

The Inheritance and Innovation of the “Calligraphy and Painting Share the Same Origin” Theory: Taking Guo Xi’s Lofty Ambitions in Forest and Spring as an Example

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Abstract: The theory that “calligraphy and painting share the same origin” first emerged from Zhang Yanyuan’s Tang Dynasty concept of “calligraphy and painting sharing the same essence”. This idea was later reaffirmed by Guo Xi in his Northern Song Dynasty masterpiece *Lofty Ambitions in Forest and Spring*, which emphasizes that throughout Chinese painting’s evolution, its core essence—pursuing the “figural representation of objects”—has remained unchanged. The act of nature’s forms concurrently gave birth to another great art form: the origins of calligraphy. As a foundational text of Northern Song landscape painting theory, *Lofty Ambitions* begins with an Original Preface that explores the relationship between calligraphy and painting. It not only inherits the «shared origin» tradition but also enriches it through four new dimensions: «shared ontological origin,» «shared formal source,» «shared spiritual source,» and «shared inner mind source».

Keywords: *Lofty Ambitions in Forest and Spring*; Calligraphy and Painting Share the Same Origin; Guo Xi

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1. Introduction

Lofty Ambitions in Forest and Spring is a summary of Northern Song painter Guo Xi’s experiences in landscape aesthetics and landscape painting creation, embodying extremely high aesthetic value. The opening Original Preface serves as Guo Xi’s “exposition of his ideas,” exploring the origin of painting and emphasizing that calligraphy and painting share similarities or close connections in aspects such as materials used, expressive techniques, formative conditions, and aesthetic concepts. In the Tang Dynasty, painter Zhang Yanyuan, in Volume “On the Origin and Development of Painting” of *Records of Famous Paintings of All Dynasties*, comprehensively expounded the theory of “calligraphy and painting sharing the same origin” from a theoretical perspective for the first time, and concluded that “calligraphy and painting were of the same essence and undivided” in terms of the significance of their origins. Guo Xi inherited and developed this theory, breaking down “calligraphy and painting sharing the same origin” into four aspects: “calligraphy and painting sharing the same ontological origin,” “calligraphy and painting sharing the same formal source,” “calligraphy and painting sharing the same spiritual source,” and “calligraphy and painting sharing the same inner mind source.” By conducting an in-depth analysis of the “calligraphy and painting sharing the same origin” theory in the Original Preface, and combining it with the specific practice of “integrating calligraphic techniques into painting” by later calligraphers and painters, this study further explores and interprets the aesthetic thoughts that Guo Xi did not elaborate on, appreciates the beauty of painting from the perspective of calligraphy,

and seeks the essence of painting.

2. Calligraphy and painting share the same “origin”

Calligraphy and painting share the “same origin” in that during clan society, each tribe had its own totem. Cultures such as the Dawenkou, Wucheng, and Banpo cultures have preserved hundreds of ancient clan emblems. The images on these emblems all originated from the observations of ancient ancestors on nature—they understood every grass, tree, flower, and “expression” around them from a purely natural perspective. Whenever they gained insights, they recorded these matters or expressed them through symbols. The Northern Song Dynasty Taoist classic *Seven Apocrypha of the Clouds* records: “The Emperor (Huangdi, the Yellow Emperor) arrived at the Spring of Cuiwei, where a yellow dragon came carrying a map. The map had all colors fully presented, with a white base, orchid leaves, and crimson text. The Emperor ordered his attendants to copy it and show it to the world, calling it the ‘Hetu and River Map and Luo Document.’”^[1] The Hetu and Luoshu here represent one interpretation of the “shared origin of calligraphy and painting.” In the understanding of ancient ancestors, calligraphy and painting were in a chaotic state of being undivided, integrated, and mutually complementary—they were both calligraphy and painting, with no obvious distinction between them. People used their bodies, physical objects, images, and symbols to convey information and communicate. The functions and significance of calligraphy and painting in clan society all arose from the needs of life and evolved based on the observation of nature. In the Original Preface, Guo Xi mentioned the historical basis for the “shared origin” of calligraphy and painting. He quoted *The Book of Appended Remarks*, Part 1: “Looking up to observe the patterns of heaven, looking down to examine the principles of earth—thus understanding the reasons for the obscure and the evident” and *The Book of Appended Remarks*, Part 2: “In ancient times, when Fuxi ruled the world, he looked up to observe the images in heaven, looked down to examine the laws of earth, studied the patterns of birds and beasts and the suitability of the land, took examples from his own body and from distant things. Thus, he created the Eight Trigrams.”^[2] These quotations illustrate that the earliest writing and images originated from humans’ “taking examples from nearby and distant things”—i.e., imitating human affairs and the forms of objects from near and far. Here, “looking up and down to observe” and “taking examples from near and far” are both ways of observing things and capturing their forms. The objects of “observation” and “imitation” all come from heaven, earth, and all creatures, serving as an inevitable channel connecting the subject’s emotions, thoughts with heaven, earth, and all things. This view inherits the ideas of the Tang Dynasty painter Zhang Yanyuan. In *Records of Famous Paintings of All Dynasties*, Zhang expounded on the origin and transformation of calligraphy and painting from the perspective of painting. In Volume 1, *On the Origin and Development of Painting*, he stated:

“Fuxi obtained from the Rong River, and thus classics and images began to emerge; Xuanyuan obtained from the Wen River and Luo River, and Shihuang and Cangjie shaped them. The Kui constellation has bright horns, governing literature and writing from below; Cangjie had four eyes, looking up to observe the celestial phenomena. He followed the traces of tortoise shells and thus determined the forms of written characters. Nature could not hide its secrets, so grain rained from heaven; spirits and monsters could not conceal their shapes, so ghosts cried at night. At that time, calligraphy and painting were of the same essence and undivided; their symbolic forms were just initiated and still simple. Since there was no way to convey ideas, calligraphy emerged; since there was no way to show forms, painting emerged. These were the intentions of heaven, earth, and sages. According to the category of philology, there are six styles of writing: first, ancient script; second, unusual script; third, seal script; fourth, auxiliary script; fifth, Miao seal script; sixth, bird script. The bird-head-like patterns on the top of banners and tallies belong to the category of painting. (In the late Han Dynasty, Zhen Feng, the Minister of Works, collated the scripts, identifying six types: Ancient script, i.e., the script found in the walls of Confucius’ mansion; Unusual script, i.e., variants of ancient script; Seal script, i.e., small seal script; Auxiliary script, i.e., Qin Dynasty official script; Miao seal script, used for carving seals; Bird script, i.e., the insect-and-bird-shaped patterns on banners and tallies.) Yan Guanglu said: ‘There are three purposes of diagrams: first, diagramming principles (e.g., the Eight Trigrams); second, diagramming knowledge; third, diagramming forms. Additionally, in the Zhou Dynasty, the royal court taught the six scripts to noble youths, and the third one—pictographs—embodies the essence of painting. Therefore, we know that calligraphy and painting have different names but share the same essence.’”^[3]

Zhang Yanyuan's exposition holds that although calligraphy and painting have different names, their essence is interconnected. Their initial creation and subsequent development could not do without "looking up and down to observe" and "taking examples from near and far." Yan Yanzhi once said that writing and painting are connected by following the principle of "pictography"—this principle determined the original state of calligraphy and painting being "of the same essence and undivided" in their early stages. Therefore, Guo Xi's discussion on the "shared origin" of calligraphy and painting is reasonable and well-founded.

3. Calligraphy and Painting Share the Same "Form-Based" Origin

Calligraphy and painting share the same "form-based" origin, meaning they follow common rules in terms of expressive forms, particularly in the use of brush and ink. Both embody the beauty of abstraction, the beauty of brush and ink, and the beauty of rhythm. The brushwork in calligraphy serves as a "language of form-building," while the brushwork in painting inherently carries a strong calligraphic charm. The lines and ink nuances in traditional Chinese painting reveal the abstract beauty of calligraphy everywhere, exuding its unique aesthetic value.

This viewpoint was put into practice by freehand calligraphers of the Song Dynasty. For instance, Han Zhuo, a renowned portrait artist during the Xuanhe era, clearly stated: "Calligraphy and painting bear different names but follow the same principles."^[4] Wang Shizhen wrote, "Mr. Shishi painted bamboo using calligraphic techniques, while Daoist Huang Tingjian created calligraphy using bamboo-painting methods."^[5] The fruitful practices of these two artists provided the most compelling evidence for the theory of "calligraphy and painting sharing a common origin." Zhao Mengfu of the Yuan Dynasty also mentioned the connection between calligraphy and painting in terms of brush and ink in his poems: "Rocks should be painted like the flying-white calligraphy, trees like the ancient seal script; painting bamboo must align with the 'eight methods' of calligraphy. If one can master this, they will know that calligraphy and painting are inherently the same."

^[6] By comparing rocks and trees in paintings to the "ancient seal" script and "flying-white" calligraphy, he confirmed that calligraphy and painting have an inherent connection in their respective developmental processes. *Trees and Elegant Rocks*, now in the collection of the National Palace Museum in Taipei (China Taiwan region), is a work from Zhao Mengfu's middle age and a fine representation of the "calligraphy and painting sharing the same 'form-based' origin" theory. The first thing that catches the eye is the running-script inscription at the top right of the painting: "Painted for Yang Anfu on the 26th day of the seventh lunar month in the third year of the Dade era (1299). Zi'ang (Zhao Mengfu's courtesy name)." On the left side, there are colophons by Chen Lin and Ke Jiusi. Chen Lin wrote: "I set sail from the bank of Floating Jade; mountain birds sing through mist beyond tall trees. On Bilan Hall, I recall the nobleman—white stones and clustered bamboos wetted by autumn rain. Chen Lin." Ke Jiusi wrote: "Clouds over Bilanz Lake; mist-shrouded vines on evening hills of Tiaoxi. A path through sparse woods and elegant rocks; dancing in the Crystal Palace. Inscribed by Ke Jiusi of Danqiu." The characters of their inscriptions are smaller than Zhao Mengfu's, and this attention to the size of the script resembles the arrangement of primary and secondary relationships among forms in painting. From the verses in the colophons, we know the painting depicts sparse trees and elegant rocks along a lakeshore on an evening after an early autumn rain. The simplicity of the images in the painting highlights the independent beauty of the brush and ink itself—subtle, calm, and imbued with a strong calligraphic touch, with no unnecessary strokes. On the flat slope, three withered trees are painted using elegant "seal" and "ancient seal" brush techniques; their lines twist and interweave, with clear brush paths. The third withered tree in the background has "deer-horn" branches reaching high, and the direction of the branches draws the viewer's gaze to the inscription at the top right (Figure 1). Between the cracks of the rocks, three clusters of bamboo leaves stand gracefully; their shapes—leaning forward or backward—adopt the "left-falling stroke" and "right-falling stroke" techniques of regular script. Compared to the trees and rocks painted with light ink and dry brush, the bamboo leaves have a softer yet more upright texture. The rocks in the painting have their outlines drawn with "flying-white" brushwork, with a continuous flow of brush momentum. Overall, the painting conveys a sense of sparse tranquility after an autumn rain, and the integration of calligraphic brushwork amplifies this feeling—exactly confirming the connection between calligraphy and painting in terms of brush and ink. Regarding Guo Xi's view on calligraphy and painting sharing the same "form-based" origin, Zhu Hegeng, a later scholar, also made important remarks in *Insights from Practicing Calligraphy*:

“Since ancient times, most who excel at calligraphy are skilled in painting, and most who excel at painting are proficient in calligraphy—calligraphy and painting take different paths but lead to the same destination. Painting rocks is like ‘flying-white’ calligraphy; painting trees like ‘ancient seal’ script; painting bamboo stems like “seal” script, branches like cursive script, leaves like regular script, and joints like official script. The trees painted by Guo Xi and Tang Di, the bamboo by Wen Tong, and the grapes by Wen Riyuan all originate from cursive script techniques—these are examples of calligraphy-painting connection. As for calligraphy styles, there are metaphors such as ‘swan’s head,’ ‘tiger’s claw,’ ‘inverted leek,’ ‘wavy curve,’ ‘dragon and phoenix,’ ‘unicorn and turtle,’ ‘fish and insect,’ ‘cloud and bird,’ ‘dog and rabbit,’ ‘tadpole’. There are also descriptions like ‘stroke like a cone scraping sand,’ ‘ink like a seal pressing clay,’ ‘folded hairpin,’ ‘water stain on wall,’ ‘rock falling from a high peak,’ ‘withered vine of a hundred years,’ ‘startled snake entering grass,’ ‘dragon leaping and tiger pouncing,’ ‘playing in the sea and roaming the sky,’ ‘beauty and immortal,’ ‘sunset fading and moon rising.’ These are all examples of the connection between calligraphy and painting. Reading Han Yu’s Preface to Sending Monk Gaoxian and Li Yangbing’s Letter to Minister Li, one will have even greater faith in the principle that calligraphy and painting are connected.”^[7]

This passage explains that since ancient times, those skilled in calligraphy are mostly good at painting, and those skilled in painting are also mostly proficient in calligraphy. Although calligraphy and painting differ in form, they are essentially connected. If one does not rigidly adhere to the superficial forms of calligraphy and painting but explores their evolution, they will find that calligraphy and painting influence each other, leading to changes and mutual promotion.

Figure1: Partial View of Sparse Woods and Elegant Rocks by Zhao Mengfu



4. Calligraphy and Painting Share the Same “Spirit-Based” Origin

Calligraphy and painting share the same “spirit-based” origin, meaning that calligraphy and painting not only share a common origin in terms of brush-and-ink forms, but their deeper connection lies in the fact that neither has ever ceased pursuing artistic conception. The creation of artistic conception serves not only as the basis for calligraphers’ ingenuity but also as the source of inspiration for painters’ creations. The formal beauty of calligraphic colophons can balance the composition of a painting, fill empty spaces, and enhance its momentum. The textual content they carry endows the painting with a clearer semantic expression, evokes aesthetic appeal in a literary sense, generates artistic interest, and highlights the scholarly artistic conception. Fang Xun of the Qing Dynasty stated: “Some paintings may not require colophons, but Jin Nong’s paintings cannot be without inscriptions. His new verses and witty remarks possess exquisite literary grace; his running script and official script all conform to ancient styles.” This passage refers to Jin Nong, the leader of the “Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou,” whose calligraphic colophons were unique and innovative, adding great artistic charm to his paintings. Influenced by the prevailing trends in the calligraphy circle of his time, Jin Nong absorbed new calligraphic form elements from the Song Dynasty’s Buddhist scripture calligraphy and folk woodblock carvings, adapting them for his own use. Consequently, his calligraphic colophons mostly adopted the scripture-writing style regular script or a hybrid style of

official and regular script (Figure 2). The complete rendering of each dot and stroke, along with the relatively gentle rhythm of brush movement, brought new changes to calligraphic colophons. Using such calligraphic styles in paintings obviously added a “scholarly elegance” to the composition. Jin Nong’s calligraphic colophons became a hallmark of his paintings and exerted a profound influence. If Jin Nong’s paintings still left room for the further development of calligraphic colophons, then in Zhu Da’s works, the aesthetic appeal of calligraphic colophons and paintings has been fully integrated, and the boundary between calligraphy and painting has blurred here. Thus, his works allow viewers to better perceive the beauty of artistic conception pursued by both “calligraphy” and “painting.” Zhu Da painted with a style that revealed his true nature; while capturing the artistic interest of the composition, he also demonstrated his active and perceptive way of thinking. In his works, the definitions of all concepts became less important—only indulging in “the pursuit of calligraphy and painting” was his true goal. The expression of artistic conception in both Jin Nong’s and Zhu Da’s paintings was inseparable from the integration of calligraphy, serving as typical examples of the “spirit-based shared origin of calligraphy and painting.”

Qi Baishi, a renowned modern calligrapher and painter, also used calligraphy to highlight the artistic conception of his paintings. In 1941, Qi Baishi created the scroll *Eagle*; on the upper left, he inscribed in running-regular script: “To Chairman Mao Zedong. The tenth lunar month of the Gengyin year. Qi Huang” (Figure 3). A single-line signature was added along the left edge of the painting. With the assistance of this calligraphic colophon, the painting achieved a clear contrast between emptiness and solidity, as well as a compact and rich sense of layering, highlighting a grand artistic conception. The calligraphic inscription on another work, *Eagle and Rock*, differs entirely from that on *Eagle*. Through the content of the calligraphic colophon, Qi Baishi incorporated the auspicious meanings of folk sayings into his painting, narrowing the distance between “freehand painting” and the general public. For instance, he painted two magpies on the branches of a plum tree, titling the work *Joy on the Eyebrows*. Using metaphors and symbols to subtly convey a joyful and auspicious atmosphere, he allowed viewers to feel the authenticity of art in daily life. Qi Baishi’s paintings drew inspiration from calligraphy: his brushwork was vigorous, neat, and unrestrained, embodying the “metal and stone charm” pursued by stele-school calligraphy. He handled the contrasting relationships in his paintings—such as emptiness and solidity, opening and closing, expansion and restraint—with great intensity. Here, the expressive power of “calligraphy” was elevated to a new height, enabling his works to not only highlight a grand artistic conception but also exhibit vivid and natural vitality. From “calligraphic intent” to “painterly intent,” the innovation of calligraphy and painting lies not only in technical aspects but more importantly in elevating artistic creation to a spiritual practice of perceiving the laws of nature and cultivating one’s mind.

Figure2: *Album of Flower Paintings by Jin Nong and Eagle by Qi Baishi*



5. Calligraphy and Painting Share the Same “Heart-Based” Origin

The notion that calligraphy and painting share the same “Heart-Based” Origin means both arts attach great importance to the state of the creative subject—a concept encapsulated by the principle “Learning from nature externally, and drawing inspiration from one’s heart internally”. Artworks are no longer mere combinations of black and white ink, but dynamic recreations of life. Guo Xi elaborated on the connotation of heart origin using landscape painting as an example in his work *The Lofty Message of Forests and Streams*:

“A well-established view in the world holds that landscapes in paintings can be ‘walked through,’ ‘looked at,’ ‘traveled in,’ or ‘lived in.’ Any painting that achieves this reaches the realm of exquisite work. However, landscapes that are ‘walkable’ or ‘viewable’ are not as valuable as those that are ‘travelable’ or ‘livable.’ Why? Observe the mountains and rivers in the real world: across hundreds of miles, places that are truly suitable for traveling or living make up no more than three or four out of ten. Yet we must depict scenes that are ‘livable’ and ‘travelable’ in paintings. The reason why virtuous scholars yearn for forests and springs is precisely because of these wonderful qualities. Therefore, painters should create with this intention, and connoisseurs should appreciate paintings with this understanding—that is how the original essence of landscape painting is preserved.”^[8]

By comparing four types of landscape paintings, Guo Xi expounded his ideal of landscape art: landscapes that are “livable” and “travelable.” Since places suitable for living and traveling are rare in real natural landscapes, yet virtuous scholars seek exactly such places in nature, landscape paintings—as representations of ideal scenery—should strive to create a realm of “livability” and “travelability,” transforming black and white ink into an ideal paradise in reality. He advocated “immersing oneself in mountains and rivers to capture them”—experiencing and contemplating landscapes as part of one’s lived world, and transforming objective natural objects into carriers of subjective emotions and thoughts. Shi Tao, a renowned painter of the early Qing Dynasty, put forward the concept of “the Primal Brush” in *The Aphorisms of Painter Bitter Melon Monk*, which also beautifully explains the meaning of “heart origin”. He stated:

“Painting is governed by the mind. If a painter fails to deeply comprehend the principles behind the graceful complexity of mountains, rivers, figures, the inherent nature of birds, beasts, grass, and trees, and the structural rules of ponds, pavilions, and towers—if they cannot fully capture their subtleties—they will never grasp the fundamental principles of ‘the One Brush’... ‘The Primal Brush’ encompasses everything beyond the chaos of primal creation. Even hundreds of millions of brushstrokes begin and end with this principle; it all depends on how the painter wields it. If one can embody ‘the One Brush’ in even the smallest details, with clear intention and transparent brushwork...”^[9]

This passage explains that painting creation is governed by the subjective mind. Painters must also deeply observe objective nature—“learning from nature externally, and drawing inspiration from one’s mind internally”—and convey the essence of all things in heaven and earth through brush and ink. However, for the brush and ink used by painters to successfully achieve this, they must “deeply comprehend the underlying principles.” Only in this way can they transcend the surface of objects, embrace “the vastness of the eight extremes, the changes of the nine regions, the majesty of the Five Great Mountains, and the breadth of the Four Seas”^[10], and profoundly interpret the vitality of life and the spirit of heaven and earth. In this process, calligraphy is integrated into painting, and the two arts merge as one. Calligraphy—an art form more inclined to abstraction—injects life into painting, allowing both to converge into a realm that harmonizes with the universe’s great transformation. Beyond Shi Tao, many other theorists have also made relevant remarks to confirm this idea. For instance, Yun Xiang said: “What makes Zhonggui (Wu Zhen of the Yuan Dynasty) unparalleled is that a single brushstroke of his contains ten thousand strokes.”^[11] Yun Shouping stated: “There is no such thing as a painting without ‘the Primal Brush.’ Even a long scroll or a large album depicting a thousand peaks and ten thousand valleys can be called ‘no painting at all’ if it lacks this essence.”^[12] These remarks illustrate that “the Primal Brush” gives rise to all things in a painting. Only when brush and ink converge into a “single stroke” that connects with “the Primal Brush” can a painter depict “a thousand peaks and ten thousand valleys” and evoke a cosmic spirit that encompasses all things.

Conclusion

The concept of “the common origin of calligraphy and painting” has endured for millennia. Regardless of dynastic changes and transitions, its theoretical value remains deeply rooted in the hearts of creators. With the accumulation of history, the integration of these two art forms has become increasingly close.

By sorting out and researching the four aspects mentioned in the Original Preface of Guo Xi's *Lofty Ambitions in Forests and Streams* — namely “calligraphy and painting sharing the same origin of genesis”, “calligraphy and painting sharing the same origin of form”, “calligraphy and painting sharing the same origin of spirit”, and “calligraphy and painting sharing the same origin of mind” — this study first reveals the evolutionary process of the gradual infiltration and expansion between calligraphy and painting. It then explores the unique aesthetic orientation of Chinese calligraphy and painting and the spiritual pursuit of painters embodied within this process. Finally, it cites the philosophical viewpoints from Shi Tao's Chapter on the Single Brushstroke to explain the cosmic spirit contained in the «common origin» of calligraphy and painting, demonstrating the artistic divergence between Chinese painting and Western painting from different perspectives. To sum up, the theory of “the common origin of calligraphy and painting” proposed by Guo Xi is not only a discovery and summary of the achievements of previous generations, but also expands the connotation of “common origin” from different angles. The inscriptions on Chinese paintings are derived from poetry, and the brushwork and ink application draw more from calligraphy. Calligraphers and painters of all dynasties “used the fluttering of brush and ink to express the free spirit in their hearts”. Therefore, Chinese painting does not emphasize the depiction of specific objects; instead, it tends to use abstract brush and ink to convey the painter's personality, mood, and the artistic conception of the work. Although “calligraphy” and “painting” are different art forms, they share the same essence and source of artistic charm.

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