

# A Brief Analysis of Blank Space in Ancient Chinese Hand-scroll Paintings from the Perspective of Reception Aesthetics

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**Abstract:** *Reception aesthetics emphasizes the comprehensive role of multiple functions of works. For ancient Chinese hand-scroll paintings, blank space in the picture also reflects such an aesthetic principle. Blank space not only has a specific aesthetic image in the picture, but also is a summoning structure when appreciating the picture. This structure provides the viewer with the possibility of imagination and secondary creation. For this reason, ancient hand-scroll paintings not only need the beauty of blank space in the construction of the body of the painting, but also have similar structural functions in the mounting of hand-scroll paintings. This article conducts a relatively in-depth analysis.*

**Keywords:** Blank, Chinese hand scroll painting, Aesthetic of reception.

## 1. Introduction

Reception aesthetics is also a reception theory. As early as the late 1960s, Hans Robert Jauss of the Federal Republic of Germany proposed that reception aesthetics become an independent school in his "Literary History as a Challenge of Literary Science". His theory is mainly a new theoretical form advocated in the field of literature that creation and reading jointly construct the meaning of the work. The characteristic of this theory is that the educational function and entertainment function of the work must be realized in the reader's reading, and this process is the process of the work gaining vitality and final completion. It can be inferred that this is not only true for literary works, but also for Chinese hand scrolls.

## 2. Function and Aesthetic Significance of Blank Space

Blank space is a new vocabulary in the theory of modern Western reception aesthetics, and it is also a new research object and category. The theory of "blank space" has a relatively clear formation and development process in the West. After Ingarden proposed it, it was interpreted and developed by Iser, a representative of reception aesthetics, making "blank space" one of the important theories in Western literary theory. The term "blank space" also appeared in ancient Chinese literary theory and art theory, but in ancient literary theory, "blank space" was not clearly expressed as a concept and category in literary theory, but "empty" or "white" was used unconsciously in literary theory, and "blank space" was mostly used unconsciously, and no clear theoretical system about "blank space" was formed. In ancient literary theory and artistic creation, "blank space" as a general interpretation was relatively scattered, and it was often effectively used in artistic creation, forming a strong "blank space" artistic theoretical consciousness, and thus forming a "blank space" aesthetic form. In many literary theories, there are many words that are similar to the context of "blank". Concepts such as artistic conception, charm, and wonderful enlightenment are related to the word "blank". For example, categories such as virtuality, emptiness, and hidden beauty are

closely related to "blank" in terms of connotation. In short, "blank" is a very important concept and category in literary theory and creation, and it also exists as one of the universal forms of Chinese classical aesthetics. To study or explore the function and aesthetic significance of "blank", it is necessary to sort out and outline the concept and category of "blank", as well as the origin and process of its formation and development.

In the creation of Chinese painting, "blank" is mainly the blank space in the composition of the picture, which is a common technique in Chinese painting creation. The beauty of this technique is that it is widely used by painters from ancient times to the present. It not only plays a certain role in visual aesthetics, but also plays a very important role in the construction of the artistic conception of the picture. For painters, blank space or blank space mainly refers to the place where there is no ink and color, which can specifically refer to the sky, clouds, waters, etc. For the audience, blank space is the need for visual aesthetic experience full of rhythm and contrast, which can not only let the vision relax and wander in it, but also let the imagination run wild. It can be seen that blank space not only plays an important role in the setting and shaping of the character environment in the creation of figure painting, but also becomes a technique and theory of painting creation, which has played a very important role in the creation of Chinese paintings in the past dynasties. Huang Gongwang's ink landscape hand scroll "Fuchun Mountain Residence" in the Yuan Dynasty also uses blank space as the main expression technique for the expression of the sky and the depiction of the water. In fact, blank space makes the virtual and real relationship more prominent and the visual effect more significant. From this, it can be understood that "virtual" means "no painting" and refers to the blank space or blank space in the painting, and "real" refers to the objects or images expressed by pen and ink. This obviously emphasizes the function of blank space in the painting and the beauty of visual aesthetics.

In terms of the context of accepting aesthetics, there is an expectation psychological process for the appreciation of paintings by viewers, and this expectation occurs in the stage

before appreciating the works. The subject of appreciation will make a prejudgment of the work based on his or her personal cultural accomplishment, hobbies, aesthetic mind, etc. Prejudgment and appreciation will lead to deviations. Prejudgment will exceed the artistic conception and style of the work itself, or it will be lower than the style of the work. This will not form an effective or valuable appreciation activity, which is inconsistent with the theoretical viewpoint of aesthetic acceptance. In any case, everyone will be affected by this kind of prejudgment, or complete the interpretation and appreciation of the work in their own prejudgment, thus forming an expectation perspective. Art theorist Jaus proposed: "Expected horizons can be understood from two dimensions. One is the horizon and attributes of the work itself from the perspective of the work, that is, the basic attributes such as the time of creation of the work or the background of the era of the theme it reflects; the other is from the viewer. The different cultural backgrounds, understanding abilities, aesthetic characteristics, and subjective consciousness of the viewer will present different horizons and angles, which together constitute the viewer's expected variables." [1] Whether it is the perspective of the creator or the expected horizon of the viewer, both are full of uncertain expectations for the work. This uncertainty is not only the mysterious factor that the work needs to consider, but also the ethereal realm that the work can construct in the process of creation. This is not only a structural requirement of the work, but also the artistic charm that the work itself can demonstrate.

### 3. The Summoning Structure in Hand Scrolls

Although the blank space or blank space in Chinese paintings does not seem to have any artistic image or recognizable image, it basically does not attract attention when appreciating or looking at it casually, and is often ignored. In fact, this part is a very important part for the creation and appreciation of Chinese paintings. It is not only inevitably related to the composition of the creation, but also a summoning structure in the creation and appreciation of Chinese paintings. Although art appreciation is a kind of integrated artistic image as a whole, the image or artistic conception is not without its own structure. Image and artistic conception are the carriers and results of aesthetics, but in the process of constructing the whole, especially between the creator and the appreciator, such a call structure still exists. German reception aesthetician Wolfgang Iser put forward his own view on reception aesthetics: "The gaps in the structure of an artwork are not defects or deficiencies in the creation, but can give the viewer the opportunity and space to participate in the work. Many of the aesthetic values of the work are reflected with the help of these gaps." [2] The "gap" discussed in the article actually refers to the "blank" or "white space" in Chinese painting creation. The gaps in the painting are not defects or incompleteness, but the careful arrangement and design of the painter. It is an indispensable and important structure for the artistic conception of the picture. This is the core view of the call structure theory, which emphasizes that the gaps or blanks in the work are an open structural feature. For the appreciator or recipient, this structural feature can make up for or fill the gaps and blanks through imagination and re-creation in the process of appreciation or acceptance.

In the Tang and Song dynasties, the two coexisting forms of

expression were color painting and ink painting, but the color painting still dominated the flower and bird paintings. The "Ink and Wash Sketches" by Fachang Monk is a relatively rare ink and wash freehand flower and bird hand scroll in the Song Dynasty. Not only that, he also set a precedent for the creation of freehand flower and bird paintings after the Song Dynasty. From the perspective of the summoning structure in the theory of aesthetics, this ink and wash freehand flower and bird painting is examined. Fruits and vegetables, flowers, trees, birds, fish and crabs are painted in the hand scroll. The fruits and vegetables are: pomegranates, peaches, pears, loquats, radishes, and eggplants. Each fruit and vegetable is placed in isolation and has no connection with each other. The surroundings of the fruits and vegetables are composed by leaving blanks or in the form of vacancies. For the audience, the blank space will naturally remind them of the soil, vegetable beds, fences, water and fertilizers that are closely related to these fruits and vegetables. This may also be a problem that the painter considered when creating. Birds include swallows, magpies, magpie pigeons, and red-crested ducks. Some of these birds are flying, some are still, and their postures are different. The swallows stand on the rocks, and the red-crested ducks squat on the water bank. The surrounding environment is very simple, and a large area of blank space is used to deal with it. From the perspective of composition, the mutual relationship between the objects and the coherent construction of the artistic conception of the picture are omitted. Such a composition seems to be incomplete or split. In fact, this is also a vacant structural form. This also forms a summoning structure, which allows the audience to continue the creation of the picture in the incomplete and incomplete structure. This process is continuous and varies from person to person. Those who like the nature of birds will naturally think of the soaring sky and open waters. Aquatic animals include fish, shrimps, and crabs. These are the most common creatures in the water and are closely related to human life. The performance of aquatic animals is also a large area of blank space, or it remains blank in the composition. The beauty of this is that it not only leaves space for the audience to imagine and think, but the blank space in the painting is an endless water area. Water and sky are inseparable. In Chinese painting, water and sky can also be expressed by leaving blank space. Leaving blank space not only omits complex arrangement of objects in structure, but also maintains infinite possibilities in space processing. Therefore, only the absence or blank space can give people the feeling of infinite water and sky, which has brought new inspiration to the creation of flower and bird paintings after the Song Dynasty, and has also become a precedent for the creation of flower and bird paintings in the Ming and Qing Dynasties and even in modern times.

Zhao Chang's "Sketch of Butterflies" in the Song Dynasty is another example of summoning structure. This work depicts the scene of butterflies flying and loving flowers. The butterflies are different in posture and color, and the flowers and weeds together construct a pastoral scene, which is different from the "Ink Sketch Scroll" by the monk Fachang.

From the composition of the picture, the picture is divided into two parts, the ground is the pastoral scenery, and the sky is blank space. Three butterflies of different heights are drawn between the sky and the pastoral. Although the ground is static,

there are also several dynamic grasshoppers in the flowers. From the picture, we can see that Zhao Chang is very keen and interesting in observing life in his sketches. From the performance of the objects in the painting, the painter uses the double-hook filling method to draw the soil slope, grass, and butterfly at the bottom. The hook line is rich in changes of thickness and thickness, and the ink and color are also divided into light and dark. The color is applied in multiple layers, especially the wings of the butterfly are repeatedly dyed, which looks thick and gorgeous. The leaves of the plants on the ground are relatively light in color, which forms a contrast with the butterfly in terms of thickness and lightness, and also highlights the beauty of the butterfly's dynamic posture. From the denseness of the slope and the blankness of the sky, the audience will naturally associate with the vacancy or blank, further releasing their imagination. In the process of imagination, it is free and unrestrained, which can not only summon the desired objects in the heart, but also create images related to the picture. In short, Zhao Chang's "Sketch of Butterflies" is an exploration of the painting scene and vitality from nature. Sketching refers to both writing vitality and describing living things in nature. This is a vivid capture of the painter's communication and interaction with nature, and it is also the vitality of nature that calls on the painter's talent and talent. Since then, whether it is butterflies in love with flowers or flowers in love with butterflies, they have become classic themes in the creation of flower and bird paintings in later generations. This is not only the charm of nature's call, but also a clear evidence of the long-term dependence between art and nature.

#### 4. Audience Participation and Interaction

For the painter, the blank space in the painting is not an escape, labor-saving and meaningless, but a special grammatical structure of creation. The special feature of this structure is the wonderful use of blank space. The painter uses a few strokes to sketch out an artwork with "blank space". The blank space in the work is not meaningless, but connects the scenery, allowing the appreciator to actively participate in it, thereby stimulating the appreciator's imagination. The "blank space" becomes a call and shout to the appreciator, and even a wake-up in a sense. The appreciator consciously accepts the invitation, and thus wanders in the "blank space" between the aesthetic objects in the painting, enters the situation constructed by the painter, realizes the wonder and charm of the work, and appreciates the deeper meaning of the work, thus entering a kind of artistic conception that embodies the "blank space" aesthetics, and the value of the artwork is thus realized.

The blank space or blank space in the work becomes a meaningful composition need for the picture, and also becomes a visual need for the appreciator. When the appreciator looks at a painting, he or she has a need in his or her heart to find the meaning in the painting, or to verify his or her own experience and cognition in the painting, or even to communicate and interact with the painting. Appreciating a painting is a silent communication in itself, from visual to inner communication. Such communication is not passive, nor does the painting actively bring something to the appreciator, but there is also interaction and collision between the appreciator and the painting. The generation of this interaction

and collision is related to the image of the picture, the structure of the painting environment, and the vacancy or blank space in the painting.

If a painting is too perfect, or the composition is too full and perfect, although the appreciator also looks at it with an appreciative eye, the possibility of re-creation and interaction will be less, which seems to be a relativist assertion. When appreciating a painting, although the appreciator participates in the re-creation of the painting to varying degrees, in short, it is participating in the interaction, but the effects and differences of different paintings are very different. Take hand scrolls as an example. In the mounting structure of hand scrolls, two relatively large blank spaces have been reserved for the lead and the tail. Although this blank space is separated from the center of the painting, it does not block the appreciation process. On the contrary, the appreciation of the picture can still be interactive. Hand scrolls were more common in the Ming Dynasty, and the painting styles also involved two categories: meticulous and freehand. Take the hand scroll created by Chen Chun as an example. Its expression method is freehand ink painting, which belongs to the style of small freehand painting. Chen Chun used ink to paint eight kinds of plants and flowers, such as peony branches, lotus, and daylily. Each flower is in an isolated state, which has a common origin with the "Ink Sketch Scroll" by Fachang Monk. Although each of Chen Chun's ink flower paintings is isolated, each one has a poem. From the hand scrolls, it can be seen that Chen Chun's cultivation in the three aspects of poetry, calligraphy and painting is relatively comprehensive. It can be seen that for the audience, there will be more possibilities for interaction. When viewing this hand scroll, the audience can interact from the three aspects of poetry, calligraphy and painting. At the same time, because each flower is in an isolated environment, there are relatively many blank spaces on the screen, which naturally gives people a sense of emptiness. The blank space of the hand scroll is an opportunity for the audience to interact, and it is also a bridge for interaction. The inscriptions at the tail of the hand scroll are an important manifestation of the audience's participation in interaction, and it has also become one of the important bases for enhancing the artistic value of the painting. In a sense, the artistic value of a painting lies not only in the talent of the artist, but also in the participation of the acquired audience. The consensus of the audience group becomes the basis of the value of the artwork, and the opportunity to participate in the interaction lies not only in the appeal of the image in the painting, but also in the beauty of the vacancy and blank space in the painting. The beauty of the creation of hand scrolls lies in the setting of the blank space on the screen, and also in the design of the decorative structure of the hand scroll, which brings many possibilities to the creation and development of hand scrolls.

Some researchers have argued that blank space is a bridge for the audience and the creator to achieve emotional resonance, and is also a way to enrich the connotation and meaning of the work. It cannot be arranged arbitrarily during the creative process. The selection of its position and the division of its size all require the creator to think carefully. The artistic conception created by blank space cannot be expressed by brush and ink and color. This unlimited blank space is a means to extend the artistic conception. If creators want to give full

play to the summoning function of blank space, they must improve their own creative level. They must not only have a clear understanding of blank space, but also learn to do subtraction in the picture. On the basis of being able to grasp the overall artistic conception of the picture, they should use blank space appropriately, so that when the audience appreciates the artwork, they can not only feel the true emotions of the creator, but also form unique insights into the work according to their own situation, and achieve true emotional resonance [3]. From this, we can know that in the process of participating in the interaction, the audience needs the picture to be uncertain in form, that is, there should be gaps or blanks in the visual sense. This is the entry point for the audience to interact and the condition for completing the re-creation of the picture. The inscriptions and supplementary poems in the hand scrolls are not only witnesses of the interaction between the appreciators, but also important documents for interpreting the scrolls, and even more so a symbol of the aesthetic memory of the scrolls.

## References

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