

# A Comparative Study on the Aesthetics of Grey Tones in Morandi's Paintings and Suzhou Gardens from a Cross-Cultural Perspective

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**Abstract:** This paper uses “grey tone aesthetics” as the core thread to explore the intrinsic connection between the 20th-century Italian painter Giorgio Morandi's works and Suzhou Gardens in terms of their grey tone color systems and cultural contexts. By comparing the low-saturation tones in Morandi's paintings with the “pursuit of elegance and avoidance of vulgarity” in the color composition of Suzhou Gardens, the study reveals their resonance in aesthetic concepts and values. The analysis shows that “grey tone aesthetics” can serve as a bridge for cross-temporal and cross-regional communication between East and West, providing new ideas and practical value for contemporary cross-cultural aesthetic research.

**Keywords:** Grey tone aesthetics, Morandi, Suzhou Gardens.

## 1. Introduction

The 20th-century Italian painter Giorgio Morandi is renowned for his unique use of grey tones. His works feature low-saturation neutral colors and a restrained, simple visual language that creates a quiet and profound artistic atmosphere. Morandi's color aesthetics, through restrained and harmonious grey combinations, demonstrate an aesthetic universality that transcends regional cultures, resonating with the subtlety and elegance concepts found in Eastern traditional aesthetics.

Suzhou Gardens, as a representative of classical Chinese garden art, follow the principle of “pursuing elegance and avoiding vulgarity” in their color design. Using low-saturation tones such as bluish-grey stone slabs, grey-red corridor pillars, pale ochre rockeries, and bluish water pools, the gardens construct a restrained and gentle visual atmosphere. This neutral grey-dominated color scheme shows significant similarity in aesthetic expression to Morandi's color palette, both emphasizing harmony, subtlety, and tranquility of color.

In recent years, academia has begun to pay attention to the connections between Morandi's paintings and Eastern aesthetics. For instance, Qingyan Sun [1] explored Eastern philosophical implications in Morandi's works; Yanxia Zhang and Li Li [2] analyzed the commonality of grey tones in Eastern and Western oil painting; Xiaopeng Fan [3] studied the connection between Morandi's art and Eastern artistic sensibilities; and Ziang Tian [4] discussed the alignment of Morandi's painting style with Eastern aesthetics. However, there has been little research on the integration of Morandi's color system with that of Suzhou Gardens.

Based on this, this study proposes the concept of “grey tone aesthetics” to analyze the internal connections between Morandi's color palette and Suzhou Gardens from three levels: color deconstruction, cultural translation, and aesthetic value, revealing their cross-temporal and cross-regional aesthetic resonance, and providing new theoretical perspectives for East-West artistic integration research.

## 2. Color Deconstruction

Morandi's works are dominated by low-saturation neutral greys. Through subtle variations in brightness and hue—such as grey-white, grey-blue, and grey-ochre—he constructs a tranquil spatial feeling. In Figure 1, a still life oil painting created by Morandi in 1956, cold greys dominate the composition, including light grey, middle grey, cool blue-grey, and purple-grey. The painting lacks pure grey or white, using delicate tonal changes within a narrow grey spectrum.

While cool greys predominate, a warm yellow bottle on the left becomes a focal point, enhancing the visual layers. The careful control of color saturation ensures each object blends harmoniously into the whole, resulting in a cool, elegant, and serene visual effect.



**Figure 1:** Natura morta (Still Life), 1954 V.919 Oil on canvas, 35×41cm [5]

Suzhou Gardens, by relying on natural tones such as bluish-grey stone slabs, pale ochre rockeries, and grey-red corridor pillars, form a unified and restrained visual hierarchy. Like Morandi's paintings, Suzhou Gardens achieve overall balance by reducing color purity and emphasizing neutral grey transitions. In Figure 2, a pavilion corner in the Couple's Retreat Garden displays harmony between the structure, foliage, and rockeries. The soft plant colors and warm wooden tones of the corridor create a subtle and quiet atmosphere. In the background, white walls and rock formations in muted lime and beige tones add visual depth while evoking a sense of timeless stillness.

Both Morandi's use of grey tones in still life and Suzhou Gardens' delicate color coordination embody the aesthetic principle of "pursuing elegance and avoiding vulgarity." These low-saturation combinations create a sense of tranquility, refinement, and elegance. Despite different cultural contexts and media, both reflect similar aesthetic consciousness.



**Figure 2:** A Corner of the Couple's Retreat Garden (photographed by the author)

### 3. Cultural Translation: Intertextuality Between Eastern and Western Aesthetic Concepts

Morandi's works often exude simplicity and serenity. The grey tones in his works carry symbolic meanings. Yeshe Wei [5] examined the core element of "structure" in Morandi's visual language, arguing that form and color convey spiritual content and that artists must develop a unique language through inheritance and innovation.

Morandi's painting technique aligns closely with Chinese Chan (Zen) painting aesthetics. His seemingly casual brushstrokes generate a lively, spiritual ambiance, reflecting artistic concepts like "intention precedes form" and "harmony with nature" [6]. Excellent artworks often carry deep spiritual pursuits and aesthetic concerns. Morandi abstracts, reorganizes, and arranges everyday objects, endowing them with a new presence that exudes calm and elegant artistic temperament. Yaoze Liu [7] pointed out that Morandi's brushwork reveals a flavor and beauty akin to traditional Chinese painting, using concise strokes to express subtle emotions—an idea aligned with Chinese aesthetics. This near-Eastern aesthetic transforms still life into spiritual symbols that transcend physical representation.

The grey tone in Suzhou Gardens stems from traditional Chinese ink-based aesthetics that favor subtlety over flamboyance. It reflects Daoist ideals of "natural non-action" and Confucian harmony. The quiet and ethereal feel of Suzhou Gardens stems from careful construction of artistic conception. Cheng Chen [8] emphasized that the beauty of grey in these gardens comes not only from visual style but from the Jiangnan literati's "reclusive" cultural spirit. Through subtle colors, the gardens express detachment and a return to simplicity, echoing deep philosophical ideals.

According to Hu Deng [9], garden aesthetics are rooted in the

principle of "unity between man and nature." Plants such as plum blossoms, orchids, bamboo, and chrysanthemums symbolize virtuous character, while the integration of architecture and nature allows visitors to experience the ancient literati's spiritual quest for seclusion and peace.

Morandi's minimalist compositions and restrained grey tones embody a spiritual aspiration that transcends physical forms, echoing Zen ideas of "emptiness," "coldness," and "non-action." Suzhou Gardens express humanistic spirit through natural forms, embracing "ink first" aesthetics and the pursuit of seclusion and humility. Though their forms differ, both share an intertextual spiritual essence across East and West.

### 4. Aesthetic Value: The Universality and Contemporary Significance of Grey Tones

Aesthetic value is the synthesis of the preceding levels and explores the broader cross-cultural significance of grey tone aesthetics. The shared use of grey tones in Morandi's paintings and Suzhou Gardens shows that low-saturation palettes not only reduce visual conflict but also evoke introspection and emotional calm. This effect transcends historical or stylistic boundaries.

In contemporary design, grey tone strategies derived from these sources are widely used, such as in tea packaging using Morandi colors or in contemporary ceramics. This validates the universal aesthetic value of grey tones.

In a rapidly developing world, human perception is constantly overstimulated. Anlin Fan [10] argued that grey tones express a sense of time and space, weakening overstimulation and bringing rational and poetic calm. In Eastern cultures, grey emphasizes restraint and gentleness, evoking emotions and influencing mood. Grey tones serve as a counterbalance to agitation, helping individuals refocus on inner essence. This paper proposes that the core of grey tone aesthetics lies in "richness within restraint," both purifying the material world and expanding the spiritual realm—offering a methodological reference for artistic innovation in the global era.

### 5. Conclusion

This paper explores the intrinsic connections between Giorgio Morandi's paintings and Suzhou Gardens through the lens of "grey tone aesthetics," analyzing their approaches to color deconstruction, cultural translation, and aesthetic value. Despite differing cultural contexts and forms, both express remarkably similar aesthetic ideals such as "pursuing elegance and avoiding vulgarity" and "tranquility leading to depth."

Their resonance in color and artistic conception demonstrates a profound aesthetic link between Eastern and Western philosophies. This paper fills a research gap on the grey tone systems of Morandi and Suzhou Gardens and opens new pathways for contemporary cross-cultural design and spatial aesthetics.

While the study of "grey tone aesthetics" is still in its early stages, its growing application in fields such as contemporary

art, architecture, and urban space suggests vast potential. Introducing this concept into broader interdisciplinary contexts may extend its theoretical reach and practical value.

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