

# **Fabric Language: Translation of the Concept and Forms of Song-Dynasty Landscape Paintings in Contemporary Design**

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**Abstract:** From the Five Dynasties Period to the Song Dynasty, the landscape evolved from the decorative background of paintings to an independent subject or even image, and gradually became a typical representative of traditional Chinese art. Imagery is a combination of subjective ideas and objective objects.

**Keywords:** Dynasties Period, Song Dynasty, Traditional Chinese Art, Decorative Background, Independent Subject, Landscape

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Features of Landscape Painting in the Song Dynasty**

From the Five Dynasties Period to the Song Dynasty, the landscape evolved from the decorative background of paintings to an independent subject or even image, and gradually became a typical representative of traditional Chinese art. Imagery is a combination of subjective ideas and objective objects. The imposition of “landscape” as a realistic landscape with moral value and aesthetic value can be traced back to the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties. In the context of the flourishing of metaphysics, it became popular among literati and officialdom to practice and nourish themselves. As a representative of the creation of nature, the term landscape was frequently used. “landscape” was placed on the opposite side of the earthly world, and “landscape tour” became an expression of noble behavior such as seclusion and Tao comprehension. Of course, the “landscape” in this period had not yet been clearly defined in terms of landscape painting from later generations, so it cannot be directly understood as a landscape like landscape, but it was the scholars of Wei and Jin who gave nature an objective value. This was the first step for landscape to become an imagery. It was during the Eastern Jin period that the term landscape extended from a concept to a practice on paper and silk. Chong Byung's “Words on Landscape Painting” shows that in this period, the concept of landscape already had an image form

corresponding to it. By the Song Dynasty, the form of landscape painting was quite mature. Guo Xi discussed mountains, water, stones, clouds, plants and trees, and the scenery of the four seasons, and the images of dawn and dusk. Under his influence, Han Zhuo also classified landscapes as mountains, water, trees, stones, clouds, smoke, fog, light, wind, rain, snow and figure, etc., and scenes such as scenery of mountains and boats in the four seasons, while Tang Zhiqi still used in “Discussion on Painting” such categories as hill, valley, stone, tree moss, water, mountains, clouds, rain, fog, snow, pavilions, etc. The form of landscape has gradually matured with its brush and ink style since the Song Dynasty. It is not only a link between real objects and the will of literati people, but at the same time it itself has also become part of the “image” of landscape, which has had a profound influence on the landscape forms in later generations. The rise of landscape painting is linked to the awareness of painting creators. Painters seek to support their own pursuit of life in their paintings, and literati are the main driving force behind this transformation. In the Tang Dynasty, Zhang Yanyuan said, “Since ancient times, good painters were noble people. They boosted the art and became figures remembered in history, which is not what people with lower status could do.” (Zhang). “When scholars look at paintings, it is as if checking horses of the world, extracting the feelings; however, painting artisans paint with many details of hair, making people tired after looking at the paintings for a short while” (Yu, 2016b). Here, Su Shi proposed the two opposite concepts of “painting by a scholar” and “painting by a painting artisan.” Ruan Pu believed that although Su Shi's praises were different from the concept of “literati paintings” widely popular in later generations, they still refer to “formal paintings with the interest of literati and officialdom”(Ruan, 1983). Until the Ming Dynasty, when Dong Qichang proposed the concept of “literati painting,” landscape painting has always been an expression of elite culture. The main subjects of landscape painting creation were confined to literary gentlemen, yet the “feeling” of landscape painting was given by warriors and men, and was also pursued by literati (Zhang, 2023). The literati class not only participated in the practical creation of landscape painting, but also left behind rich independent and complete theories of landscape painting. On the one hand, these painting theories start from landscape painting techniques, discuss the

skeletal appeal of specific objects in detail, and establish a set of formal aesthetic standards. As far as the aesthetics of literary painting are concerned, the content of landscape painting in the Song Dynasty focused on form. Song Dynasty literati painters, represented by Su Shi, gave a high degree of freedom to image, and unlike later generations, they were bound by ancient ideas and laws. The original purpose of landscape painting is to be able to “recline” and thus become a spiritual sustenance. This requires landscape painting to be faithful to reality to a certain extent, yet Song Dynasty literati did not try to reproduce nature. “In painting, pursuing the imitation of appearance is a view similar to that of children.” Their esthetic view of “expressing out of the image” points to the opposite connotations of images, including the mood of expression and character of the artist. Calligraphy and painting are of the same origin. Su Shi's “naive and immature” attitude towards calligraphy, which “comes from new ideas and does not copy the practice of ancients, which is a joy” has the same root as his aesthetic concept of focusing on “reason” rather than “form” in painting. One point that should be made clear is that the distinction between “form” and “reason” is not equivalent to a pure form-content dichotomy. Traditional art uses brush and ink as a carrier and focuses on the continuation of the program. Explanatory form has long been part of the content. As for the relationship between form and content, every speaker is inconclusive. Wu Guanzhong once expressed the relationship between the two: “It's not that we don't want thoughts, content, or mood; our thoughts, content, and mood... are integrated into the bone marrow of our own form. They are born with the birth of form, and disappear with the destruction of form. That is different from the content of the text that footnotes it.” (Yin). This is one of the characteristics of landscape painting in the Song Dynasty (Blanchard, 2018). On the other hand, in addition to discussing painting techniques, the Song people's painting theory should also be viewed as a textual explanation of the “logic” presented in their landscape paintings. Until the Song Dynasty, the development of landscape painting had a lot to do with the rise of Song Ming science. The landscape world corresponded to the “celestial” worldview in science. Guo Xi discussed the relationship between mountains and trees in “Lin Quan Gao Zhi” (Wang): “Large mountains are the

master of all mountains, and distributions are based on them. They dominate the perspective relationship of hills, woods and valleys. Their image is like a great monarch towering, which is followed by other elements. Tall pines are the representative of trees, and they are the base of composition, followed by vines and other plants. Their appearance is like a noble man in his right time, ordering lower ones and never showing tired appearance.” Landscape is endowed with the ability to reflect the heavenly truth, that is, the “meaning” of heavenly truth (Yu, 2016a). “Only paintings linking to the meaning can follow the nature, express details of things, which is comprehended by the heart.” Through the requirement of “making sense,” Han Zhuo enabled the forms existing in painting to express the nature of nature, thus realizing the unification of the spiritual world of man with the natural world. Therefore, the image of a landscape establishes a link with the moral character of the individual through the nature and self-cultivation that its content points to. Through the lofty value of landscape images, the value of landscape painting was established from this. This is also the reason why it can stand out from the crowd (Halperin, 2020). Simply put, since the Song Dynasty, the connotations of landscape images have been perfected and matured through Confucianism of the Song and Ming dynasties, and the brush and ink process for landscape painting has also developed greatly. Although the landscape of Song painting is somewhat different from that of later generations of Yuanming, the landscape aesthetics established in the Song Dynasty are the foundation for the development and evolution of landscape in later generations, and is also one of the sources of contemporary Chinese artistic character and appearance. Therefore, in contemporary landscape art design works, this core is unavoidably touched upon.

## 2. MODERN TRANSFORMATION OF LANDSCAPE IMAGERY

Today's landscape images, and what people think of landscape painting as traditional art today, have a certain shift from the concept of landscape painting in the Song Dynasty. It is fundamentally a shift in aesthetics. In the 20th century, China was at a critical point in the transition between the old and the new. Under the combined effects of Chinese painting in the late Qing Dynasty and the strong impact of Western painting in the gradual social context of Western studies, the

modern transformation of landscape painting began to be taken seriously by domestic calligraphy and painting artists, which also prompted the transformation of the concept of “landscape” itself. The most direct and obvious influence was that realism was widely promoted. In 1919, Chen Duxiu proposed improving Chinese painting in “The New Youth” : “If we want to improve Chinese painting, we must first revolutionize the paintings of the four painters surnamed Wang. Because in the improvement of Chinese painting, we must not fail to adopt the realistic spirit of Western painting.” “paintings of the four painters surnamed Wang” refer to the paintings of Wang Shimin, Wang Jian, Wang Yi, and Wang Yuanqi. The intention is to denounce famous artists and ancient people at the time, break away from reality, and pursue the interest of brush and ink. Western painting's direct care for the real world has undoubtedly provided a focus for innovation, and the techniques and aesthetics it brings have also lifted the restrictions on landscape painting in terms of formal language and traditional media. With the development of modernity, many experiments similar to contemporary “experimental ink painting,” landscape forms were further refined and tended to be abstract. This kind of practice not only gradually moved away from traditional Chinese painting, but also prompted people to reexamine the cultural status and symbolic role of landscape in it. Also, in order to counter formality, there are scholars who have reiterated the importance of “sketching” in the history of Chinese painting. Unlike the realism and accuracy emphasized by Western realism, “sketching” pursues “imitation,” “based on an intuitive impression, with a sense of the inner spirit of nature,” which is a reproduction of the aesthetic views of Song Dynasty literati. Whether it's realism or sketching, in the first half of the 20th century, the focus of landscape painting was transferred to modern society and life. Western painting techniques also expanded the formal language of landscape, and in the modern transformation, the “form” showed a trend of strengthening compared to the “logic” of the concept of landscape (Chen, 2016). The modern transformation of Chinese painting is mostly due to the consciousness of Chinese painters facing the dualistic rivalry between China and the West. Regardless of the arguments, it contains a kind of metaphor for national cultural identity. As a traditional subject and image, landscape naturally has both “traditional” and “national” attributes. Since the second half of the 20th century, the realistic approach adapted to

the current political situation, contributed to the formation of revolutionary realism, and gave greater prominence to the status and role of the vast majority of working people. Among these, the landscape changed from the reality of nature to the reality of reality, and became a medium for expressing contemporary industrial social space (Wu et al., 2019,). The creators of landscape paintings consciously juxtaposed the products of modern industry with natural landscapes, reflecting the public social reality at the time rather than the freedom of individual mentality in the past. The image of landscape, which has the spatial characteristics of an industrial society, has changed from originally referring to nature to “strengthening the domination of nature by people who strengthen society.” (Ru, 2008). The working people, as subjects of social revolution and construction, have become the subject of the ideological connotations conveyed by images of landscape water. What is more remarkable is that along with this, landscape painting is trying to break free from the barriers of elite culture, and is open to the masses, both in terms of creativity and criticism. Landscape painting in the Ming and Qing dynasties was restrained by the concept of “orthodoxy,” and Li Kedian criticized the Chinese painting in Ming and Qing as “art serving feudal society... bringing Chinese painting into the cage of formalism... further detached from reality, away from the people...” The reason why Chinese painting in the 20th century has repeatedly mentioned caring for reality is due to the art world's urgent need to arouse public sympathy. At the same time, Chinese painting and calligraphy collections are also undergoing modern transformation and development. Public exhibition spaces are being emphasized and gradually established. More and more collections are changing from private collections to public exhibits, and the concept of landscape is becoming universal, collective, and realistic. The aesthetic shift that has arisen in the modern transformation of landscape water can be summed up as: in terms of the form, it is inspired by Western formal language, combining with old formulae, and a new atmosphere has been created. Form has been further explored as an important characteristic of traditional painting; in terms of meaning and content, in addition to continuing the aesthetic views of literati, more attention is paid to real space rather than spiritual space, based on reality and people's creations, and the landscape spirit has been spread more widely among the public (Shao et al., 2022). After the transformation in the 20th century, the cultural significance and value of landscape images also changed. On the one hand, it continued old

traditions, and the “Tao” and “truth” given by literati were preserved; on the other hand, it was given value again by people today, whether as a cultural symbol or in contemporary social life. Therefore, in contemporary landscape design, what is being translated is not only its formal language, but also the interpretation of the connotations of landscape images that should also be paid attention to.

### 3. THE CONCEPT OF LANDSCAPE IN CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE OF ART AND DESIGN

Landscape has been popular for thousands of years as a subject of Chinese painting. It has been valued as a symbol of social identity in the popularity and appreciation of literati, and has also become a representative of the essence of traditional culture because it is an expression of personal realm and cultivation, and a figurative expression of the philosophical cosmology unique to the nation. In the transformation of the concept of landscape as described above, landscape creation and appreciation were separated, the original literary class was disintegrated, and value pursuit corresponding to the connotations of landscape was replaced. Landscape was captured by the imported word “art,” and its concept was also trapped in existing pictures and texts. In contemporary art practice, when the image of landscape is separated from brush and ink and is expressed by other media, regardless of whether the artists consciously continue its origin and put effort based on the traditional form and connotations of landscape, it is necessary to avoid the dual identity of the traditional image of landscape in ancient and contemporary times (Shi, 2018). “The Story Behind” (Figure 1, Figure 2) is a series of paintings by Xu Bing since 2004. In this series, the artist showed a passion about landscape painting, using a series of waste and ready-made products such as dried plants, old newspapers, plastic bags, etc., by adjusting the distance between materials and glass, and through the interaction of light and shadow, he recreates classic ancient landscape paintings, and perfectly interprets the depth and depth of China's two-dimensional paintings. When the viewer looks through the glass on the front, it looks like a splashed ink landscape painting with flowing brushstrokes and an ethereal mood, but in reality, there is neither a landscape nor a painting. The artist has dissolved the concepts of pen, ink, paper, and even graphic painting, as well as the temporal nature of painting - from the expression of an eternal moment to the fragile, instantaneous light

and shadow effects, only images created by deliberately arranged “trace” famous works and directly point to landscape paintings from the past. In the painting, the concept of landscape painting is completely deconstructed, and through the “impression” of the shadow, the image memory of the landscape painting is preserved, but waste and ready-made products that have nothing to do with the landscape unabashedly show their existence to the viewer. The painting pushes the viewers into a confrontation between ancient and contemporary, instant and eternal. Famous landscape paintings copied in the work are condensed into traditional landscape symbols, naturally evoking the viewer's overall reflection on the nature of landscape culture. However, “The Story Behind” does not further discuss the form and content of landscape painting. Its formal language is more of a reflection on the two in a contemporary capacity, so this work can be seen as a contemporary interpretation of the ancient concept of landscape and water, as well as a practical experiment in other media to express the image of landscape (Liu et al., 2024).



**Figure 1:** Xu Bing, “The Story Behind: Wide View of Trees,” UCCA Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, 2018

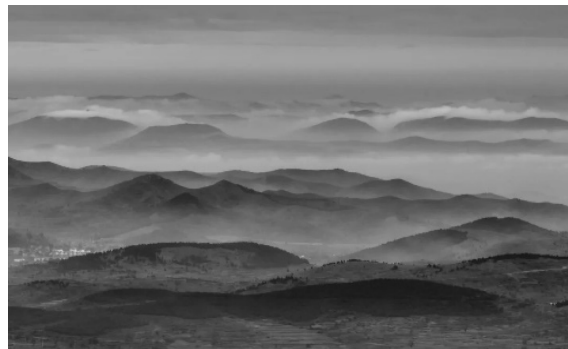


**Figure 2:** Xu Bing, “The Story Behind: Wide View of Trees,” UCCA Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, 2018

The “Perspective or Worldview: Landscape as Methodology” section of the “Proposal to Leonardo da Vinci” in the “Proposal to Leonardo da Vinci” Shanghai Science and Technology Art Exhibition had an in-



depth discussion on landscape culture and spirit. The works in the exhibition focused on image practice. The landscape in the images completely broken away from the old program and became a perspective and an attitude. The landscape represents a fixed time and space as an image in ancient paintings or images, and its biggest characteristic is that travelers from both ancient times and modern times can enter and understand it. The introduction to the exhibition mentions the “Rule of Three Distances” proposed by Guo Xi. Here, the “Three Distances” perspective is understood as a perspective of observation and expression centered on “me,” which surpasses Leonardo da Vinci's perspective with individual experience and sensibility. This kind of emphasis on the subject “me” and modeling imitates an unreal spiritual world on top of real images to inherit the ancient people's pursuit of unification of subject and object. This level of spiritual experience is known as the “Mountain Water Park” . It is a space where individuals can understand each other. Furthermore, through the “landscape theater,” that is, the strategy of performance of works, “individuals transcend and learn about culture of full meaning”. In Gao Shiqiang's nearly 15 minute image work “Dawn” (Figure 3), the endless mountains in reality are presented in a rolling form similar to a long roll through image means. Each frame is a scene, and it has the characteristics of multiple perspectives. The rolling peaks loom in smoke and fog, and the outline where fiction and reality intersect makes viewers connect the reality in the image with Wang Ximeng's “A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains” quoted in the introduction. What the viewer experiences is the perspective of ancient people experiencing landscape in the past, but at the same time, the artist is not shy about contemporary things in the image. In this kind of likeness and disguise, before creating this image endowed with eternal attributes, the contemporary viewer seems to be in the same time and space as the ancient painters (Pan, 2020).



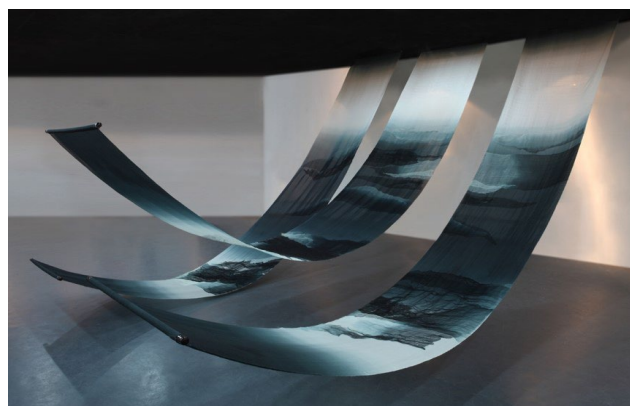
**Figure 3:** Gao Shiqiang, “Dawn” , image, Zhangjiang Science Hall, Shanghai, 2023

What needs to be further discussed is who will open the “Landscape Ashram” and “Landscape Theater”? Whose culture does the “culture of full meaning” belong to? The literati's monopoly on interpreting landscape water has been disintegrated, and landscape imagery is no longer linked to ethical principles. Although the landscape presented in “Dawn” has some connection with the ancient painting “A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains,” it has abandoned its old form and symbolic meaning, while in more works, atypical landscapes, or even just “landscapes,” are selected. If not intentional, it is difficult to link them to landscape themes. These landscapes are not part of the landscape symbol system, but rather have the attributes of personal experience. They first became an open object without any cultural barriers. The methodology of landscape, on the other hand, is the cultural belonging that the work finds for oneself. Landscape is only the perspective and method of entering the work, which determines at what level the viewer can resonate with the work. In exhibitions, the cultural attributes of landscape are often linked to the past and are related to the cultural heritage of the nation. The repeated assertion of the identity of “past,” “present,” and “future” suggests the powerful power of landscape symbolizing tradition. The reflection on history and context included in it is a reflection on history and context that cannot be ignored when translating current works. In much contemporary artistic practice, the status of a “symbol of the past” has been deeply imprinted in contemporary landscape images. Every time landscape reaffirms its contemporary identity, it includes reflection on the past, and amplifies the misalignment between ancient and contemporary landscape concepts. The above two examples start more from the identity of landscape in contemporary culture and do not touch on discussions on traditional forms and aesthetics of landscape. For the latter, fabrics focusing on formal design and innovation would be a better medium for translation.

#### 4. EXPRESSING LANDSCAPE WITH THE LANGUAGE OF FABRICS (DYEING, WEAVING, WEAVING)

The characteristics of fabric materials come from their most basic composition: the interlacing of meridians and parallels. Latitude and longitude lines can form a simple two-dimensional plane. On top of that, fabric patterns become an alternative to image patterns. At the same time,

woven lines can be seen as existing in three-dimensional space, making the work escape the limitations of two-dimensional plane expression. Therefore, fabric can not only be used as a new carrier for brush and ink programs of landscape painting, but landscape images can also be extracted from the original form and injected into the unique expression language of fabric. Dyeing is the coloring of fabrics. With the advancement of technology, new materials and processes have given fabrics a wider space and more possibilities in terms of color language. On flat two-dimensional fabrics, due to the similarity between “dyeing” and “painting,” the dyeing and weaving process can restore the texture of brush and ink as much as possible, or use differences in fabric material characteristics and process innovation to translate modern design language based on the formal characteristics of brush and ink. Li Wei's “Fresh, Distant, Tranquil” (Figure 4) is a hand-dyed painting using materials such as raw silk and water silk instead of paper and silk. The fabric is suspended in the air in the form of a scroll. The shape of the work all links it to the axis of landscape painting, yet its color and pen also present a contemporary landscape aesthetic interest. Li Xinyuan's tapestry “The Rhyme of Ink Painting” (Figure 5). The author uses fiber wool and reflective silk to present the temperature and oriental feelings of ink painting, and reproduces the changing rhythm of ink painting through precise control of the coloring and texture of the fabric. The pattern form of the work does not directly point to a specific landscape work or landscape image, but rather internalizes and translates the aesthetic interest in Chinese painting by imitating dark, dry, wet, white, false and real colors. This type of work all uses fabric as a carrier for landscape images and aesthetics, continuing and expanding the form of flat Chinese brush and ink, or mixed with modern and contemporary aesthetic orientations, forming the formal characteristics of contemporary landscapes.



**Figure 4:** Li Wei, “Fresh, Distant, Tranquil”, raw silk, water silk



**Figure 5:** Li Xinyuan's "The Rhyme of Ink Painting", wool fiber

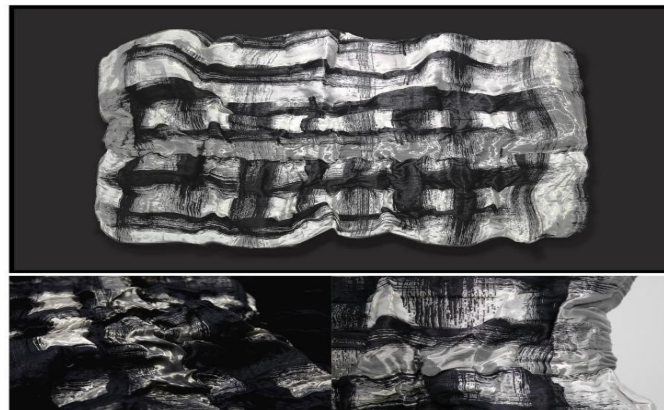
Jiang Tutu's "Ink Style" (Figure 6) mainly uses the weaving process to transform the fabric from flat to three-dimensional. The soft woven wire becomes voluminous, strong, and bendable. The entire work is woven from a single black silk thread, which stands out on the white wall behind it, like thick ink dotted on white paper. The fabric is entwined and stacked, like mountains, flying springs in the woods, and the trees are deep. The woven lines hanging along the outer edge of the work seem to announce that this is an unfinished work. It looks like a dead brush and ink. The hard work of Chinese painters is often seen in every stroke. To put it mildly, it only takes a moment to see the vividness of the whole painting. The work condenses the image of a landscape into one "point", making the viewer stray into the macro and micro of the landscape. The author did not borrow specific landscape images from past works, but instead refined the overall form presented in landscape painting. In the process of refinement and application, contemporary aesthetics and landscape concepts had a strong catalytic effect. Therefore, this work has quite a traditional landscape form, but the overall language is quite contemporary and innovative.



**Figure 6:** "Ink Style", composite yarn

In addition to the orientation of the concept of Chinese painting on the

work itself, in contemporary fabric design, the influence and effect of craftsmanship on the interpretation of the concept should not be underestimated. Li Xinyuan's "Touch of Ink" (Figure 7) reverses the smudge-like norm of ink painting, presents ink under a brush in a formatted straight line. The material texture of metal wire contrasts with the texture of ink traces, and presents a creative fiber fabric design. In the process, the wrinkling effect of metal fiber, and the innovation of the double-layer weaving process of metal fiber and reflective wire were also tested. In the wrinkle process, more two-dimensional visions protruding from landscape ink were tried to interpret the process materials and visual narratives of brush and ink in multiple latitudes. Rather than an experiment with ink painting in a new medium, it is better to think of it as a transformation of ink painting by the three-dimensional weaving process. Traditional landscape imagery and brush and ink procedures have been simplified to abstraction as symbols here. Viewers can recognize the interest of brush and ink through colors and patterns, but they are more attracted by the novel form of materials. For viewers, the brush and ink concept of old Chinese paintings is unwittingly interpreted.



**Figure 7:** "Touch of Ink", metal fiber

Because of their own characteristics, fabric design works focus more on the form and aesthetics of ancient landscapes. They use three-dimensional fabric techniques in experimental exploration and application of landscape themes. The design language and innovative ideas of fabrics make the elegant atmosphere of landscape better integrated into contemporary living spaces, thus highlighting the renewal of the media and the transformation of formal language, it reflects its contemporary nature.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The development of landscape painting in the traditional context is

complete and consistent. Landscape imagery is given value by literati and used by literati. Whether it is the Song Dynasty, which emphasized learning from nature, or the Ming and Qing dynasties that emphasized brush and ink technique, the “shape” and “reason” of landscape painting were perfectly integrated, and its aesthetic standards and ideals had always been influenced by orthodox values. Since the 20th century, the development of landscape painting has faced unprecedented challenges and changes. The complete context of the past has been interrupted, and the landscape painting itself has not yet been effectively reflected. The landscape image, which is regarded as a symbol of culture, has been removed from the painting carrier and entered into a wider range of art and design practices. Contemporary art and design works with the theme of landscape are not only an expression of the conceptual shift in landscape, but can also be a reflection on displacement. As a result, we found two translation paths. The first is the redesign of traditional forms of language. Traditional aesthetic values have been rediscovered, and the two may be interpreted side by side from the perspective of contemporary aesthetics. The second is a reflection on the position of landscape imagery itself within the cultural structure. “Displacement” became the object of reflection on the work. In creative design practice, landscape has always been restricted by its traditional symbolic meaning, thus bringing about a confrontation between ancient and modern identities. Therefore, the so-called transposition is a means that contemporary art practice cannot avoid using when touching on landscape subjects, or even traditional subjects similar to them. For viewers, consciously and unconsciously, transliteration transforms traditional subjects into things under the contemporary aesthetic system, so that these “traditions” no longer adhere to the past, but gradually construct their own context in the present.

## 6. PROJECT

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