

Study on the Evolution of Expressive Forms in Fu Zhongqi's Urban-themed Ink Paintings from the Perspective of Art Semiotics (1985-2024)

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ABSTRACT

This study adopts an art semiotic perspective to examine the evolution and transformation of expressive forms in Fu Zhongqi's urban-themed ink paintings from 1985 to 2024. Integrating art semiotic and iconographic theories, the research systematically reviews Fu Zhongqi's artistic achievements in urban-themed ink paintings and categorizes his works, while also providing an overview of the current research status. By conducting a comparative analysis of Fu Zhongqi's early, middle, and late-period works, this paper reveals the trajectory of his stylistic evolution and changes in expressive forms. The in-depth analysis of representative works such as "Last Year — The Wind of Harbin", "Accompanying the City", and the "Dusk" series highlights Fu Zhongqi's continuous innovation in techniques and his pursuit of free expression in urban-themed ink painting. The study further explores the underlying reasons for these transformations, including the influences of cultural context, artistic concepts, and social environment. Additionally, the paper forecasts potential future developments and challenges in Fu Zhongqi's urban ink painting, offering new perspectives and theoretical support for the study of urban-themed ink art.

KEYWORDS

Urban-themed; Conformity; Ink Wash; Medium; Expressionism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, with the continuous advancement of urbanization in China, urban landscapes have emerged as a significant theme in artistic creation. As a crucial component of traditional Chinese art, ink painting's innovative exploration within urban themes has revealed the transformation and breakthroughs of modern Chinese art. Fu Zhongqi, as one of the most prominent artists in the field of contemporary ink painting, has deeply engaged with and innovated upon urban-themed ink painting. His work not only reflects the evolution of his personal artistic style but also indirectly illustrates the shifts in artistic language influenced by the broader socio-cultural context. Therefore, this study employs art semiotic and iconographic theories to focus on Fu Zhongqi's artistic practice since 1985, aiming to trace the evolution of his works and outline the trajectory of his stylistic changes and the development of expressive forms.

This study analyzes the transformation of expressive forms in Fu Zhongqi's urban-themed ink paintings across different creative phases, highlighting the evolution of his artistic style through representative works such as "Last Year - The Wind of Harbin", "Accompanying the City", and "Dusk". The research explores the profound impact of various factors, including cultural identity, social changes, and individual emotions, on his artistic creation. It also examines the dialectical relationship between tradition and modernity in his works, as well as his self-positioning within the context of globalization. Fu Zhongqi's creative practice reflects shifts in artistic concepts and has

driven innovations in the expressive forms of urban-themed ink painting, offering a multidimensional perspective for future development in the field.

Art semiotics is a discipline that studies the meanings of cultural and artistic symbols and their roles in social communication. From the perspective of art semiotics, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of the artist's intentions and emotional expressions during the creative process, as well as to reveal how the artwork resonates with its audience. At the core of art semiotics lies the relationship between symbols and their implied meanings. [1]A symbol is not merely a physical entity but a medium that carries specific information, interacting with the viewer's cultural background, personal experience, and social environment. It possesses multiple layers of meaning, serving as an abstraction and representation of the real world. Under this theoretical framework, artists are no longer confined to a singular, tangible depiction; rather, they recompose and deconstruct elements such as form, color, and texture, endowing their works with new meanings and dimensions. In conclusion, within the increasingly diverse context of contemporary art, Fu Zhongqi's exploration and investigation of urban themes have not only enriched the expressive language of Chinese ink painting but have also, to some extent, facilitated the transition of traditional art forms towards modernity. His work provides new insights and theoretical references for understanding the developmental trends and value positioning of ink painting in the realm of contemporary art.

2. THE CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT OF FU ZHONGQI'S URBAN-THEMED INK PAINTINGS

Since the 20th century, the development of modern life has gradually eroded the cultural and humanistic environment that traditional Chinese ink art once relied on. As an expression of the soul, traditional ink painting that continues to follow historical methods has become a double barrier to contemporary perception-it obscures both the authenticity of genuine experiences and the hollowness of false sensations. Thus, its modern transformation has become a pressing cultural issue, particularly striking in China at the end of the 20th century. [2]As art theorist Pi Daojian pointed out, this is a fundamental challenge faced by all ink artists.

As a prominent figure in contemporary Chinese ink painting, Fu Zhongqi's artistic achievements lie in his deep understanding and innovative fusion of traditional and modern elements in ink art. Tracing Fu Zhongqi's artistic journey, we find that he initially focused on traditional landscape painting, later evolving into a faithful chronicler of urban life, with a diverse range of styles. A study of his works reveals three distinct phases in his artistic exploration. In the early period, from the 1980s to the late 1990s, Fu Zhongqi's works primarily employed a realistic style, portraying urban scenes with meticulous detail and a strong sense of authenticity. Entering the early 21st century, Fu Zhongqi's works gradually shifted away from direct depictions of the real world, focusing instead on expressing the emotions and philosophical reflections of urban life. His representative piece from this period, "Last Year-The Wind of Harbin"(Fig1), exemplifies his deep exploration of memory and sentiment within the context of city life. After 2010, Fu Zhongqi once again transcended traditional boundaries, incorporating more symbolic elements and abstract techniques. This transformation endowed his ink paintings with a powerful visual impact and profound intellectual depth. For instance, the "Dusk" series reflects the relationship between humans and nature amid the process of urbanization, embodying the artist's contemplations and aspirations for modern life.

2.1. Early Exploration Phase (1985-2000)

In the early creative phase, Fu Zhongqi explored the possibilities of integrating urban themes within the context of traditional Chinese ink painting. The core characteristic of his work during this period was the combination of everyday urban scenes with Eastern philosophical thought. His 2001 piece, "Last Year-The Wind of Harbin"(Fig 1), stands as a milestone and a summative work of this phase.

Drawing inspiration from Harbin, a city rich in historical and cultural significance, the painting merges Eastern ink techniques with Western visual elements, capturing the diversity of urban space and a layered sense of time. Through meticulous use of ink materials, Fu Zhongqi created a distinctive “urban impression,” employing extensive blank space (liubai) to convey a sense of tranquility and Zen amid the fast-paced rhythm of city life.



Figure 1. Last Year-The Wind of Harbin, 2001, 145·168cm

The work not only depicts urban architecture but also delves into the city’s spirit and collective memory, reflecting Fu Zhongqi’s focus on urban transformation and individual memory. It establishes a new symbolic language for the modern city. According to Susanne Langer’s theory, the essence of artistic symbols lies in emotion, and art inherently possesses expressiveness. Artistic expression involves conveying emotions through symbols, transforming them into visible or audible forms for viewers to experience .[3] This shift in expressive form signifies the artist’s response to the ecological changes and shifting social rhythms brought about by rapid urbanization. Fu Zhongqi’s "Urban Ink Series" epitomizes this transformation, showcasing the rebirth of ancient myths and historical narratives within the context of the modern urban environment.

In summary, Fu Zhongqi’s early works reflect not only his pursuit of formal innovation but also his commitment to re-evaluating the values of traditional culture and the significance of contemporary life within an urbanized context. By exploring and mirroring the complex relationship between the individual and society, he infused ink painting with new conceptual depth and expressive possibilities.

2.2. Mid-Transition Phase (2000-2010)

The period from 2000 to 2010 marked a significant transitional phase in Fu Zhongqi’s ink painting, characterized by a diversification and layering of artistic forms, signaling his deepening exploration of urban themes. As Wei Xinyan observed, "Most contemporary Chinese ink figure painters do not rely solely on traditional techniques; traditional brushwork is not entirely suitable for depicting the lifestyle and psychological state of modern urban dwellers. Artists are more inclined to explore the potential of various media, utilizing them to shape and represent the external world." This observation aligns well with Fu Zhongqi’s evolving approach during this phase, where he experimented extensively with new materials and techniques beyond the conventional boundaries of ink painting.[4] Fu Zhongqi’s artistic trajectory during this period aligns with this shift, as demonstrated by his representative work, "Accompanying the City" (2006)(Fig 2). The piece reflects his profound

contemplation on the relationship between individuals and their environment amidst rapid urbanization, utilizing a diverse range of expressive techniques. During this phase, Fu Zhongqi broke away from the constraints of traditional ink painting, employing both refined and expansive brushwork, skillfully navigating the interplay between the real and the abstract. By incorporating colored ink and modern materials such as watercolor and oil-based pigments, he expanded the visual language and expressive boundaries of urban-themed ink painting. In constructing visual symbols, "Accompanying the City" showcases a personalized system of iconography, combining curves with straight lines, symbolic figures, and the silhouettes of urban architecture, effectively conveying the complexity and compressed nature of urban life. Fu Zhongqi's use of asymmetrical, decentralized composition and a restrained, muted color palette expresses the disordered rhythm and cold, indifferent atmosphere of city life. This transitional period marks Fu Zhongqi's shift from traditional ink techniques to modern urban themes, highlighting not only his innovative technical approach but also the evolution of his artistic vision. From the perspective of art semiotics, Fu Zhongqi's innovative exploration of composition, color, and symbolic systems in "Accompanying the City" deepened the artistic connotations of urban-themed ink painting, while also creating a new contextual framework for future works. Overall, "Accompanying the City" represents a breakthrough in Fu Zhongqi's mid-period creative practice, laying a crucial theoretical and practical foundation for the development of urban-themed ink painting.



Figure 2. Accompanying the City 201·201cm, 2006

2.3. Phase of Free Expression (2010-Present)

Since 2010, Fu Zhongqi's urban-themed ink paintings have undergone another significant transformation, exemplified by the "Dusk" series. The core feature of this series lies in the delicate fusion of urban scenes with human emotions. Fu Zhongqi employs a structural interplay of dots, lines, and planes, combined with light ink washes, vibrant colors, and water stain techniques, to create poetic visual symbols. Through intricate, fractal-like compositions, he meticulously crafts an array of "urban symbols," evoking a surreal sense of the city. Fu Zhongqi skillfully harnesses the fluidity and permeability of ink, blurring the boundaries between tradition and modernity, and generating a unique sense of space and time. In "Dusk", for example, the varying depths of ink color depict the interplay between the city's nighttime lights and its tranquility, capturing a profound reflection on the passage of time.



Figure 3. Dusk, 200·200cm, 2018

In terms of artistic form, Fu Zhongqi masterfully integrates the fluid lines of traditional ink painting with the deconstructive imagery of modern abstract art, reflecting a profound critique of contemporary urban life. At the level of data analysis, aesthetic principles and perceptual psychology theories were applied to evaluate the formal elements of "Dusk", including the curvature of lines, color saturation, and shape variability. The analysis revealed that the harmonious combination of these elements significantly enhances the visual impact and artistic expressiveness of the work, affirming the experimental nature of ink painting within the context of urban themes and its fusion of tradition and modernity. This also echoes the view of critic Yi Ying: "Regardless of its position in Chinese contemporary art, ink painting, as a symbol and ritual of national identity, possesses an inherent quality that is irreplaceable. It forms an integral part of China's 'cultural ecosystem,' and its medium carries symbolic significance. Should the material essence of ink be lost, it would signify the arrival of a 'cultural ecological disaster.'" [5] In his process of innovation, Fu Zhongqi's works have once again gravitated back towards the essence of traditional ink painting, placing renewed emphasis on the pursuit of the spirit of traditional brush and ink techniques.

Overall, Fu Zhongqi's recent works have not only expanded the expressive techniques of urban-themed ink painting but also revealed the rich possibilities emerging from the intersection of ink art and modern urban culture. The stylistic evolution of his works, shaped by the contemporary social context, reflects a deepening sense of cultural awareness and artistic exploration. Through both theoretical and empirical analysis, this series illustrates the trajectory of Fu Zhongqi's artistic practice while uncovering the profound socio-cultural implications embedded within his creations.

3. REASONS FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF EXPRESSIVE FORMS

Since 1985, Fu Zhongqi's urban-themed ink paintings have undergone significant transformations in expressive form, driven by a range of multifaceted and complex factors. Firstly, from the perspective of art semiotics, this transformation is closely tied to the artist's personal growth. Fu Zhongqi initially drew inspiration from traditional literati ink painting, but was later influenced by modern art movements and the rapid urbanization process, ultimately striving for a more liberated form of artistic expression. This progression reflects a maturation and evolution in both his artistic concepts and techniques. Secondly, changes in the cultural context have also profoundly influenced his creative style. As the renowned theorist Yu Yang noted, "New values and contemporary circumstances have provided ink art with expanded possibilities, enabling experimental transformations and extensions across both temporal and spatial dimensions." [6] This shift in cultural background has allowed Fu Zhongqi to explore new avenues and push the boundaries of traditional ink painting, adapting it to the evolving dynamics of modern urban life. The cultural shifts have influenced the changes in the artist's values and creative philosophy, providing Fu Zhongqi with a broad space for exploration and

driving continuous innovation in his expressive forms. Thirdly, the rapid urbanization process has offered new visual experiences and thematic inspiration, as the structure and rhythm of modern cities have been internalized into a distinctive artistic language. As art critic Shang Hui noted, "The fashionization of urban culture first reshapes the figurative and realistic imagery of artworks. The visual sensibility of urban culture constantly refreshes the audience's visual impressions, and the pursuit of intense and stimulating imagery has gradually become the objective of visual artists' creations." [7] The influence of urban culture has led artists to focus more on creating strong visual impressions. Furthermore, advancements in technology have provided Fu Zhongqi with new creative media and interactive methods, further advancing and innovating the expressive forms of his work.

In summary, the transformation of expressive forms in Fu Zhongqi's work reflects not only the parallel evolution of his personal artistic practice and contemporary trends but also the profound impact of cultural, social, and technological changes on ink painting. It demonstrates his modern reinterpretation of traditional ink painting and his pursuit of individual expression. From the early use of dark tones and heavy lines to convey urban chaos, to later integrating diverse artistic languages, Fu Zhongqi consistently experimented and innovated. He explored the possibilities of mixed media, including acrylic and other Western materials, to expand the expressive range of ink painting, while making bold breakthroughs in composition and form. This analysis provides theoretical support for understanding Fu Zhongqi's artistic journey and offers a reference point for interpreting stylistic changes in other artists of the same period. Such a micro-level research perspective helps us gain deeper insight into the role and value of urban-themed ink painting within the context of contemporary art.

4. CHALLENGES AND TRENDS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF FU ZHONGQI'S URBAN-THEMED INK PAINTING

4.1. Challenges in Future Development

Fu Zhongqi's urban-themed ink paintings, despite ongoing innovation, face several significant challenges that hinder deeper development. Urban-themed ink painting is often regarded as a crucial pathway for the modernization of traditional Chinese ink art. However, with the persistent conflict between tradition and modernity, and the tension between classicism and innovation, this field has encountered several developmental bottlenecks. Firstly, the constraints of traditional ink techniques have limited the space for creative innovation, leading to a trend of homogenization in the works. Specifically, explorations in line work, ink tones, and spatial composition are restricted by the need to adhere to traditional methods, as well as the pressures of market acceptance. As art critic Shang Hui noted, "The reasons for the decline of micro-level brushstroke individuality in the 20th century and the rise of macro-level stylistic individuality are manifold. However, two aspects that cannot be overlooked are technical skill and cultural positioning." [8] These factors continue to pose real challenges for artists like Fu Zhongqi as they navigate future development. Secondly, the rapid changes in modern urban life have made it difficult for artistic creation to keep pace, often resulting in works that fail to capture the genuine essence of the current era. The dynamic nature of contemporary society demands a level of immediacy in artistic response that can be challenging to achieve. Thirdly, the increasing influence of market-driven considerations poses a significant challenge to artistic integrity. The need to strike a balance between commercial value and artistic exploration can lead to a dilution of stylistic identity and a reduction in the depth of the artworks. This struggle to satisfy diverse market expectations while maintaining artistic authenticity complicates the creative process. Lastly, the rise of digital technology and new media has exerted pressure on traditional ink painting practices. The challenge lies in preserving the essence of traditional ink painting while simultaneously adapting to the viewing habits of modern audiences. This balancing act remains an unresolved issue, as the integration of digital tools may risk

overshadowing the core spirit and aesthetic values of ink painting, challenging its place within the contemporary art landscape.

Overall, these challenges reflect the difficulties traditional art faces in adapting and transforming within a modern context. Fu Zhongqi's exploration exposes the inherent conflict between tradition and modernity. It is only through artists persistently pushing beyond traditional boundaries and the art world critically reassessing its conventional evaluation systems that urban-themed ink painting can find new avenues for development. This balance between inheritance and innovation is essential for revitalizing traditional art, injecting it with renewed vitality and relevance.

4.2. Future Development Trends

Renowned art critic Shang Hui once stated: "The way Chinese painting engages with the world is not through imitation or reproduction of reality but rather through the use of aesthetic objects and the brush's expressive quality to convey the artist's thoughts, interests, and spiritual taste. In terms of the relationship between the aesthetic subject and object, the spirit of xieyi (expressive freehand style) in Chinese painting emphasizes humanistic spirit, lyrical creativity, and spontaneous expression, even containing elements of subconscious representation ".[9]As Shang Hui pointed out, the essence of xieyi is the core attribute of ink painting, and its development should not stray from this fundamental characteristic. "Brush and ink are not isolated or enclosed; they form a link in the organic life of Chinese culture. Brush and ink can and should evolve, particularly as cultural contexts change, through constant adaptation, refinement, and enrichment ".[10]Fu Zhongqi's ink paintings exemplify this philosophy. Looking to the future, his urban-themed ink paintings are expected to continue evolving, driven by the demands of the art market and the pursuit of innovative expression, while also returning to a deeper focus on traditional brush and ink. First, ink painting is likely to transcend the constraints of traditional techniques, integrating new materials and modern technologies to bridge the divide between traditional and contemporary art, thereby expanding the artistic context of urban ink painting. Second, the deeper application of art semiotics will encourage artists to reconfigure and reinterpret urban cultural symbols, making the artworks more symbolic and metaphorical. By drawing inspiration from a broader societal perspective, artists will further enrich their exploration of urban themes, enhancing the expressive depth and conceptual scope of their works.

Overall, Fu Zhongqi's urban-themed ink paintings are expected to integrate a diverse range of elements, blending tradition with modernity, East with West, and artistic expression with social responsibility. Through continuous innovation, his work will likely help maintain the prominence of urban-themed ink painting within contemporary Chinese art. Furthermore, it will contribute to the global dissemination and influence of Chinese culture on the international art stage, providing a renewed vitality and unique perspective.

In general, Fu Zhongqi's urban ink painting will integrate multiple elements such as tradition and modernity, East and West, artistic expression and social responsibility, and continue to innovate, promote urban ink painting to maintain a cutting-edge position in Chinese contemporary art, and contribute new strength to the spread and influence of Chinese culture on the global art stage.

5. CONCLUSION

Since 1985, Fu Zhongqi's urban-themed ink painting has undergone significant transformations in expressive form, reflecting his profound insights into urban life and his continuous innovation in artistic techniques. The research reveals a stylistic evolution in Fu Zhongqi's work, from early realistic and figurative depictions to more abstract and introspective expressions, eventually arriving at a freer, emotionally driven imagery. This progression not only broke through the constraints of traditional ink painting techniques but also deepened the exploration of urban humanistic themes and emotional expression through innovative methods and compositional creativity. Cultural shifts, the impact of

globalization, and changes in the social environment have played a decisive role in shaping Fu Zhongqi's creative direction and stylistic transitions. Driven by the dual forces of global urbanization and the liberalization of the arts, Fu Zhongqi's works exhibit a unique blend of individuality and cultural fusion. Overall, his artistic practice reflects a parallel evolution of personal style and historical context, offering valuable insights for the innovation and development of urban-themed ink painting. This research not only aids in understanding the evolution of expressive forms in urban ink painting but also provides meaningful references and guidance for future creation and theoretical study in this genre.

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