

The Zeitgeist of Longyuan: The Simple and Honest Colors of Gansu Oil Paintings Selected for The 14th National Exhibition of Fine Arts

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Abstract: “The 14th National Exhibition of Fine Arts Oil Painting Exhibition” Gansu selected fourteen pieces of oil paintings. Over the past five years, Gansu oil painters have firmly grasped the pulse of the new era, focusing on capturing the humanistic concern and scanning the reality of people’s livelihood at the present time, and highlighting the spirit of the nation while embodying the aesthetic orientation of truth, goodness and beauty. This paper takes the current art exhibition of Gansu oil paintings as the vision, discusses the new changes of Gansu oil paintings in the new period, which not only shows that Gansu oil painters are based on Longyuan plateau land, promote the sense of responsibility and mission of Chinese excellent traditional culture in artistic creation. But also presents the simple color of Gansu oil paintings, expresses the development of the society and the historical changes in the language of oil paintings, and shapes the social life, political culture and people’s image of Gansu in the new period, building up a unique Longyuan zeitgeist.

Keywords: The 14th National Exhibition of Fine Arts; Oil Painting; Gansu; Zeitgeist

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1. Introduction

Western oil painting has been closely connected with the pulse of the times since its inception. Today, the development of oil painting in China is guided by national culture and has gradually formed a development model with Chinese characteristics under the influence of the spirit of the times and continuous exploration of localization and nationalization. It has become a mainstream bearer of shaping and conveying the spiritual life of the people. The National Art Exhibition, as a high-standard artistic creation platform, has showcased numerous outstanding and influential oil paintings over the years, serving as a means for artists to express their genuine feelings and for people to reflect on historical culture. On July 18, 2024, the “Celebrating the 75th Anniversary of the Founding of the People’s Republic of China - The 14th National Art Exhibition of Oil Paintings” has opened at the Shanghai Art Museum, featuring a total of 697 oil paintings^[1], among which 14 from Gansu are selected, and 1 is sent to Beijing. Gansu artists focus on expressing the era and national spirit, concentrating on capturing contemporary humanitarian concerns and scanning real-life issues, showcasing the rustic colors of selected oil paintings from Gansu, providing a glimpse into the current state and evolution of oil painting in Gansu today^[2].

The selected oil paintings from Gansu for the National Art Exhibition went through a rigorous preliminary and re-evaluation process, standing out among numerous works from the province. The artists’ exquisite oil painting techniques and delicate

emotional expressions captivate viewers, leaving a profound and positive impression of the selected works. In fact, the 14th National Art Exhibition requires that creations respond to the themes of the times, always grounded in the fertile soil of outstanding Chinese traditional culture, adhering to cultural confidence, highlighting the spirit of innovation, and establishing a development path that promotes the “main theme while advocating diversity.”^[3] It aims to produce an exhibition with a clear stance and attitude. However, alongside its high standards, the National Art Exhibition also presents contemporary oil painters with the challenging task of reflecting the essential characteristics of the era^[4]. In this context, Gansu oil painters, through their works showcasing simple colors, earnestly capture the new lives and flourishing new era of the Gansu people. Additionally, the ability to transform real scene images into the artistic form of oil painting during creation reflects the artists’ mastery of the language of oil painting. For instance, the selected oil paintings from Gansu in this exhibition display fragmented portrayals of the simple lives of the populace, the localization conversion of heterogeneous cultural languages, and personalized explorations of the pictorial qualities of oil painting language.

2. Fragmented Direct Portrayals of the Simple Lives of the Populace

The 14th National Art Exhibition advocates for further strengthening its roots in life and for upholding integrity and innovation, featuring “people-oriented”, “contemporary”, and “exploratory” as overall characteristics^[5]. Artists are urged to engage with the contemporary scene, extracting materials, refining forms, and shaping images from it. The results of their creations should resonate with the times, possessing profound cultural forms and substantial ideological consciousness. Therefore, adhering to a people-oriented approach in artistic creation is necessarily a form of realist language, which not only objectively reflects societal development and the lives of the people but should also be a creative form that is favored and easily accepted by the masses. Each National Art Exhibition has evidently become a milestone for the exploration and advancement of modern art, where historical culture and current livelihoods are often the focal points of representation, and this edition is no exception.

Figure 1: Jiao Quan, *Five Flavors Enter the River, Noodles Fragrance Arises Series-18*, oil painting, 130cm x 180cm, 2024



Figure 2: Guo Jinyu, *Jianji River Market in Tianshui*, oil painting, 110cm x 170cm, 2024



Figure 3: Feng Bingchao, *Snack Street in Yangguan Town, Lixian County, Gansu Province*, oil painting, 150cm x 150cm, 2024



Figure 4: Cai Xiaobin, *In February of the Chengji, Joyous Events Filled Household*, oil painting, 117cm x 180cm, 2024



This year's art exhibition anticipates the emergence of high-quality new classic works that embody the character of the new era. The reflection of the real-life conditions of the people's simple life is undoubtedly the best subject matter for the visual presentation of the characteristics of the times. The oil paintings selected from Gansu vividly depict the liveliness and authenticity of people's lives, even capturing some unremarkable details and images. For instance, Jiao Quan's *Five Flavors Enter the River, Noodles Fragrance Arises Series·18* (Figure 1) portrays a fragrant aroma of beef noodles permeating every street and alley in Lanzhou, a dish that embodies the wisdom and hard work of countless individuals and contains profound regional culture. While experiencing the craftsmanship spirit of the people of Lanzhou, one also appreciates their both bold and delicate character; the busy chefs and the rising steam symbolize the taste and warmth of life, representing a sense of sentiment and connection. Guo Jinyu's *Jianji River Market in Tianshui* (Figure 2) focuses on the current state of people's lives, created with feelings inspired by the happiest and most genuine settings. The painting depicts one of the liveliest markets in Tianshui, showcasing the prosperous scenes at different times in the market. These perspectives depict the happy yet simple lives of Tianshui's residents, representing moments of joy from the artist's memories. Feng Bingchao's *Snack Street in Yangguan Town, Lixian County, Gansu Province* (Figure 3) and Cai Xiaobin's *In February of the Chengji, Joyous Events Filled Household* (Figure 4) display the artists' unique observational styles and genuine emotions in depicting the most

familiar people and objects, expressing their insights into the life around them through oil painting and highlighting these ordinary yet special scenarios. These works reflect the happy and optimistic, simple lives of the people, and the perceptible local themes in the imagery express the artists' praise and nostalgia for rural life. The paintings utilize a direct expressive technique, allowing the creators to enjoy the playful nature of oil paint and the pleasure of composing the scene while exploring the infinite possibilities of oil painting language, all while showcasing the spirit of our times.

The ordinary scenes and figures depicted by the painter are fragmented representations of social reality and the simple lives of common people. These seemingly mundane daily moments profoundly reflect the essential characteristics of the era and serve as the best evidence for the subtle changes in people's cultural concepts and lifestyles. The artwork highlights the rich and profound regional cultural and artistic features of the Longyuan land through various presentation methods.

3. Localization Conversion of Heterogeneous Cultural Languages

Originating from Europe, oil painting, as a language of heterogeneous culture, has developed a mature system. The challenge lies in how to transform oil painting into a localized aesthetic presentation within the modern art field, integrating it into the contemporary Chinese oil painting framework. This process represents the conversion and expression of heterogeneous cultural language in a localized context, which is reflected both in the depiction of China's cultural landscape and historical heritage using oil painting language, and in the fusion and permeation of the Chinese expressive aesthetic within the oil painting language^[6]. This cross-cultural enhancement of the foreign oil painting language embodies the modern creativity of Chinese oil painters, who combine it with Chinese culture and humanistic spirit, carrying the emotional expression and spiritual aspirations of the Chinese nation. Consequently, it forms a new aesthetic quality with Eastern characteristics. The exploration by Gansu oil painters regarding the localization of this heterogeneous cultural language in oil painting profoundly illustrates the unique modern creative power arising from the integration of regional cultures.

Chinese oil painting, while absorbing nourishment from diverse art forms, also faces impacts from various artistic expressions. For instance, the purity of oil painting has been challenged by the instantaneous nature of images, leading to the replacement and overshadowing of the color and form of oil painting by real visual images, which in turn gradually dissolves the unique language system of oil painting. However, the recognition of the uniqueness of the oil painting language by painters has become the reason for their study and exploration of Western oil painting traditions. The language of oil painting, which approaches reality like images, does not equate to the reproduction of real scenes. Instead, it often stems from the artist's enthusiastic depiction of reality, striving to express the true essence of the subject. Therefore, the ability of artists to convert real images into localized oil painting textures that approximate reality using the heterogeneous language of oil painting relies on their fundamental and critical understanding of the oil painting language.

For example, Chen Weiguo's *A Lifetime of Protection* (Figure 5) employs a compressed, surrounding composition, placing the great image of Mr. Chang Shuhong alongside the grand scene of Digital Dunhuang, applying panoramic replication in artistic creation. The digital preservation and transmission of Dunhuang culture carries contemporary significance. The choice of colors is inspired by the common Dunhuang sandy yellow of the Hexi Corridor, along with sandstone red and black, as well as vibrant greens and blues drawn from Dunhuang murals, forming a unique Chinese color palette. The whole picture exhibits an unexpected harmony from form to content, and when combined with the symmetrical structure of the Dunhuang caves, it creates a comprehensive visual layout that allows us to understand Dunhuang in all aspects and appreciate the spirit of Dunhuang. Zhang Gang's *Series of Songs from the Longyuan Plateau·New Spring Festival on the Plateau* (Figure 6) depicts the social fire performances in the Longdong region of Northwest China. The artist attempts to convey the unique cultural significance and human spirit of local folklore using a new language of oil painting, adopting texture and flat painting techniques in its formal language, with exaggerated transformations in character modeling, giving the work a rustic aesthetic characteristic and distinctive regionality, highlighting a new visual image in the new era. Guo Shuze's *The Gentle Wind Blows Westward*, Volume Nine (Figure 7) draws on scenes from the local livestock market in his hometown, where the parties negotiate prices through a specific "sleeve tube" method, forming a unique regional culture. The painting language chosen for this work adopts a flat approach, reducing direct representations of material images in form, instead presenting the mystery of this folk culture through simple color blocks and shapes in both visual and temporal dimensions.

Figure 5: Chen Weiguo, *A Lifetime of Protection*, oil painting, 150cm x 235cm, 2024



Figure 6: Zhang Gang, *Series of Songs from the Longyuan Plateau-New Spring Festival on the Plateau*, oil painting, 200cm x 160cm, 2024

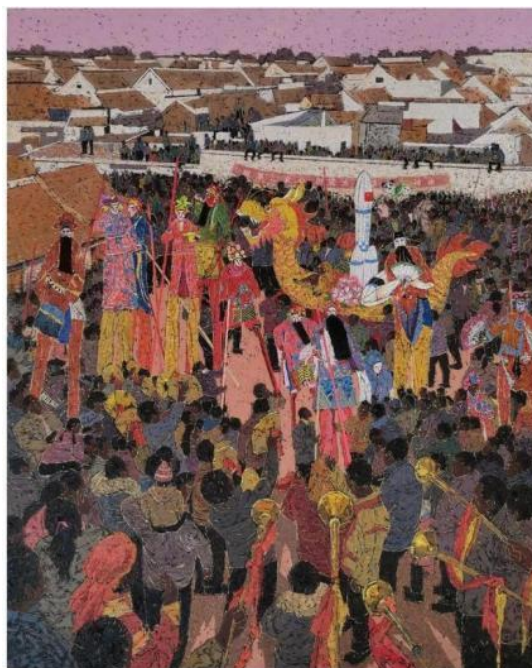


Figure 7: Guo Shuze, *The Gentle Wind Blows Westward*, Volume Nine, oil painting, 130cm x 180cm, 2024



Figure 8: Zhang Xiyuan, *Harmonious Spring Warmth, Rain Moistens the Dry Plateau*, oil painting, 158cm x 230cm, 2024



The oil paintings from Gansu depict the landscape of the Loess Plateau, such as Zhang Xiyuan's *Harmonious Spring Warmth, Rain Moistens the Dry Plateau*, oil painting (Figure 8). This work is based on the artist's hometown of the Loess Plateau, where the painter draws from personal life experiences. Through continuous sketching, the artist has sought to explore a regional oil painting language that can express the geographical features of the Loess Plateau. This exploration, under the fusion of Chinese and Western styles, has gradually formed a unique aesthetic orientation. The painting presents a rich and simple, serene yet profound atmosphere of the Loess Plateau, reflecting the hardworking and unadorned spirit of its people, infusing the barren land with abundant hope and vitality. Ma Aibing's *Building Dreams in Longyuan* (Figure 9) selects the context of the under-construction Longzhang Expressway, using the grand mountains and rivers of the Loess Plateau as the backdrop to showcase the rapid development achievements of Gansu. Although the scene appears chaotic with construction sites, it is unified under the interplay of sunlight and shadow. The figurative expressions are depicted through abstract brushstrokes, vividly portraying the grand momentum of the new era on the Loess Plateau. The overall color scheme employs warm tones; to enhance the atmosphere, the originally blue mesh fabric is changed to red, presenting a vibrant developmental vigor characterized by prosperity and growth, while attempting to emphasize the abstract expression of oil painting language within a realistic figurative scene.

It is evident that Gansu painters express the regional culture of China through the language of Western oil painting. By interpreting and understanding the oil painting language in diverse ways, they achieve a subtle transformation and re-creation of heterogeneous cultural languages. Some painters employ exaggeration and reconstruction of forms, infusing their works with subjective emotions, thereby generating artistic connotations and expressions that embody Eastern aesthetics. Other painters strive to break away from existing normative forms, using abstract symbols to transcend traditional cultural concepts and represent concrete visual images, enhancing the visual impact of the artwork and creating a new quality of oil painting aesthetics that is distinctly regional.

Figure 9: Ma Aibing, *Building Dreams in Longyuan*, oil painting, 130cm x 180cm, 2024



Figure 10: Wang Jingjing, *Migration*, oil painting, 150cm x 150cm, 2024



4. Personalized Explorations of the Pictorial Qualities of Oil Painting Language

From the selected oil paintings from Gansu, it can be seen that the level of oil painting art creation in Gansu has significantly improved, mainly reflected in the changes and return to creative methods, moving out of the studio and immersing in life, rather than simply creating art in a photographic state. This is a creative concept that oil painters have consistently emphasized. However, regardless of the approach, the current age of imagery is an unavoidable trend for oil painters, and completely rejecting visual imagery seems unrealistic. The key lies in how to excavate the thematic significance behind images, creating flat visual texts that transcend imagery through personalized exploration of the pictorial language of oil painting. When viewed from a positive perspective, it is evident that images provide artists with such rich and wonderful visual moments. Therefore, the main issue facing contemporary oil painting is how to balance the relationship between photographic imagery and the pictorial language of oil painting, emphasizing the formal language and narrative techniques of artistic creation.

The exhibition focuses on themes related to the everyday lives of ordinary people, particularly in the portrayal of ethnic figures, showcasing the changes in time and regional highlights of Gansu art. These works reflect the aspirations of ethnic minority communities who strive to create a better life through hard work. For example, Wang Jingjing's *Migration* (Figure 10) depicts the simple life of Xizang herders, expressing a genuine and authentic significance of life, imbued with an optimistic and open-minded spirit. The artwork employs a method of scattered perspective, incorporating elements of traditional Chinese painting and mural techniques, resulting in an overall sense of weight in the composition. The color palette is dominated by unified gray tones, intertwined with lines of Chinese calligraphy, creating a rhythm and cadence of speed, pauses, light, and heaviness that enhances the dynamic quality of the piece, as well as the pictoriality of oil painting. This expresses the artist's contemplation on the individual value of life. The artists present ethnic spirit through realistic language, allowing the visuals to exhibit a rational and rigorous sense of representation. The content is nuanced and profound, capturing fleeting moments through image technology, effectively freezing dynamic instances into eternity. This guides the viewer's gaze into depth, as seen in Wang Xin's *Dan Zhu's Holiday Lunch* (Figure 11), which portrays the real lives of Xizang people. The realistic imagery "re-presents" the narrative perception of the new life in the Xizang region, and through "the nationalization of oil painting," it expresses a heartfelt admiration for the vast and profound beauty of the natural and cultural heritage in the West. Throughout the creative process, the interplay of compositional space and emotional color treatment allows for a coexistence of the figurative and abstract, producing a strong visual impact and imaginative space within the spiritual realm, all in pursuit of the essence of contemporaneity, expressing the most sincere and pure emotional longings from deep within.

Some works utilize the language of oil painting to discover the beauty of details in the ordinary world. Rather than directly depicting high-definition photographs, they delve into the act of observing images through sketching, expressing a positive attitude and values towards the era, thus providing a distinct visual experience filled with emotional care in the age of images

^[7]. Zhang Wenping's *The high-speed rail entering Xizang* (Figure 12) portrays a high-speed train entering the snowy plateau, with a group of Xizang people standing at a high point witnessing this historic moment. Their backs resemble vibrant stories brimming with hope, collectively painting a beautiful new blueprint for the Xizang region using the language of oil painting. The artwork intentionally subjectively modifies imagery during its creation, reflecting the artist's personalized pursuit. The painterly visual space of oil painting brings the scene into an emotional expression on a spiritual level, achieving a more vivid and thrilling impact than that of photographic images. Zhang Guofeng's *Intangible Cultural Heritage - Tajik Sheep Grabbing* (Figure 13) depicts the scene of the Tajik goat-dragging game with skilled oil painting techniques. As an intangible cultural heritage project, goat-dragging embodies the passionate beauty of strength and courage. It is a form of cultural preservation and transmission. By capturing this dynamic beauty in oil painting, the work represents a genuine reproduction and artistic expression of the lives and traditional culture of the Tajik people. The completion of such a dynamic composition, while inevitably based on reference photographs, is commendable. The artist uses the form of photos yet transcends their limitations, integrating their understanding of the work's concept into the imagery. The artwork achieves a balance between firm and loose brushwork, and rich and minimalist forms, complemented by composition design and color application, resulting in a true restoration of the intense goat-dragging scene, embodying the essence of oil painting in form and meaning.

Figure 11: Wang Xin, Dan Zhu's Holiday Lunch, oil painting, 160cm x 150cm, 2024



Figure 12: Zhang Wenping, The high-speed rail entering Xizang, oil painting, 200cm x 138cm, 2024



Figure 13: Zhang Guofeng, *Intangible Cultural Heritage - Tajik Sheep Grabbing*, oil painting, 170cm x 230cm, 2024



Figure 14: Li Yuqi, *The World of Glass 2*, oil painting, 200cm x 160cm, 2024



Gansu's young artists exhibit vibrant creativity and passion in this exhibition, constructing distinctive and innovative oil paintings through imaginative conceptual perspectives and exploratory cross-cultural viewpoints. Li Yuqi's *The World of Glass 2* (Figure 14) aims to express how today's youth resist external pressures, daring to break free from constraints and establish a tranquil inner world amidst the torrents of the times, showcasing the spiritual demeanor of contemporary youth. The painting predominantly features gray tones, with dramatic natural light on the right side, imparting an unusual tranquility to the entire scene. The figures examine their past and present from an observational perspective, merging with the background stage, crows, and the concept of a painting within a painting to create a tangible expression of the characters' inner worlds. The artist sensitively captures the real sensations and meaningful communication of visual imagery, allowing viewers to find emotional expressions and spiritual appeals that resonate within the artwork.

It is evident that the oil paintings selected in this session from Gansu exhibit a significant highlight, prominently showcasing the painterly nature of oil painting. This reveals Gansu artists' deeper understanding and transformation of the concept of localization in the language of oil painting from aspects such as thought and personality. The development moves toward a diverse range of expressive techniques and a higher level of technical skill in the intrinsic art of oil painting. When faced with the pros and cons brought about by imagery, the artists strive to break free from template-driven, formulaic rigidity, present-

ing a pure, profound, and innovative oil painting art. Grounded in tradition yet keeping pace with the times, their ability to grasp, understand, and recreate photographic images has qualitatively improved. They actively avoid the mere replication of photographic realism and utilize the effect of freezing moments captured in photographs, deeply exploring the richness and ripples of characters' inner worlds. This constructs an emotional resonance that provokes deep contemplation among viewers, propelling artists to articulate expressions in real contexts that fulfill the intrinsic language of oil painting, thus producing works that transcend the "realism" of images.

5. The artistic value and contemporary significance of selected oil paintings from Gansu Province

Today, the absorption and permeation of oil painting within our country's excellent traditional culture are primarily guided by subject matter that can highlight the core socialist values, focus on social well-being, and express the spirit of the times and the nation. In terms of formal expression, it shows a diverse appearance and an oil painting language based on national aesthetic habits, forming a language form rich in national meaning and cultural symbols, emphasizing the confidence in the path of oil painting development in China, as well as in its theory and system. It can be said that in this era of cross-cultural information integration, and after five years of accumulation, the selected oil paintings from Gansu strive to absorb the nutrients of different cultures. Gansu oil painters increasingly emphasize the diversity of ideas, concepts, subjects, and methods in their oil painting creation, seriously considering the ideological connotations they carry as well as the unique aesthetics of the nation. They have become clearer in exploring issues related to the nationalization and localization of oil painting, presenting regional characteristics, authentic expression, and symbolic metaphors in their aesthetic sentiments, returning to the essence of Chinese culture, and showcasing unique artistic languages and distinct creative styles.

The National Fine Arts Exhibition has gone through thirteen sessions. In terms of its artistic development, the subjects of the works often represent significant historical events or real-life figures, attempting to achieve an emotional resonance with the audience. In this exhibition, the oil paintings feature diverse subjects and varied techniques, aiming to provide a dual sense of visual and emotional satisfaction through narrative, expression, and atmosphere. They offer a culturally refined joy through the interpretation of oil painting language, capturing a delightful essence that reflects both enlightenment and ease, infused with a spirit of the times^[8]. From the works selected from Gansu, one can clearly feel that the pieces place greater emphasis on the authenticity of narrative content, the vividness of characters' expressions, the accuracy of forms, and the intricacies of atmospheric rendering. The creative styles exhibit a more personalized approach, presenting different experiential patterns. Artists deeply taste the nuances of oil painting language, which significantly enhances its expressive qualities. This localized artistic form displays clear regional differences and reflects Gansu's independent original thoughts in terms of subject matter, composition, and modeling. The resulting works of national significance resonate deeply with viewers and embody profound artistic value, carrying the significance of cultural heritage and the promotion of the spirit of the times^[9].

Artists should adhere to their artistic individuality, using expressive language to showcase a vibrant spirit and present authentic depictions of life. They should reconstruct the language system of oil painting through the historical and cultural perspective of the Chinese nation, establishing a mature, healthy artistic style that embodies the spirit of the new era. This is the correct direction and development path for Gansu oil painters to pursue their relentless efforts. Undoubtedly, although the ecological landscape of oil painting is changing under the influence of globalized new media art, national art exhibitions remain pure forms of art, serving to promote the progress and development of Chinese art. As Gansu oil painters continually update their creative concepts and broaden their artistic horizons along with the ongoing cultural changes in society, the diversity in oil painting creation contributes positively to improving the level of oil painting works selected from Gansu. Furthermore, it is evident from these works that the straightforward and earnest artistic attitude of Gansu artists is widely recognized, and it is heartening to see the younger generation of oil painters taking up the baton from their predecessors, fully reflecting the prosperity and enduring cultural traditions of Gansu oil painting in the new era^[10].

6. Conclusion

The oil paintings selected from Gansu for the 14th National Art Exhibition demonstrate a diversified and innovative

development model. These works showcase exceptional painting skills and a rigorous foundation in realism, reflecting a vivid contemporary style and focusing on the lives of people in the countryside through a unique perspective, all while exploring a poetic language of oil painting. Art itself should be a pure form of activity that follows the heart, conveys emotions, and learns from nature. The oil paintings presented in this exhibition infuse the subjective emotions and artistic spirit of the creators, conveying Gansu's prosperous culture, national rejuvenation, and happiness through a more intense and direct visual impact and philosophical significance. They exhibit an unusual artistic rhythm and appeal, resonating with viewers' psychology and emotions, aligning with the true essence of art that comes from the heart.

Gansu, as a pivotal region of the ancient Silk Road, possesses a rich historical and cultural heritage. Gansu oil painters should continue to base their work on the land of Longyuan, exploring the creation of new and vibrant Gansu oil painting art. The path to beauty has no shortcuts, nor does it have a fixed route; it can only be pursued tirelessly in a vast expanse by generations of oil painters, who must always recognize their cultural responsibilities and strive to create masterpieces that resonate with social development and the spirit of the times. It is worth believing that Gansu oil painters are gradually breaking free from the imitation of Western oil painting and are returning to attempts at integrating Chinese culture and modern civilization. It is believed that Gansu's oil painting art will usher in a flourishing scene of outstanding works and a diversity of creations. Through this exhibition, Gansu oil painters are further encouraged to adopt a more dynamic stance, producing more artistically significant works that uniquely reflect the Northwest style and meet the aesthetic needs and aspirations for a better life of the people.

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Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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