

Beyond Mimesis: Naturalistic Representation and Literati Ideals in Flower-and-Bird Paintings of the Nanjing Museum

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Abstract

Throughout its millennia-long development, traditional Chinese bird-and-flower painting has consistently grappled with the dialectical proposition of “representing nature” versus “expressing ideals,” a theme that has manifested in complex interactive forms across different eras of artistic practice. As a major repository of masterpieces in this genre, the Nanjing Museum houses a comprehensive collection that bears witness to the evolving trajectory of this artistic proposition. This study takes the bird-and-flower paintings in the Nanjing Museum as its core research objects, systematically analyzing how naturalistic representation and literati ideals are embodied in these works, and exploring the inherent interdependence and mutual reinforcement between the two. The study aims to transcend the superficial understanding of bird-and-flower painting as merely “imitating nature,” revealing its artistic qualities that go beyond resemblance to form, while uncovering the literati spirit and cultural connotations underlying these works. In doing so, it provides a new scholarly perspective and theoretical reference for grasping the artistic essence of traditional Chinese bird-and-flower painting, while also offering insights for contemporary artistic creation and cultural inheritance.

Keywords

Nanjing Museum; bird-and-flower painting; naturalistic representation; literati ideals; artistic style.

1. Introduction

Bird-and-flower painting occupies a distinctive and significant position in the system of traditional Chinese painting. It not only presents the ancient artists' keen observations and aesthetic perceptions of the natural world, but also serves as an important medium for the literati class to articulate spiritual aspirations and emotional sentiments^[1]. The Nanjing Museum, a national-level comprehensive museum that integrates collection, conservation, research, and exhibition, preserves a rich trove of bird-and-flower masterpieces spanning from the Song dynasty to the modern era. These works, encompassing both meticulous (*gongbi*) and freehand (*xieyi*) techniques, span a thousand years of history and encapsulate the artistic achievements of Chinese bird-and-flower painting at various developmental stages. They provide invaluable material evidence for tracing the interplay between naturalistic representation and literati ideals in the genre. Conducting a systematic review and in-depth analysis of these holdings enables us to delineate the evolving relationship between naturalistic representation and literati ideals, thereby offering significant insights for contemporary scholarship and artistic practice.

2. The Development Trajectory of Bird-and-Flower Painting in the Nanjing Museum

The developmental trajectory of bird-and-flower painting preserved in the Nanjing Museum echoes the broader evolution of the genre in China. Works from different historical periods, shaped by the prevailing socio-cultural environment, creative communities, and aesthetic orientations, display distinct artistic features. From the Song dynasty through the modern era, these works demonstrate continuous progression in subject matter, modes of expression, and underlying spirit. They both preserve essential traditions and, under the impetus of changing times, cultivate new artistic characteristics, thus clearly mapping the genre’s developmental path (see Table 1).

Table 1: Developmental Trajectory of Bird-and-Flower Painting in the Nanjing Museum

Periods	Main Characteristics	Representations in the Nanjing Museum Collection
Song to Yuan Dynasty	In the Song dynasty, realism reached its peak; in the Yuan dynasty, literati painters took the lead, shifting toward the pursuit of “artistic conception,” moving from resemblance in form to resemblance in spirit.	In the Song dynasty, works demonstrated precise realism; in the Yuan dynasty, emotional expression was incorporated, with stronger lyrical qualities in brush and ink.
Ming to Mid-Qing Dynasty	In the Ming dynasty, diverse schools flourished; in the mid-Qing dynasty, innovations emerged, with Yun Nantian’s boneless flower paintings standing out uniquely.	In the Ming dynasty, pieces reflected the characteristics of multiple schools; in the Qing dynasty, Yun Nantian’s works combined realism with freehand expression.
Late Qing to Modern Era	Influenced by Western culture, the late Qing to modern era integrated traditional and Western elements, with an emphasis on individual expression.	In later periods, composition and color took on new appearances, with natural imagery embodying both realistic representation and the projection of literati ideals.

2.1. Song to Yuan Dynasties

The Song dynasty marked the zenith of the realist tradition in Chinese bird-and-flower painting, a feature well represented in the Nanjing Museum’s collection. Artists observed nature with scientific rigor, studying the forms, colors, and growth patterns of flowers and birds in depth. Their works depict blossoms, feathers, and even insect limbs with striking verisimilitude and precision, embodying an uncompromising pursuit of natural truth. As the socio-cultural climate shifted, literati painters gradually emerged as the dominant creative force. Bird-and-flower works from the Yuan dynasty in the museum bear witness to this transformation. Literati artists moved beyond pure realism, infusing personal emotions, scholarship, and life reflections into their art^[2]. Their brushwork became more expressive, their lines freer, and their ink tones more varied. This marked a shift from striving for external likeness to seeking inner spirit, injecting new artistic meaning into bird-and-flower painting and advancing its transition toward a literati-oriented genre.

2.2. Ming to Mid-Qing Dynasties

In the Ming dynasty, bird-and-flower painting flourished with diverse schools and styles, fully reflected in the Nanjing Museum’s collection. The Wu School was noted for its strong literati character; its painters drew on everyday flora and fauna as subjects, blending them with

leisurely moods through fluid brushwork, imbuing their works with both life's vitality and scholarly elegance. In contrast, court bird-and-flower painting catered to imperial tastes, inheriting the meticulous realism of the Song, with tightly structured compositions, sumptuous coloring, and superb technique that reflected the aesthetic preferences of the royal court. Building on earlier traditions, the genre continued to innovate. A notable example in the museum's collection is Yun Nantian's "boneless" flower paintings, in which he abandoned traditional outlining in favor of directly applying color to render forms. His focus on natural transitions and layered hues produced vibrant, lifelike blossoms that combined the vitality of realism with the fluidity of freehand brushwork. This expanded the expressive possibilities of the genre and enriched its artistic vocabulary.

2.3. Late Qing to Modern Era

From the late Qing through the modern period, China underwent dramatic transformations, with Western cultural influences and shifting social ideologies profoundly reshaping bird-and-flower painting. Works from this period in the Nanjing Museum clearly embody these changes. While upholding the spirit of traditional brush-and-ink, artists began incorporating Western techniques such as perspective and chiaroscuro, creating stronger senses of spatial depth and employing color theory to enhance visual effects. Increasingly, painters emphasized individuality and emotional expression. Natural motifs in their works became not mere representations of objective reality, but vehicles for personal ideals and the spirit of the times. Naturalistic representation thus transcended simple imitation of forms, merging with literati ideals of patriotism, reformist consciousness, and cultural reflection. This fusion of tradition and modernity, East and West, imbued bird-and-flower painting with renewed vitality, endowing the genre with an artistic character attuned to its era.

3. The Relationship between Naturalistic Representation and Literati Ideals

3.1. Naturalistic Representation as the Foundation for Literati Ideals

As an abstract spiritual concept, the literati ideal requires a concrete medium for its expression, and naturalistic representation of nature provides precisely such a medium. Literati painters lived within the natural environment, and natural objects—flowers, birds, landscapes—were the most familiar and emotionally resonant subjects for them. By realistically depicting these forms, they infused their works with moral aspirations, life philosophies, and aesthetic tastes. The accurate rendering of natural forms enabled viewers to grasp the creator's intentions through imagery: the sight of plum blossoms blooming in the snow evoked the scholar's resilience; lotus flowers rising unsullied from the mud suggested purity of character. Without the truthful representation of natural objects, literati ideals would remain unattached abstractions, difficult for audiences to perceive or understand. Thus, naturalistic representation was the prerequisite and guarantee for the effective transmission of literati ideals.

3.2. Literati Ideals Enriching Naturalistic Representation

If naturalistic representation were limited to mechanical imitation of natural objects, the artwork would become nothing more than a literal copy of reality, lacking emotional resonance and enduring artistic value. By integrating literati ideals, representation gained a spiritual core and cultural meaning, liberating natural motifs from their material properties to become symbolic cultural markers. A single bamboo stalk could signify both resilience and humility, while a cluster of chrysanthemums might convey either the tranquility of rustic retreat or the loneliness of solitude. Through subjective interpretation and artistic refinement, literati painters infused natural motifs with rich emotional content and intellectual depth,

transforming naturalistic representation into a bridge linking nature and humanity, and endowing it with profound cultural significance and lasting artistic appeal^[3-4].

4. Manifestations of Naturalistic Representation in the Nanjing Museum's Bird-and-Flower Paintings

4.1. Precise Depiction of Natural Forms

Traditional Chinese painting has long emphasized the principle of “learning from nature,” and the precise depiction of natural forms is the foundation of naturalistic representation in bird-and-flower painting as well as a direct showcase of the painter's artistry. In the Song dynasty *Auspicious Cranes*, preserved in the Nanjing Museum, the layering of crane feathers is clearly distinguished, with texture and arrangement closely matching the features of real birds. In the Yuan dynasty *Ink Plum*, the curve of petals and the form of stamens reflect the artist's attentive observation of plum blossoms blooming in winter. In these works, whether in the tension expressed by bird claws or the growth trajectory of plant stems, none stray from the original forms of nature. Through long-term observation and refinement, artists transformed natural forms into artistic expression—avoiding the rigidity of mechanical reproduction while preserving nature's vivid vitality, thereby achieving precise representation in an artistic manner.

4.2. Color Application in Harmony with Nature

Color serves as a vital medium for conveying the essence of nature in bird-and-flower painting, and whether its use aligns with natural phenomena directly affects the realism and appeal of the work. In the Ming dynasty meticulous painting *Peonies*, the artist used rouge red to shade petal edges, gradually transitioning to pale white toward the center, faithfully echoing the chromatic changes of garden peonies in bloom. The Qing dynasty *Bamboo and Sparrows* mixed indigo and gamboge to create tender green leaves, with tonal variation reflecting their stages of growth, resembling the shifting shades of bamboo foliage in nature. Even in freehand works, painters adhered to natural color logic: ochre to emphasize autumn leaves' withering yellow, or ink tonal contrasts to distinguish light and shadow in branches. Such color handling, rooted in direct observation and enhanced by brush-and-ink technique, achieved a subtle coordination with nature.

4.3. Composition in Accordance with Natural Space

The composition of bird-and-flower paintings was never arbitrary but instead represented an artistic translation of natural spatial order, which determined viewers' spatial perception of the work. In the Song dynasty *Pomegranate and Yellow Bird* (see Figure 1), a pomegranate branch extends diagonally from the lower right, with fruit and foliage arranged according to the natural arc of growth. The yellow bird perches in a posture consistent with the branch's bearing capacity. In the Ming dynasty *Lotus and Water Birds*, half-unfurled lotus leaves and drooping seed pods form the foreground, while distant leaves fade into the background, reproducing the spatial layering of a pond with clarity between the near and far^[5]. Such compositions, whether isolating a fragment of nature or reconstructing an entire scene, relied on the authentic logic of natural space, enabling viewers to resonate with the depicted environment and amplifying the effect of naturalistic representation.



Figure 1: Pomegranate and Yellow Bird

5. The Expression of Literati Ideals in the Bird-and-Flower Paintings of the Nanjing Museum

5.1. The Integration of Literati Thought

The bird-and-flower paintings preserved in the Nanjing Museum embody a wealth of literati thought, vividly conveyed through the selection of natural motifs and artistic creation. The Confucian concept of *zhongyong* (moderation and harmony) is reflected in balanced compositions, harmonious color coordination, and auspicious imagery of flora and fauna. For example, paintings depicting peacocks alongside peonies not only highlight the magnificence of the birds and the grandeur of the flowers but also, through their harmonious arrangement, symbolize good fortune and universal concord. Daoist philosophy of *ziran wuwei* (naturalness and non-action) manifests in the pursuit of authenticity, where painters avoided excessive embellishment and instead used spontaneous brushwork to reveal the inherent forms of nature. Works such as freehand ink bamboo, rendered with concise brushstrokes to capture bamboo's upright form without bright colors, embody the ideals of returning to simplicity and following nature^[6]. The "Four Gentlemen" (plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum) recur frequently in the collection, serving as archetypal vehicles for literati values. Through their depiction, artists conveyed integrity, elegance, resilience, and reclusion—translating literati ideals directly into pictorial form.

5.2. The Conveyance of Emotions and Aspirations

Chinese literati often used bird-and-flower painting to articulate emotions and aspirations, making it a crucial medium for expressing inner sentiments. In contexts such as the hardships of the examination system or periods of social turmoil, literati who could not voice their feelings

openly infused them into depictions of flora and fauna. Wang Mian's Yuan dynasty work *Ink Plum* (see Figure 2) exemplifies this tradition. A plum branch extends diagonally from the side, with twisting boughs outlined in dark and light ink, and blossoms tinted with pale washes against reserved white spaces suggestive of frost and snow. Without bright pigments, the composition conveys natural clarity and elegance. Wang, who lived through the turmoil of the late Yuan and abandoned his pursuit of office after failing the examinations, used his sparse yet vigorous brushwork to project an unyielding spirit, mirroring his refusal to flatter convention^[7-8]. The inscription "I do not seek praise for bright colors; I leave pure fragrance to fill the world" infused the motif with spiritual aspiration, transforming the plum blossom into a symbol of lofty ideals. In such works, flora and fauna embodied the painter's inner world, enabling viewers to sense sincere emotion and steadfast commitment through brushwork and rhythm.



Figure 2: Ink Plum

5.3. Literati Spirit in the Aesthetic of Brush and Ink

The literati spirit within the Nanjing Museum's bird-and-flower paintings is most vividly expressed through brush-and-ink aesthetics, which serve as a direct artistic embodiment of literati ideals. Most literati painters had strong foundations in calligraphy, incorporating calligraphic brush techniques into painting. Lines thus carried not only descriptive function but also emotion and rhythm: some strokes were firm and forceful, as in the "leaking-roof" brushwork used for bamboo stalks, evoking upright integrity; others were light and flowing, as in the "silkworm-spinning" strokes used for petals, conveying tenderness and delicacy. Ink tones were manipulated with sophistication—variations in density, dryness, and moisture created rhythmic layers, such as light ink washes for distant landscapes and dense ink for foreground flowers and birds, producing clarity and dynamism. Such mastery of brush and ink went beyond technical skill, reflecting literati aesthetics and spiritual pursuits^[9-10]. The lively rhythm of brushwork embodied ideals of freedom, transcendence, and refinement, imbuing the paintings with scholarly elegance and artistic distinction. In this way, bird-and-flower painting transcended mere visual representation to become a vessel for spiritual and cultural expression.

6. Conclusion

In summary, the development of bird-and-flower painting in the Nanjing Museum's collection demonstrates the profound integration of naturalistic representation and literati ideals.

Naturalistic representation provided concrete imagery through which ideals could be visually conveyed, while literati ideals infused naturalistic motifs with intellectual and spiritual depth, elevating them beyond simple imitation. From the realism of the Song dynasty to the innovations of the modern era, these works maintained fidelity to nature while expressing the literati spirit and aesthetic refinement. Studying them deepens our understanding of the core principle *“learning from nature externally, seeking inspiration internally”* in traditional painting. Moreover, it offers valuable insights for contemporary art in negotiating the relationship between nature and humanity, contributing to the continuation and renewal of traditional artistic values in the modern age.

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