

Integration of Folk Perspectives: Multidimensional Spatial Narrative in Farmer Paintings

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Abstract: Farmer paintings, as an important component of Chinese folk art, vividly exhibit the authentic features of rural life through their unique artistic techniques and spatial narrative methods, encapsulating profound historical memories and the veins of social change. This article will analyze the spatial composition characteristics of farmer paintings to explore how farmer painters embody the multidimensionality of rural life from a multi-integrated perspective, the reasons behind this perspective, and its underlying social functions and cultural significance. The aim is to provide a new perspective for the sustained development and preservation of folk art.

Keywords: Farmer paintings; Space; Multidimensional perspective; Creative techniques

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1. Introduction

Farmer paintings are an artistic form that emerged in rural China in the 1950s, with creators mostly being non-professional painters closely linked to agricultural labor, such as farmers and fishermen. The themes of these paintings often focus on rural scenery, festive celebrations, legendary stories, etc., depicting vivid and interesting images with distinctive local artistic characteristics and temporal traits in color, form, and composition layout. Early farmer paintings played a role in promoting new socialist customs and values. As times changed, individuals from diverse backgrounds, including students, cultural station workers, art teachers, and professional painters, also participated, contributing to teaching, assistance, and exchanges ^[1]. In recent years, the themes of farmer paintings have become increasingly diverse and all-encompassing, giving rise to intangible cultural heritage such as Shanghai Jinshan Farmer Paintings, Shaanxi Huzhao Farmer Paintings, and Jilin Dongfeng Farmer Paintings. Their artistic charm has also received international recognition and praise, yet the profound connotations and value of farmer paintings still await promotion and popularization. Modern aesthete Mr. Zong Baihua believed that “the difference in the sense of space expresses the different worldviews and deepest understandings of life among different nations, times, and classes, based on different economic foundations and social conditions” ^[2]. Space is the most primary relationship between humans and the world. Exploring the spatial characteristics of farmer paintings, analyzing

and understanding the creative perspectives of farmer painters, and interpreting the rural sentiments contained within the paintings are conducive to enhancing rural aesthetic value, strengthening rural cultural confidence, advancing rural revitalization, and promoting the revitalization of rural culture.

2. Knowing and Seeing: the multi-dimensional space in farmer paintings

Farmer paintings represent artists' most direct and pure artistic expression of nature and life, overturning traditional painting perspective concepts and presenting an aesthetic style as naive as that of a child. The paintings create a multi-dimensional space where freedom and order, time and space, objective objects, and inner emotions intertwine.

2.1. Spatial experience beyond traditional perspective

French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty believed that painting is not merely a reproduction of the external world but an expression of the artist's direct experience of the world, not a simple replication of reality^[3]. The farmer painting *Spring Festival* depicts the scene of villagers celebrating the Chinese New Year amidst snowfall (**Figure 1**). The painting is diverse in characters and actions, with activities such as lion dancing, snowman building, visiting neighbors, and wedding processions vividly presented in the same space, offering a panoramic view of the village's liveliest scenes. Thatched cottages, residences, and pavilions are not obscured by each other, and regardless of distance, the sizes of the figures are similar, with depictions from top-down, side, and bottom-up perspectives^[4].



Figure 1. "Spring Festival" by Lu Jingnong.

The reasons for this are twofold: first, farmer painters often lack formal artistic training and are not familiar with perspective rules. Second, creators tend to integrate their knowledge and observations into their paintings comprehensively in an artistic form. Specifically, farmer painters rely on their feelings and bold imagination. Even without professional perspective skills, they can hint at the depth and hierarchy of space through changes in color, lines, and patterns. Whatever they wish to express can be included in the painting, unaffected by obstructions or other physical conditions in the real world. This expression reflects the farmer painters' instinctive

understanding of spatial structure, which is the core of farmer paintings.

Farmer paintings typically reflect the creators' bodily experiences and daily life scenes. Wang Bingxiu, a 90-year-old farmer-painter who picked up a brush at the age of 78, showcases the scenery of a countryside courtyard in Dali in her work *Mountain Households* (**Figure 2**). She incorporates life experiences such as plowing, feeding chickens, paper-cutting, and embroidery into the painting. The figures, animals, plants, rockeries, and the path in front of the houses all appear in unexpected and delightful perspectives. The bold and intense use of color, flat modeling, and embellishments of Bai ethnic traditional patterns all embody her observations and thoughts. The same spatial perspective is evident in the farmer painting *Our Village* (**Figure 3**). The character designs may seem absurd, but are the painter's true capture and childlike interpretation of object features. Two eyes fully depicted indicate that the figure is facing front, while when the figure is in profile, only one eye enters the creator's field of vision, hence indicated by a single eye. Fields of melons and grapes, rural paths, streams, and houses are not constrained by professional painting or logical life constraints but are harmoniously and orderly arranged in the painting in a layered, nested manner, creating a soul-stirring spatial experience.



Figure 2. "Mountain Households" by Wang Bingxiu.



Figure 3. "Our Village" by Hua Yuexiu.

2.2. Dynamic and fluid multiple perspectives

Farmer paintings are created based on a dynamic and fluid multiple perspective, and their rich visual and intuitive spatial experiences are inseparable from the farmer painters' emphasis on the cultural concept of "completeness" and the integration of their rich perceptions of the living environment. The farmer painting *New Year Greeting New Guests* depicts a group of variously shaped still lifes, with vases, teacups, and wine goblets appearing in the

painting from a side view, while pastries, fruit platters, and dishes holding tea sets are depicted from a top-down perspective (**Figure 4**). This interlaced use of perspectives not only shows the creator's intuitive impression of this group of still lifes but also reflects the richness and diversity of rural life scenes. The farmer painting *The Everlasting Sun* depicts the sun and moon, which should not appear at the same time (**Figure 5**). The painter cleverly integrates multiple perspectives, scenes from different times, and people's activities into the same painting. The lively courtyard, the river where fishermen row, the bustling opposite shore, etc., have no clear boundaries between spaces. This artistic technique highlights the intentional expression in Eastern art that pursues the integration of subject and object^[5]. The lifestyle concept of "working when the sun rises and resting when the sun sets" is embodied within it. Because farmer painters' observations of the world are not preset, single, or static perspectives but rather incorporate experience, association, contemplation, and refinement, multiple perspectives imply the occurrence of actions or the passage of time, infusing movement into static paintings. At this moment, time and space can be freely converted within the painting.

The use of multiple perspectives can stimulate a dialogue among viewers, the painting itself, and the creator. Farmer paintings break the limitations of geometric space rules, and the creative viewpoints are flexible and changeable. When viewers appreciate farmer paintings, their gaze can wander through different spaces, equivalent to entering a multi-dimensional open field, and an interaction is established. This interaction can inspire viewers' imagination and resonance, guiding them to experience and interpret the pastoral poems depicted by the creator through the creator's perspective.



Figure 4. "New Year Greeting New Guests" by Xu Xiaoxing.



Figure 5. "The Everlasting Sun" by Lu Zhuoyan.

2.3. Expression of emotion and imagination

Farmer paintings, as an artistic form rooted in the fertile soil of the countryside, showcase the abundant emotions and boundless imagination of farmer artists. Influenced by Post-Impressionist painter Paul Cézanne, Cubism believes that space can not only reflect the objective real world but also create the artist's inner subjective world. Farmer painters draw inspiration from tilling and hard work in the fields, and their paintings usually contain respect for the earth and beautiful fantasies about life. Painter Wang Bingxiu loves to depict traditional Bai ethnic dwellings and costumes, camellias commonly seen in Dali, chickens, ducks, and other small animals, and even incorporates mythical phoenixes into her paintings. Zhuo Liping's *Spring Cow Tillage Scene* is colorful and joyful, with natural forms, using imagination and memory to intertwine and present a spring plowing scene of

flying yellow cows and swallows, snowy pear blossoms, dogs accompanying, children playing, and harmonious families from twenty years ago. Happiness leaps off the paper. It is worth mentioning that this work was printed on coffee cups, integrating traditional art into modern life and bringing original ecological spring vitality to the city. These farmer painters may not be eloquent, but they record their attitudes toward life, spiritual pursuits, and ideals in a simple and romantic artistic manner.

3. Comparison and extension: the real perspective in Western art

In terms of artistic expression, despite being situated in different historical periods, possessing disparate cultural backgrounds, and exhibiting varied visual styles, farmer paintings and Western paintings share a creative thinking that transcends linear perspective. This can also be found in ancient Egyptian murals and Western Cubist works ^[6], where these pieces do not confine themselves to conventional single visual foci. Instead, they create images with decorative beauty, depth, and integrity by integrating multiple perspectives. Merleau-Ponty describes this as a “perspective of perception,” reflecting artists’ unique perception and reconstruction of the real world ^[7].

For instance, the ancient Egyptian mural *The Garden of Nebamon* combines both overhead and eye-level perspectives. The overhead perspective is used to showcase the panorama of the pool, while the eye-level perspective facilitates a detailed portrayal of the trees. The artist did not adopt a direct imitation of reality but believed that each element should be presented from the angle that best highlights its features ^[8]. Due to religious, cultural, and artistic traditional expression needs, ancient Egyptian artists often flexibly shifted perspectives during creation, unifying images observed from multiple perspectives into the same painting to ensure a “true expression” that allows every object to be recognized by viewers ^[9]. Spanish artist Pablo Picasso’s paintings during his Cubist period also express an instinctive and primitive artistic pursuit. Works such as *Guernica* subvert traditional perspective expression, with the composition reassembled from multiple perspectives, delivering an extremely powerful visual impact ^[10]. These creative approaches that seek “reality” share similarities with farmer paintings, both emphasizing an intuitive grasp of the external world and integrating it with the creators’ inner emotions, thereby shaping a unique multidimensional spatial expression form that transcends reality yet remains closely connected to it ^[11].

4. Preservation and inheritance: the cultural significance behind multiple perspectives

As time evolves, farmer paintings continue to bloom with new vitality in self-innovation, with their painting language and expression techniques constantly deepening and maturing. Farmer painters across the country, rooted in their local regional characteristics, have nurtured diverse and distinctive farmer painting styles ^[12]. Despite increasingly varied creation methods, what flows through each painting remains the purity and sincerity originating from the folks. This perseverance and original aspiration towards the countryside serve as the continuous driving force behind farmer paintings ^[13].

Farmer paintings are not only emotional bonds between farmer painters and their homeland, but also carry the farmer community’s exploration and identification of their own culture. They are also vivid symbols showcasing cultural and national confidence ^[14]. The spatial layout and artistic expression techniques employing multiple perspectives in farmer paintings profoundly reflect the wisdom and philosophy of “harmony and

coexistence” in Chinese traditional culture. The beauty of farmer paintings lies in the vast labor force’s love for life. Through the canvas, viewers can almost journey to that space echoing with rustic sounds, breathe in the scent of the earth, savor the sweetness of fruits, listen to the wind rustling through the fields, and immerse themselves in the tranquility under the moonlight. In the current strategic context of rural revitalization, we should cherish and preserve this unique folk perspective, actively expand the development paths of farmer paintings, and encourage cross-sector collaborations between farmer paintings and education, media, technology, and other fields. This will promote the prosperity of rural culture and safeguard national memory and innovativeness^[15].

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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