



# Analysis and Comparison of the Artistic Characteristics of Isaac Levitan and Wu Guanzhong

Lian Jin\*, Jin Lin

College of Art, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua, Zhejiang, China.

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\***Corresponding author:** Lian Jin, College of Art, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua, Zhejiang, China.

## Abstract

The development of Chinese oil painting is closely tied to the influence of Russian realist oil painting. Isaac Levitan, an exceptional realist landscape oil painting master of the 19th century, inherited and advanced the esteemed tradition of Russian landscape painting. His landscape oil painting, with its unique creative personality and method, reached the peak of expressing emotion with scenery and conveying thoughts with objects. His works encompassed the essence of scenery lyricism and storytelling, solidifying his significant position in the annals of art history. Wu Guanzhong, on the other hand, is a mature representative of imagery landscape oil painting in the 20th century. He devoted his life to the exploration of the nationalization of oil painting and the modernization of Chinese painting. Remaining steadfast in the artistic concept of integrating China and the West, Wu Guanzhong delved into the realm of landscape painting, ultimately forming an imagery style characterized by distinct regional qualities and personal touches. This paper aims to analyze and compare the artistic characteristics of these two oil painters, shedding light on the inheritance and differences between Chinese and Russian landscape oil paintings.

## Keywords

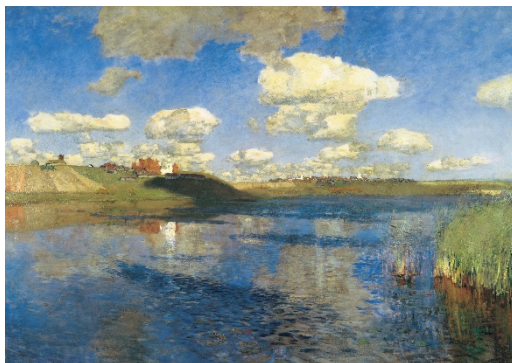
Landscape oil painting, artistic characteristics, Levitan, Wu Guanzhong

## 1. Artistic characteristics of Isaac Levitan's Oil paintings of Isaac Levitan

In terms of composition, Levitan demonstrates a rich imagination and a mastery of pictorial elements. He strives for the beauty of form, proportional and precise composition, and aims to express perfect composition and perfect harmony in his compositions. Levitan employs various common composition forms, including radial composition, horizontal composition, panoramic composition, vertical composition, monumental composition, three-stage composition, and balanced composition. Levitan often utilizes horizontal lines to reflect a regional style. The painting "The Vladimir's Road" employs a horizontal composition, which gives a sense of melancholy. The composition almost divides the painting equally between the sky and the earth, and from the painting, we can see a long, rugged road leading into the distance. The entire picture is dominated by a hazy sky and an expansive field (Zhu Aizhen, 2010). Similarly, in the artwork "Vesper Chimes", Levitan employs a top-down perspective, skillfully arranging the foreground, middle ground, and background so that the painting forms a well-balanced composition. The water surface appears wide and clear, while the sky appears expansive.

Regarding light and color, Levitan keenly observes nature, depicting its ever-changing kaleidoscopic. He becomes engrossed in the portrayal of light and air, expressing different light effects in his works. In the work "Evening at Volga", the picture is expressed in the form of a backlight, depicting the moment when the light changes at dusk of

the Volga River, and the artistic conception is quiet and elegant. Levitan's paintings, the colors are elegant and soft. He pays great attention to the integrity of the color tones of the picture (Zhu Aizhen, 2010). Levitan believes that tonal harmony is the most captivating aspect of nature and the foundation of painting. In the artwork "Lake. Rus." (shown in Figure 1-1), Levitan employs a predominantly blue palette, creating a vibrant and colorful composition. The peaceful and serene blue tones evoke a sense of tranquility, inviting viewers to immerse themselves in the picture's color and allowing for boundless contemplation.



**Figure 1-1. Lake. Rus.**

Levitan demonstrates a keen focus on the visual impact of his paintings. The brushstrokes in Levitan's works not only capture the texture, volume, and captivating play of light and shadow but also reveal his emotions and distinctive personality traits. His paintings feature a significant presence of lines, such as the gracefully curving trunks of trees, the edges of lakes and mountains, and the outlines of objects. Levitan meticulously and intentionally draws each line, employing lines of varying lengths, thicknesses, and straightness to infuse a sense of rhythm into the tranquil composition. The bold and expressive brushstrokes convey his deep love for nature. The work "Golden Autumn" (shown in Figure 1-2) depicts a warm and fresh autumn landscape, with a high degree of uniformity, rich colors, and elegance. The clear blue sky, golden birch trees, oak trees, and blue shiny rivers in the whole picture are cold and warm, with light and dark contrast and harmony (Zhang Shenglin, 2019). Similarly, in the artwork "Church View in Autumn", Levitan captures a lively and refreshing autumn scene. The trees in the painting exude a sense of movement, portrayed through strong and dynamic brushstrokes that depict swaying leaves. Levitan skillfully employs transparent or translucent colors, layering them to create a natural sense of connection. The brushwork in the middle ground is loose and free, allowing for natural retraction. These brushstrokes perfectly coincide with the shapes of the leaves, infusing his landscapes with a poetic quality.



**Figure 1-2. Golden Autumn.**

Levitan is a natural lyric interpreter. He approaches nature with a visceral connection and creates deeply emotional Russian realistic landscape paintings that deeply touch the soul. For example, the work "March" shows the scenery of early spring in Russia, the blue sky, the cold snow, the shadow of trees, and the saddle of horses. They constitute the melody of colors, just depicting the scenery of the Russian suburbs (Zhang Shenglin, 2019). In "Village by the River", Levitan depicts the serene scenery of a riverside village. He often chooses ordinary rural landscapes as his

subject matter and tranquility. The rich colors of green and yellow on the river bank blend harmoniously, while the vast open sky extends into the distance, seamlessly merging with nature. The picture shows strong poetry, which comes from his unique inner feelings and love for every corner of the motherland (Zhu Aizhen, 2010). Levitan incorporates his own emotions into his works, not only reflecting his personal mindset but also expressing social reality. He established the concept of an "emotional landscape", which is fully manifested in his art. He approaches nature with a poetic eye, akin to a landscape poet, infusing his paintings with a profound sense of poetry. His artworks embody a "poetry in painting", seamlessly integrating his own emotions without merely copying nature, resulting in a captivating blend of scenes that is highly infectious.

## 2. Artistic characteristics of Wu Guanzhong's oil paintings

Deeply influenced by Western art, Mr. Wu Guanzhong has a deep understanding of the essence of traditional Chinese culture. He has formed a unique oil painting style that harmoniously integrates with Eastern aesthetics. His exploration of landscape oil painting has traversed a journey from sketching to creation, from figurative to semi-abstract, and from realism to freehand techniques. In this process, Wu Guanzhong constantly tried ink-freehand techniques and tried to find a way to express the Oriental essence through oil painting materials. In his landscape oil paintings, Wu Guanzhong frequently employs unique rural scenes as thematic subjects, emphasizing the localization of landscape art. Although rooted in Western oil painting techniques, he incorporated elements such as the brushwork and line techniques of Chinese ink painting into his creations. This fusion of traditional ink painting and Western modern expressive painting gives his works a bright, concise modernity, and at the same time brimming with Chinese tranquility and poetry (Tan Hongmei, 2015). In his artwork "Guilin Mountain Village" (shown in Figure 2-1), Wu Guanzhong skillfully combines the tactile qualities of oil painting with the fluidity and expressiveness of Chinese painting, achieving a harmonious unity between form and artistic conception.

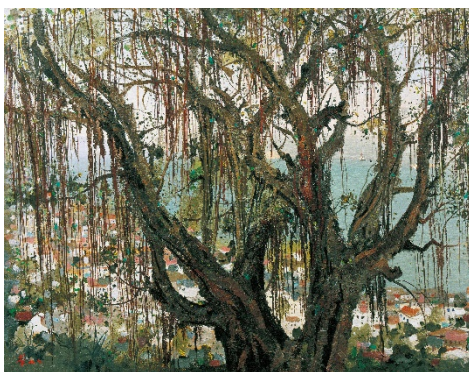


Figure 2-1. Guilin Mountain Village.

Points, lines, surfaces, and colors are the fundamental visual elements used to convey the aesthetic qualities of form. In the process of manipulating the picture, Wu Guanzhong is good at using these basic elements, extracting the formal elements from the complex natural elements, simplifying the complex, turning the concrete into abstraction, and giving it emotions, making it a "meaningful form", so as to form a unique formal beauty (Tan Hongmei, 2015).

In his oil paintings, "dots" are akin to a playful spirit, infusing his artwork with vitality, intrigue, and artistic depth. Wu Guanzhong's utilization of "dots" not only pays homage to his predecessors but also showcases his unique creative approach, blending traditional Chinese brush and ink techniques with Western forms to develop his distinctive and meaningful interpretation of the "point" of his own. Traditional Chinese painting, on the other hand, emphasizes the art of "line modeling". Wu Guanzhong is also a master of utilizing "line". However, his interpretation of "line" differs from traditional ink painting. In his works, "line" becomes an expression of emotions, an abstraction of nature, and a reflection of the subjective world inspired by the beauty of the objective world. Wu's use of "line" is characterized by its decorative and freehand qualities (Bu Ling, 2012). In "Kulangsu" (shown in Figure 2-2), the painting is brimming with lines that possess the charm of ink pen strokes. These lines flow smoothly, liberated and unconstrained, imbued with a sense of rhythm and cadence. Wu Guanzhong skillfully incorporates the essence of Chinese calligraphy and ink painting into his oil paintings, vividly capturing their expressive qualities. The flatness inherent in Western modern art has profoundly influenced Wu Guanzhong. When composing the visual structure of the artwork, he

adeptly draws upon the principles of Western modernist plane composition. By delineating and combining the objects with black, white, and gray blocks, he achieves visual balance, ultimately creating a cohesive composition that exudes both aesthetic beauty and decorative appeal. In the specific application, he first injects the spirit attached importance to traditional Chinese painting into the visual effect of the plane, creating a sense of imagery "between the like and the unlike". The other is to draw on the flat colors of Western modern painting masters such as Matisse and Gauguin. He expresses subjective feelings, creating flexible and flowing line-cutting and dividing blocks, which enhances the sense of heaviness, composition, and artistic conception of the picture (Zhong Yan, 2011). For instance, in the artwork "Former Residence of Qiu Jin", the geometric composition employed creates a formal beauty that simultaneously encapsulates the essence of the image. The composition achieves a harmonious fusion of conciseness and density, presenting a balanced visual arrangement. This interplay of elements reflects both the compositional aesthetics of Western modernity and the conceptual beauty rooted in traditional Chinese art.

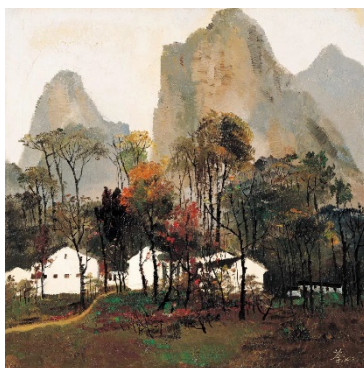


Figure 2-2. Kulangsu.

Wu Guanzhong's artwork is imbued with profound artistic beauty. Artistic conception, an aesthetic principle emphasized in traditional Chinese painting theory and poetry, represents the highest realm of aesthetics in Chinese painting art. Artistic conception encompasses two contrasting elements: subjective emotions and objective circumstances. Wu Guanzhong believes that only when Eastern and Western art learn from each other's strengths and weaknesses, and the organic combination of the two can achieve the realm of "being born outside the elephant" (Bu Ling, 2012). To reach this realm, Wu Guanzhong dedicated his life to the exploration and uncovering of formal beauty, expressing his artistic conception. On one hand, he infuses his emotions into the scenes he depicts, considering sketching as merely a tool, with his ultimate goal being to capture and unearth the "beauty of form and artistic conception" based on the foundation of sketching. On the other hand, Wu Guanzhong employs techniques that simplify complexity to arrange the composition of the artwork, thereby creating interest.

### 3. Comparison of the art of Isaac Levitan and Wu Guanzhong

Both artists have made significant accomplishments in landscape oil painting. As a 20th-century artist, Wu Guanzhong must have been influenced by the 19th-century landscape master, Levitan. Both artists were to some extent deeply influenced by Russian realist oil painting in their artistic creations. As a result, there are similarities between the two in terms of painting techniques, styles, aesthetic concepts, and more (Li Chuyang, 2020). First, great attention is given to the formal composition and formal beauty of the artwork, emphasizing the arrangement of the composition. Secondly, deeply influenced by their respective national culture and customs, the artworks of both artists profoundly reflect the cultural and spiritual connotations of their own people. Thirdly, their artistic styles are imbued with poetic and painterly qualities, exuding a profound artistic conception that embodies the blending of scenes.

The differences between the two painters in their artistic exploration and their approaches to Chinese and Western art have led to variations in their artistic styles and perspectives. Firstly, Levitan inherits the artistic characteristics of realist painting, adhering to the principles of scientific perspective and realistic depiction. In contrast, Wu Guanzhong's artistic style showcases the interplay between virtual and real spaces and incorporates the freehand elements of Chinese landscape painting. Furthermore, Wu Guanzhong combines traditional Chinese art with Western modern art, resulting in a flat, decorative, and captivating artistic expression. Secondly, Levitan employs a realistic depiction technique characterized by precise and rational brushstrokes. His use of color creates an elegant and harmonious

portrayal of nature. On the other hand, Wu Guanzhong places emphasis on experimenting with and exploring oil painting and ink techniques. He simplifies the plane in his brushwork and employs color to reflect the artist's subjective understanding and utilization of objective objects. Wu Guanzhong's fusion of Chinese painting and oil painting gives rise to an imagery oil painting style that bears a unique imprint.

#### 4. Summary

Isaac Levitan, the greatest Russian master of lyrical landscape painting in the 19th century, inherited and developed the rich tradition of Russian landscape painting. He skillfully infused his sincere and profound emotions into nature, resulting in poetic and profound works. Levitan's landscape oil paintings authentically express his deep affection for his homeland and exhibit the true Russian spirit, making them a treasure of human culture. By merging his attachment to life and nature with his love for his country, he achieved remarkable artistic achievements that blended realism and romanticism seamlessly. Wu Guanzhong, the most renowned artist in 20th-century China, exemplifies a pioneering spirit and embodies the characteristics of his era in his art. He dedicated his life to nationalizing oil painting and exploring the modernization of Chinese painting. Wu Guanzhong successfully harmonized the artistic conception found in traditional Chinese painting with the expressive techniques of Western modern art. Through the medium of oil painting, he conveyed the essence of the East, creating visual images that seamlessly blend elements of Chinese and Western art, as well as traditional and contemporary forms. Wu Guanzhong's art encompasses both external formal beauty and inner artistic conception, reflecting a genuine love for beauty, and making significant contributions to modern Chinese painting. Both artists skillfully incorporate their unique cultural and artistic backgrounds into their paintings, resulting in works that possess distinct oil painting characteristics, individual styles, and a strong national spirit. Levitan and Wu Guanzhong, as exceptional painters, merge subjective spirit with objective subjects, portraying breathtaking landscape oil paintings while reflecting their personal emotional experiences and aesthetic concepts.

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