffused light	Longing and rustic warmth
Xin Dongwang	Golden Wedding (2008)	North China (Hebei)	Elderly couple in golden-wedding year	Worn-out undershirt; the narrow single-portrait frame	Psychological realism; narrow vertical format; restrained palette	Unspoken tension and endurance of a life-long marriage; dignity of ordinary people

5.3 Cross-Case Verification of the Framework

The six works were mapped onto the classification system (Section 3.2) and the three-level translation framework (Section 4.1) through qualitative iconographical assessment by the authors (Table 3, Figure 3). Three observations emerge. First, every work is anchored in one dominant symbol dimension supplemented by one secondary dimension, which is consistent with the core-symbol-dominance principle (Section 4.3) and shows no case of symbol stacking. Second, the translation strategies of all six works operate through the four channels of modeling, color, composition and material, supporting the completeness of the translation level design. Third, the two works that internalize regional markers rather than display them (Legend of the Yellow River and Golden Wedding) stand at the meaning communication–spirit integration levels, whereas the works retaining explicit markers cluster at the form likeness–meaning communication levels; this ordering supports the progressive structure of the framework.

Table 3. Cross-case mapping of symbol dimensions and translation levels (qualitative assessment by the authors)

Work	Dominant dimension	Secondary dimension	Explicit regional markers	Dominant translation level
Father	Production & living	Spiritual belief	Few (bowl, pen, field background)	Form likeness
Spring Silkworm	Production & living	—	Silkworm tray, mulberry leaves	Form likeness
Zou Xi Kou	Material landscape	Production & living	Northern Shaanxi migration theme; loess imagery	Meaning communication
Legend of the Yellow River	Folk rituals	Spiritual belief	Internalized (carp, waves, light on dark ground)	Spirit integration
Letter from Afar	Folk rituals	Production & living	Red clothing, courtyard, mountain path	Meaning communication
Golden Wedding	Production & living	Spiritual belief	Worn everyday clothing; intimate interior	Spirit integration

Figure 3. Mapping of the case works onto the symbol dimensions and translation levels (qualitative assessment by the authors)

Case work	Dominant symbol dimensions		Dominant translation level
Father Luo, 1980	Production & living	Spiritual belief	Form likeness
Spring Silkworm Luo, 1980	Production & living		Form likeness
Zou Xi Kou Duan, 1991	Material landscape	Production & living	Meaning communication
Legend of the Yellow River Duan, 2010	Folk rituals	Spiritual belief	Spirit integration
Letter from Afar Wang, 2005	Folk rituals	Production & living	Meaning communication
Golden Wedding Xin, 2008	Production & living	Spiritual belief	Spirit integration

6. Discussion

6.1 Excavation Rooted in Lived Experience

A common feature of the four painters is that their symbol excavation was rooted in long-term embodied experience of the region rather than in short-term material collection. Luo Zhongli spent ten years living and working in the Daba Mountains and returned there repeatedly before painting *Father*; Duan Zhengqu travelled to northern Shaanxi again and again from the 1990s to 2008 with only a sketchbook and a camera; Wang Yidong has kept the Yimeng Mountains as his lifelong theme; Xin Dongwang was born in a Hebei farming village and worked as a folk painter before entering the academy^[10-13]. This echoes the field-excavation principle of Section 3.1 and explains why the symbols in their works carry contextual information and emotional authenticity instead of serving as decorative stickers.

6.2 From Explicit Markers to Internalized Imagery

The documented evolution of Duan Zhengqu's practice offers direct support for the top level of the translation framework. As the curator of his 2025 retrospective records, from the mid-1990s onward Duan consciously reduced explicit regional markers such as cave dwellings, paper-cuts, waist drums and headscarves, and instead internalized them into an overall imagery of the northwest; light in darkness, emanating from torches, faces, giant carps and the waves of the Yellow River, became his central language^[11,15]. *Legend of the Yellow River* exemplifies this stage: the region is no longer identified by objects but by light, darkness and vitality. This trajectory simultaneously warns against the risk of symbol stacking identified in Section 4.3 — explicit markers can open a work, but only internalized imagery sustains it.

6.3 Boundary Issues and Limitations

The translation process carries two risks that the cases help delimit. The first is spectacularization: none of the six works resorts to exaggerating poverty or backwardness for visual impact, which suggests that authenticity of excavation is the natural antidote. The second is symbol stacking: the comparison between *Zou Xi Kou* and *Legend of the Yellow River* shows that markers must be thinned and subordinated as the work moves toward spirit integration. The limitations of this study are also clear: the case set covers the Daba Mountains, the Loess Plateau, the Yimeng Mountains and the Hebei plateau, but not coastal, oasis or multi-ethnic mountain villages; the assessment is qualitative and interpretive, and the judgments in Table 3 represent the authors' iconographical reading rather than audience measurement; finally, the framework was validated by analyzing existing masterpieces rather than by guiding new creation, and studio-based testing remains the task of future work.

7. Conclusions

Aiming at the problems of superficialization, convergence, disconnection and lack of verification in the application of regional cultural symbols in rural-theme paintings, this paper proposes a four-in-one method framework of field excavation, symbol coding, language translation and effect verification. The main conclusions are as follows.

First, a classification system of regional cultural symbols including four dimensions of material landscape, production and living, folk rituals and spiritual beliefs has been constructed, and the scientific screening, ranking and archiving of symbols

have been realized with the dual-dimensional evaluation model of cultural importance and visualizability.

Second, a symbol translation mechanism consisting of three progressive levels of form likeness, meaning communication and spirit integration, and covering four levels of modeling, color, composition and material, has been established, providing an operable path for the conversion of symbols from cultural materials to painting language.

Third, the case analysis of six documented works by four painters shows that the framework is consistently exemplified by canonical rural-theme paintings: works with explicit regional markers cluster at the form likeness and meaning communication levels, while works with internalized imagery reach spirit integration, and the documented evolution of Duan Zhengqu's practice corroborates the progressive structure of the framework.

This method is suitable for rural painting creation situations with distinct regional cultural characteristics and surviving traditional symbol systems. Practical application requires field investigation combined with specific regions, and the effect verification link can be completed through case-based iconographical analysis before, or audience surveys after, creation. The conclusions are based on the Chinese rural painting canon; their universality across other cultural contexts remains to be tested.

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No

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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