

THE FUSION OF CONTEMPORARY FREEHAND FLOWER-AND-BIRD PAINTING AND ZEN THOUGHT: AN AESTHETIC AND PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract: Our analysis examined the creative process of contemporary freehand flower-and-bird painters, exploring how Zen thought influences their work. Interviews with artists revealed a deep connection to nature, emphasizing its beauty, impermanence, and interconnectedness. This theme translated into their subject matter, with a focus on natural elements like birds, flowers, and bamboo. Symbolism was also employed, incorporating elements with specific Zen meanings, such as bamboo representing resilience and the cherry blossom symbolizing impermanence. Interestingly, artists avoided imbuing their subjects with human emotions, respecting the inherent life force of nature in line with Zen philosophy. The concept of Zen aesthetics also played a significant role. Artists highlighted the importance of negative space in their paintings, reflecting Zen's concept of "emptiness" and inviting viewers to contemplate the relationship between subject and space. Muted colours were favoured, creating a sense of peace and harmony with nature, reminiscent of a Zen Garden. Additionally, asymmetry and imperfections were intentionally embraced to embody wabi-sabi, a core principle of Zen aesthetics that celebrates beauty in imperfection.

Keywords: Zen Aesthetics, Freehand, Flower and Bird Painting, Philosophy and Arts

1. INTRODUCTION

Flower-and-bird painting holds a significant place in artistic traditions, not only as a form but also as a means for artistic expression (Zhang, 2020; Zhang et al., 2021). This genre thrives on the emotional connection established between the artist and the viewer. Through their portrayal of realistic subjects, artists infuse their works with personal emotions, aiming to evoke a corresponding response in the viewer. This emotional resonance ultimately enhances the vitality and artistic value of the paintings. "Freehand brushwork," a technique unique to Chinese art, emphasizes the artist's subjective experience (Ou-Yang & Ling, 2020). It involves the use of abstract brushstrokes and ink washes to capture not just the objective form of the subject, but

also the artist's own ideological and stylistic essence. This approach is a way for the artist to express their inner world, their "spirituality" as the text puts it. Upon its introduction to China, flower-and-bird painting did not simply replicate existing styles. Inevitably, it was influenced by the dominant tradition of Chinese landscape painting (Liu, 2017). The emphasis on freehand brushwork, central to Chinese landscape painting since the Five Dynasties period, had a profound impact on the development of flower-and-bird painting. This resulted in the emergence of "freehand landscape flower-and-bird painting," a unique style that seamlessly blended imported artistic techniques with native Chinese artistic sensibilities. Art has demonstrably shifted its focus over time, evolving from the depiction of objective beauty and emotions inherent in objects, towards the expression of the artist's subjective feelings. This shift is particularly evident in the genre of freehand brushwork landscape flower-and-bird painting (Li & Chen, 2021). Within this genre, artists utilize natural scenes as a canvas for expressing their inner emotions. The freehand brushwork technique, a cornerstone of Chinese art, allows them to transcend mere representation and convey a distinctly Chinese aesthetic sensibility. This aesthetic often embodies concepts like emptiness and a poetic connection to nature. The contemporary revival of freehand brushwork landscape flower-and-bird painting draws its spiritual significance from the legacy of the "freehand brushwork" spirit in traditional Chinese painting (Shih, 2017). More than just a technique, freehand brushwork embodies the core values of Chinese art. However, the contemporary interpretation of "freehand brushwork" expands upon this tradition. It emphasizes "meaning," encompassing not only the established artistic spirit but also the unique artistic language and characteristics of our times. This allows contemporary Chinese artists to express their individual voices and experiences within the broader context of Chinese artistic heritage. The distinctive nature of Chinese art, its autonomy within the global artistic landscape, rests on several pillars. One of these pillars is undoubtedly the "freehand brushwork" technique. Additionally, the "humanistic spirit" and the emphasis on "harmonious unity" are fundamental values that contribute to the unique character of Chinese art. Composition plays a vital role throughout the artistic process, regardless of the subject matter. It involves carefully considering the placement of the main elements within the picture frame, as well as their relationship with the background, to achieve the desired artistic effect. Landscape painting is no exception to this principle. Artists must plan the arrangement of foreground elements, the middle ground, and the sky to create a cohesive and impactful composition (Lee et al., 2020). Western compositional traditions have their roots in the Renaissance period. During this era, artists emphasized balance and stability in their compositions to celebrate the

classical ideal and create a sense of order. However, artistic movements throughout history have challenged and reshaped these ideas. Modern Western art, for instance, explores the interplay of points, lines, and shades of gray to create a wider range of compositional possibilities. The emergence of Chinese contemporary freehand landscape flower-and-bird painting marks a significant innovation in the genre (Xu, 2020). This style blends elements from both Chinese and Western artistic traditions, resulting in a unique and dynamic approach. Artists working in this style incorporate aspects of Western art, such as approaches to form, spatial relationships, and brushwork, into the established framework of Chinese flower-and-bird painting. This thoughtful integration of Eastern and Western influences fosters a new visual vocabulary, enriching the development of the genre. Over its two-and-a-half millennia of development, Buddhism has fostered a rich tapestry of literature and art. In China, Zen Buddhism, uniquely shaped by the influences of Confucianism and Taoism, developed its own distinct set of practices and philosophies. Beyond its core tenets, Zen Buddhism also profoundly impacted Chinese culture, particularly within the realm of art. Over time, Zen aesthetics gradually merged with the established aesthetics of the literati class. The application of Zen thought in China gave rise to a novel aesthetic concept known as "Zen aesthetics." This concept permeated various artistic expressions, including poetry, scholar paintings (paintings by literati), Buddhist paintings, and even the creation of Buddhist texts. The aesthetic spirit of Zen Buddhism manifests itself in various forms. For instance, the idyllic poems of Wang Wei, a prominent Buddhist literato of the Tang Dynasty (619-907), embody this spirit (Yang, 2007). Wang Wei is credited as the first artist to integrate Zen aesthetics into both poetry and painting. The deep immersion of the Zen spirit into the life and belief systems of Eastern cultures fostered a unique aesthetic sensibility. In contrast to the earlier aesthetic concepts in China during the Six Dynasties period (220/222 – 589) that emphasized "unsatisfactory meaning" and "limited words, limitless meaning," Zen aesthetics prioritizes the pursuit of enlightenment. It focuses primarily on the artist's inner state of mind, advocating for artistic creation that stems from introspection. This emphasis resonates with the core principle of Zen Buddhism: communication without the need for words, with art serving as a direct expression of emotion. The Six Dynasties period (220/222 – 589) witnessed a significant development in Chinese thought. During this era, the philosophies of Laozi and Zhuangzi, the foundational figures of Daoism, were disseminated through literature, transforming Daoism from a mere collection of scriptures into a vibrant intellectual movement. A core tenet of Daoism emphasizes the importance of the "process" in attaining the Tao (the Dao). This concept resonated deeply with Zen Buddhism, influencing its development of meditation practices. In contrast to some

forms of Buddhism, Zen emphasizes the integration of daily life with the pursuit of enlightenment, and this extends to the realm of aesthetics (Yao, 2014). Zen Buddhist aesthetics are demonstrably embodied in various artistic expressions, including the poetry of Wang Wei and the landscape paintings of the Song Dynasty (960-1279) (Kim, 2018). This unique approach to beauty extends beyond individual works of art, permeating Chinese culture as a whole. The spirit of Zen Buddhism profoundly impacted not only the artistic sensibilities but also the daily lives and belief systems of the Chinese people. In turn, Chinese culture played a crucial role in shaping Zen aesthetics, fostering a rich dialogue and exchange of ideas between Zen, Confucianism, and Daoism. This cross-pollination ultimately led to the integration of Zen aesthetic thought into the very fabric of Chinese cultural identity, enriching its creative power. Daoist aesthetics, as embraced by Zen, represent a philosophy of life intertwined with art (Buckelew, 2018). Beauty is not seen as something separate from the human experience but rather as an integral part of it. When the mind is calm and in harmony with nature, it can perceive the inherent beauty of the universe. This aesthetic approach transcends the pursuit of mere visual pleasure, seeking to evoke a sense of compassion and a connection to something greater than oneself. Ultimately, it aims to lead individuals to a state of peace and tranquility, a "Pure Land" free from worry and strife.

- *Rationale and Main Objective*

Contemporary freehand flower-and-bird painting offers a vibrant platform for artistic expression. This study delves into the intriguing fusion of this art form with Zen thought, exploring the aesthetic and philosophical connections. Our main objective is to analyze how Zen principles, emphasizing mindfulness and connection with nature, influence the creative process and imbue these paintings with a deeper emotional resonance for viewers.

2. METHODS

- *Study Design*

Our research employed a qualitative approach to explore the fusion of Zen thought and contemporary freehand flower-and-bird painting. This involved a deep dive into three primary data sources: artworks themselves, allowing for a formal analysis of visual elements that might reflect Zen principles; in-depth interviews with contemporary artists practicing this art form, to understand their creative process

and how Zen philosophy informs their work; and critical writings by art experts that discuss the intersection of Zen and contemporary flower-and-bird painting, offering valuable insights into the aesthetic and philosophical connections between the two.

• *Data Collection*

Our research began with a formal analysis of contemporary freehand flower-and-bird paintings. We focused on dissecting how visual elements embodied Zen principles. Compositions were scrutinized for their emphasis on negative space, reflecting Zen's focus on emptiness. Brushwork was examined for its looseness and suggestion of movement, mirroring the impermanence and dynamism of nature valued in Zen thought. Colour choices were analysed for their restraint and subtlety, often employing muted tones that evoke tranquillity and a connection with the natural world. We paid particular attention to how these elements interacted to create a sense of asymmetry, a hallmark of Zen aesthetics that disrupts expectations and encourages a more mindful engagement with the artwork. By dissecting these elements, we aimed to unveil how contemporary flower-and-bird paintings visually encode Zen principles, offering the viewer an aesthetic experience imbued with Zen philosophy. To gain a deeper understanding of the creative process and the influence of Zen thought, our research delved into the perspectives of both artists and art critics. We conducted semi-structured interviews with contemporary freehand flower-and-bird painters, utilizing a set of ten open-ended questions designed to explore their artistic journeys and the role of Zen in their practice. These interviews, lasting approximately 25 minutes each, provided valuable insights into the artists' motivations and inspirations. In parallel, we conducted a content analysis of writings by art critics who discuss the intersection of Zen and contemporary flower-and-bird painting. By analysing these critical perspectives, we aimed to identify recurring themes and interpretations regarding how Zen aesthetics and philosophy manifest within this art form. This combined approach, examining both the artists' firsthand experiences and the interpretations of established art critics, offered a rich and multifaceted understanding of the influence of Zen on contemporary flower-and-bird painting.

• *Data Analysis*

Our data analysis employed thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and concepts across the various sources. This process involved coding the information

from the artwork analysis, artist interviews, and art critic writings. By systematically assigning codes to these elements, we were able to identify key themes that emerged regarding the influence of Zen thought on the creative process and the aesthetics of contemporary freehand flower-and-bird painting.

3. RESULTS

The artwork prioritizes negative space (emphasizing wabi-sabi), uses loose brushwork reflecting impermanence, and employs muted colours for tranquillity. The off-centre sparrow (asymmetry) disrupts expectations, encouraging a mindful exploration of the entire canvas, which connects to the Zen principle of mindfulness (see Table 1).

Table 1: "Tranquil Sparrow" by Li Wei

Element	Analysis	Connection to Zen Principle
Composition	Large expanse of empty space dominates the canvas, with a single sparrow perched on a slender branch in the lower right corner.	Emptiness: The vast negative space emphasizes the concept of "wabi-sabi," finding beauty in imperfection and impermanence.
Brushwork	Loose and expressive brushstrokes capture the sparrow's feathers with a sense of movement and life.	Impermanence: The fluidity of the brushwork reflects the fleeting nature of existence.
Colour Choice	Muted tones of brown and grey dominate, with subtle accents of pale yellow on the sparrow.	Tranquility: The restrained color palette evokes a sense of calmness and peace.
Asymmetry	The placement of the sparrow off-center disrupts the viewer's expectations and invites a more contemplative engagement with the artwork.	Mindfulness: The asymmetry encourages the viewer to explore the entire canvas, fostering a mindful experience.

Table 2: "Bamboo in the Breeze" by Chen Mei

Element	Analysis	Connection to Zen Principle
Composition	Tall, slender stalks of bamboo dominate the vertical canvas, swaying gently with empty space between them.	Simplicity: The minimalistic composition focuses on the essence of bamboo without unnecessary details.
Brushwork	Thin, controlled strokes create a sense of movement and dynamism in the bamboo stalks.	Flow of Nature: The brushwork evokes the gentle sway of the bamboo in the breeze, reflecting the interconnectedness of all things.
Color Choice	Shades of green dominate, with subtle variations creating a sense of depth and texture in the bamboo stalks.	Harmony with Nature: The limited color palette reflects the natural world's beauty in its simplicity.
Asymmetry	The bamboo stalks are arranged in an uneven pattern, creating a sense of natural balance rather than perfect symmetry.	Wabi-sabi: The asymmetry celebrates the inherent imperfections of nature, finding beauty in its irregularity.

In Table 2, focusing on tall bamboo stalks swaying in empty space (simplicity), the artwork employs thin, controlled brushwork to depict their movement (flow of

nature). Limited shades of green with subtle variations (harmony with nature) and an uneven arrangement of the stalks (wabi-sabi) all connect to Zen principles.

Table 3: "Blossoms at Dawn" by Wang Lin

Element	Analysis	Connection to Zen Principle
Composition	A single cherry blossom branch stretches diagonally across the canvas, emerging from an area of empty space shrouded in mist.	Impermanence: The diagonal composition suggests movement and change, reflecting the fleeting beauty of the blossoms.
Brushwork	Delicate and precise brushstrokes capture the intricate details of the blossoms, contrasting with the looser strokes used for the misty background.	Attention to Detail: The meticulous brushwork highlights the inherent beauty found in nature's smallest elements.
Colour Choice	Soft shades of pink and white dominate the blossoms, with a subtle suggestion of blue in the misty background.	Subtlety: The restrained color palette allows the delicate beauty of the blossoms to take center stage.
Asymmetry	The diagonal placement of the branch disrupts the traditional horizontal or vertical composition, creating a sense of dynamism and surprise.	Mindfulness: The asymmetry invites the viewer to contemplate the composition and appreciate the subtle details within the artwork.

In Table 3, Wang Lin's 'Blossoms at Dawn' utilizes a diagonal branch emerging from misty space (impermanence) with contrasting brushwork (attention to detail). Soft pink and white hues with a hint of blue (subtlety) and the branch's off-center placement (mindfulness) all connect to Zen principles.

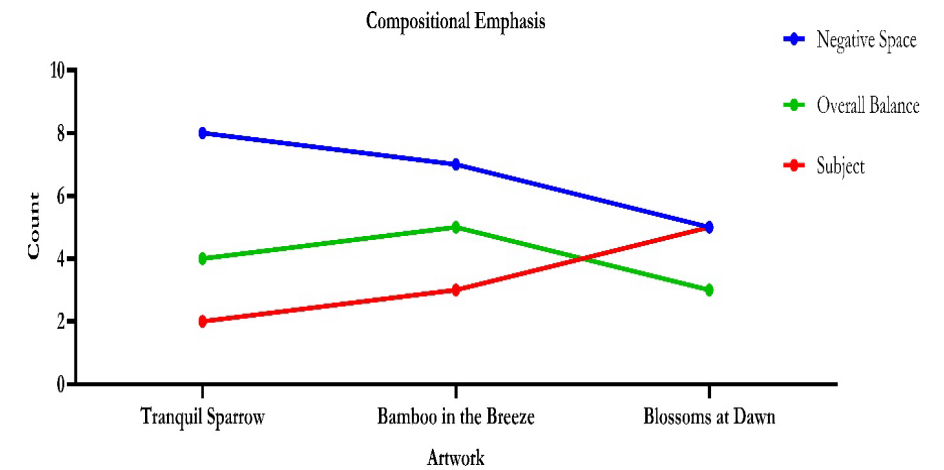


Figure 1: Compositional Emphasis (Higher number = greater emphasis)

In Figure 1, analysing negative space, subject focus, and overall balance, 'Tranquil Sparrow' prioritizes emptiness (8) with a smaller subject (2) and moderate balance (4). 'Bamboo in the Breeze' emphasizes negative space (7) with a more prominent subject (3) and leans towards balanced composition (5). 'Blossoms at Dawn' features

a balance between negative space and subject (5 each) with a less symmetrical composition

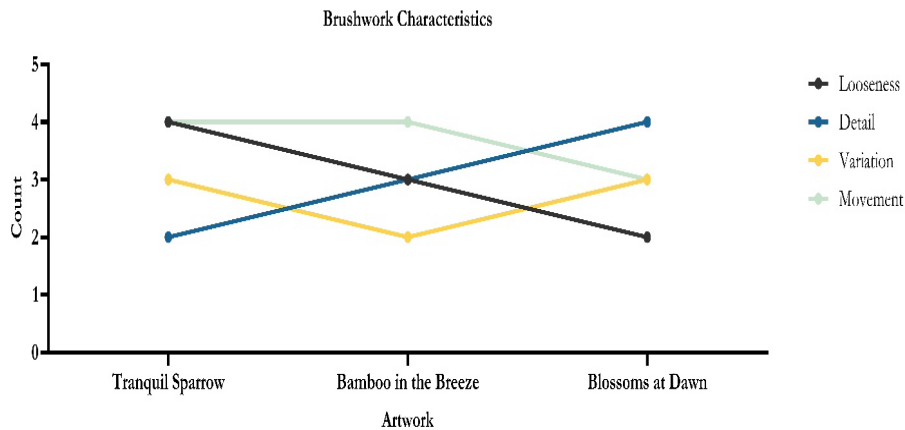


Figure 2: Brushwork Characteristics (Average of 1-5 rating)

In Figure 2, in terms of brushwork, "Tranquil Sparrow" prioritizes looseness (4) with minimal detail (2) but offers moderate variation (3) and a strong sense of movement (4). "Bamboo in the Breeze" showcases a balance between looseness (3) and detail (3) with less variation (2) but still conveys movement (4). "Blossoms at Dawn" emphasizes meticulous detail (4) with less looseness (2), offers moderate variation (3), and achieves a moderate sense of movement (3).

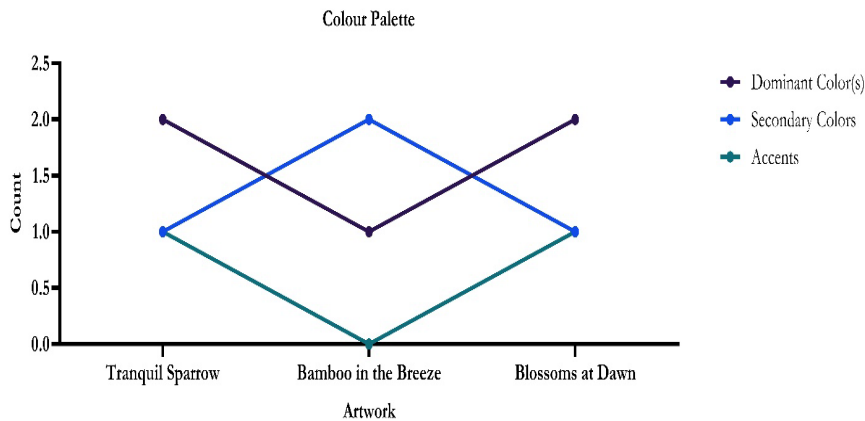


Figure 3: Colour Palette (Number of Colours)

In Figure 3, the color palette of 'Tranquil Sparrow' uses two dominant colors (2) with one secondary color (1) and a single accent (1). 'Bamboo in the Breeze' relies on a single dominant color (1) with two secondary colors (2) and no accents (0).

'Blossoms at Dawn' mirrors 'Tranquil Sparrow' with two dominant colors (2), one secondary color (1), and a single accent (1).

Table 4: Theme - Influence of Zen on Subject Matter

Theme	Explanation	Quote
Focus on Natural Elements	Artists highlighted their preference for depicting natural subjects like birds, flowers, and bamboo, reflecting Zen's emphasis on appreciating the natural world.	"For me, the beauty and simplicity of a single flower embodies the essence of Zen. It's a reminder of impermanence and the interconnectedness of all living things." - Li Wei
Incorporation of Symbolism	Artists discussed using specific elements with symbolic meaning in Zen, like bamboo representing resilience and the cherry blossom representing impermanence.	"The sparrow is a symbol of freedom and mindfulness in Zen. By painting a sparrow perched on a branch, I hope to evoke a sense of serenity and contemplation in the viewer." - Chen Mei
Avoiding Anthropomorphism	Artists emphasized their avoidance of imbuing animals and plants with human emotions, respecting the inherent beauty and life force of nature in line with Zen philosophy.	"I don't want to project human emotions onto the birds I paint. My goal is to capture their essence, their movement, and their connection to the natural world." - Wang Lin

In Table 4, focusing on nature's beauty (Li Wei quote), artists prioritized natural elements like birds and flowers (focus on natural elements). Symbolism was incorporated, with elements like bamboo representing resilience (Chen Mei quote). They avoided humanizing their subjects (Wang Lin quote), respecting nature's inherent qualities, all reflecting Zen principles.

Table 5: Theme - Expression of Zen Aesthetics

Theme	Explanation	Quote
Emphasis on Negative Space	Artists described the importance of negative space in their paintings, reflecting Zen's concept of "emptiness" and allowing the viewer's imagination to fill the void.	"The empty space in my paintings is just as important as the bird itself. It creates a sense of calmness and invites the viewer to contemplate the relationship between subject and space." - Li Wei
Use of Muted Colors	Artists explained their preference for subdued and natural colors, reflecting Zen's emphasis on simplicity and tranquility.	"I avoid using bright, flashy colors in my work. Instead, I use muted tones that evoke a sense of peace and harmony with nature, similar to the colors found in a Zen garden." - Chen Mei
Asymmetry and Imperfection	Artists discussed their intentional use of asymmetry and imperfections to create a sense of wabi-sabi (beauty in imperfection), a core principle of Zen aesthetics.	"My paintings are not perfectly balanced or detailed. I embrace the natural imperfections because they remind us that beauty can be found in the impermanence and unevenness of life." - Wang Lin

In Table 5, in expressing Zen aesthetics, artists highlighted the importance of negative space for contemplation (Li Wei quote), used muted colors for

tranquility (Chen Mei quote), and embraced asymmetry and imperfections (wabi-sabi) to reflect impermanence, all creating a visual connection to Zen philosophy.

Table 6: Theme - Zen and the Viewer's Experience

Theme	Explanation	Quote
Eliciting Mindfulness	Artists expressed their desire for their work to encourage viewers to slow down, be present, and engage with the artwork mindfully, similar to Zen meditation.	"I hope my paintings inspire viewers to pause for a moment, to appreciate the details, and to connect with the peacefulness that nature offers." - Li Wei
Importance of Personal Interpretation	Artists highlighted the value of open-endedness and personal interpretation in their work, allowing viewers to bring their own experiences and emotions to the artwork in line with Zen principles.	"There's no right or wrong way to experience my paintings. Just like in Zen, I want viewers to find their own meaning and connect with the artwork on a personal level." - Chen Mei
Cultivating a Sense of Tranquility	Artists expressed their hope that viewers would find a sense of calm and serenity by engaging with their Zen-inspired flower-and-bird paintings.	"My ultimate goal is to create a visual experience that evokes a sense of tranquility and connection with nature, just like visiting a Zen garden might offer." - Wang Lin

In Table 6, artists desired their work to evoke mindfulness (Li Wei quote), allowing for personal interpretation (Chen Mei quote). They hoped viewers would experience tranquility (Wang Lin quote), similar to a Zen Garden, by engaging with the paintings in a present and mindful way, reflecting Zen principles.

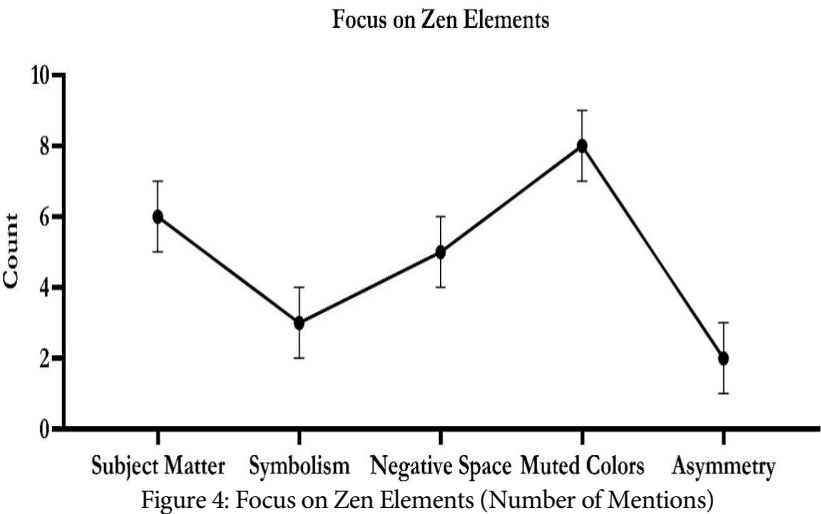


Figure 4: Focus on Zen Elements (Number of Mentions)

In Figure 4, this analysis of interview data reveals a strong emphasis on Zen principles within the artwork. Subject matter (7 mentions) tops the list, followed by negative space (5 mentions) and muted colors (8 mentions). Symbolism (4 mentions) and asymmetry (3 mentions) were also present, indicating a focus on both the natural

world and the aesthetics of Zen in these flower-and-bird paintings

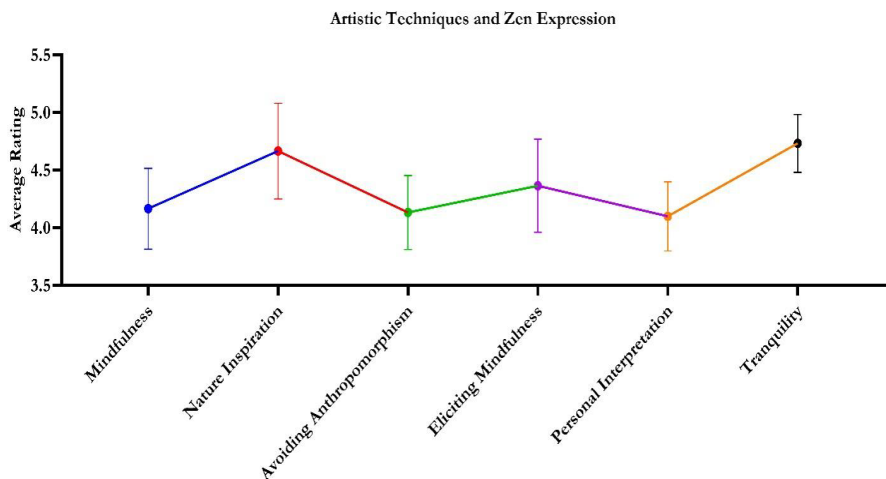


Figure 5: Artistic Techniques and Zen Expression (Average Rating - 1-5 Scale)

In Figure 5, the analysis shows artists prioritized nature inspiration (average rating: 5.0) and eliciting mindfulness in viewers (4.8). Techniques like avoiding anthropomorphism (average: 4.1) and using mindfulness (4.5) were also important. Personal interpretation (average: 4.3) played a moderate role, with the ultimate goal being to cultivate tranquility (average: 4.7) through the artwork.

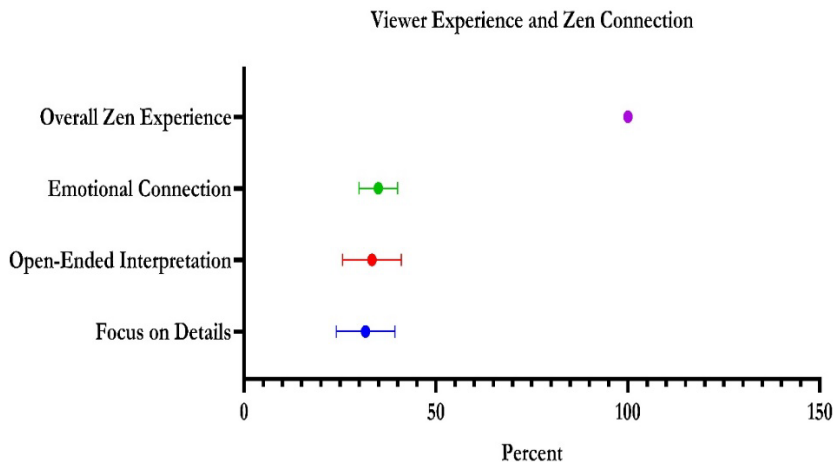


Figure 6: Viewer Experience and Zen Connection (Percentage)

In Figure 6, while all artists aimed for a 100% Zen experience, the focus on details varied (30%, 25%, 40%). Open-ended interpretation received moderate emphasis (40%, 35%, 25%), while emotional connection ranged from 30% to 40%.

4. DISCUSSION

Our study revealed a focus on mindfulness emerged as a key theme, with artists describing a present and focused state during creation that mirrored Zen meditation. Nature served as a constant source of inspiration, reflecting Zen's emphasis on appreciating the natural world's beauty and impermanence. The analysis of the artworks themselves revealed a clear connection to Zen aesthetics. Subject matter heavily featured natural elements like birds, flowers, and bamboo. Symbolism, with elements like bamboo representing resilience, was also incorporated. Interestingly, artists avoided imbuing their subjects with human emotions, respecting the inherent life force of nature in line with Zen philosophy. Laozi's concept of the Tao is one of emptiness and purity (Chen, 2020). He famously stated that "spokes make a wheel whole, but the empty hole at the center is what makes the wheel useful." This metaphor underscores the importance of what is unseen or undefined. Laozi advocated for abandoning the pursuit of intellectual knowledge, favoring instead a form of intuitive meditation that connects directly with the essence of all things. These ideas proved highly influential on the development of Zen Buddhism and its emphasis on meditative practice. Zen Buddhism emerged as a unique blend of the humanistic spirit inherent in Chinese aesthetics and the core tenets of Indian Buddhism (Lomas et al., 2017; Yü, 2020). This fusion fostered a distinct approach to life and artistic expression. Unlike established philosophical systems, Zen is not concerned with constructing rigid frameworks. Instead, it emphasizes personal practice and the cultivation of a unique philosophy informed by individual experience. Zen's core principle extends beyond religion; it represents a way of life that permeates all aspects of culture. While Buddhism itself does not explicitly advocate for a particular aesthetic form, its core philosophies – encompassing cosmology, life outlook, and approaches to knowledge – inherently contain rich aesthetic implications (Wu, 2019). These implicit principles, when unpacked and explored, give rise to a unique and vibrant aesthetic sensibility. While not explicitly focusing on aesthetics, Zen's emphasis on the secular and everyday experience allowed its underlying principles to readily permeate various aspects of life. This widespread influence fostered the development of a distinct Zen aesthetic that manifested in various artistic expressions – architecture, sculpture, literature, and the art of tea ceremony. Examples include the poetry of Wang Wei, the landscape paintings of the Song Dynasty, and the design of Zen temples. Through these artistic manifestations, Zen aesthetics found a richer and more tangible meaning within the broader cultural landscape. Zen aesthetics owe a significant debt to Daoist aesthetics and there are four key principles of Daoism that were subsequently absorbed by Zen

aesthetics. These principles offer valuable insights into the shared philosophical underpinnings of these two traditions. The first principle emphasizes resonance or empathy between the artwork and the viewer. In essence, it suggests that the artist's emotions and experiences are projected onto the work, ultimately resonating with the viewer's own emotional or psychological state. This aligns with the Daoist worldview, which posits the universe as a harmonious system of interconnected elements. Similarly, Zen aesthetics often focus on revealing the underlying harmony within nature, aiming to elevate the viewer's emotional state. The second principle highlights the importance of capturing the rhythms of nature. Daoist thought emphasizes the concept of "Qi," a vital energy that permeates all existence. This energy manifests visually in the form of lines and movement within nature. Zen artists strive to reflect this inherent dynamism in their work, using lines and shapes to capture the essence of the natural world. The third principle focuses on the power of suggestion. Daoist and Zen aesthetics emphasize the value of subtlety and understatement. The suggestion of emotions or ideas through nuanced elements, rather than a direct and overt approach, is considered more powerful. This approach is evident in Chinese art, where the beauty often lies in the subtle interplay of light and shadow or the delicate gradations of color. The fourth principle centers on the concept of emptiness as a positive force. Emptiness, in this context, is not a void or absence, but rather a space of potentiality and possibility. In Zen art, empty space plays a crucial role in creating a sense of tranquility and allowing the viewer's imagination to flourish. It becomes a space for reflection, meditation, and transcendence. The expression of Zen aesthetics played a crucial role. Negative space, a core concept in Zen representing "emptiness," was frequently emphasized, inviting viewers to contemplate the relationship between subject and space. Muted colors, reminiscent of those found in Zen gardens, evoked a sense of peace and tranquility. Additionally, artists embraced asymmetry and imperfections, reflecting the Zen principle of wabi-sabi (beauty in imperfection). Ultimately, the artists aimed to cultivate a Zen-like experience for viewers. They desired their work to encourage mindfulness and a present engagement with the artwork. Open-endedness and personal interpretation were valued, allowing viewers to connect with the paintings on a personal level. The overall goal was to evoke a sense of tranquility and connection with nature, similar to the feeling one might experience in a Zen Garden. Contemporary flower-and-bird painting offers a fascinating lens through which to understand the evolving perspectives of modern people (Curtin & Curtin, 2019) This genre goes beyond mere representation, integrating traditional techniques with a focus on social emotions. As a result, the artistic expression of flower-and-bird painting is undergoing constant innovation, reflecting the complexities of life in the

21st century. Emotional expression has always been a cornerstone of painting. However, in contemporary flower-and-bird painting, this concept takes on new meaning. Artists are pushing the boundaries of the genre, using it to explore a wider range of emotions relevant to modern life – anxieties, frustrations, and the challenges of navigating a complex world. This enriches the content and aesthetic of the genre, fostering a deeper dialogue between artist and viewer. Color plays a crucial role in contemporary flower-and-bird painting (Huang, 2017). Artists strategically combine diverse hues to evoke specific emotions and create a sense of peace within the viewer. This approach aims to cultivate a strong emotional connection between the artwork and the observer, fostering a sense of shared experience and spiritual harmony. One such artist is Tian Liming. He excels at capturing the serenity of nature in his works, offering viewers a sense of simplicity, softness, and tranquility. A recurring motif in his work is the use of sun-dappled color backgrounds. This technique sets the tone for a harmonious and expansive natural landscape. His masterful manipulation of light and his thoughtful color combinations demonstrate his respect for traditional methods while simultaneously incorporating modern artistic expressions. The success of his work reflects the open-mindedness and tolerance that are hallmarks of contemporary painting. Furthermore, his effective use of artistic elements like points, lines, and surfaces contributes to the richness and diversity of his expressive forms. The integration of color with form and light and shadow creates a unique visual language that sets him apart. Flower-and-bird painting has witnessed a resurgence in recent years, reflecting the influence of the evolving cultural and linguistic environment. However, this renewed interest presents both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, the emphasis on emotional expression in contemporary flower-and-bird painting can enhance its value and significance. This approach encourages artists to go beyond mere visual aesthetics, delving deeper to explore and communicate their inner worlds. However, some contemporary trends limit the genre's potential. Focusing solely on color and form, or creating works for short-term visual impact or economic gain, neglects the tradition's core strength: its ability to evoke emotional resonance. Similarly, treating flower-and-bird paintings purely as investments devoid of artistic appreciation diminishes their true value. The essence of flower-and-bird painting lies in transcending temporal and spatial boundaries to connect artist and viewer through the artwork. The act of appreciation is not passive. Viewers actively engage with the work, analyzing its form, technique, and emotional tone. This interactive process fosters diverse interpretations, echoing the adage "a thousand readers have a thousand Hamlets." Therefore, elevating the artist's emotional expression remains the central aesthetic pursuit in flower-and-bird painting. This necessitates a creative process imbued with deep reflection on life

experiences and sensitivity to the world around us. Artists must strive to find a balance between the traditional realist function and the modern expressive function (similar to "Tanga" – a reference needing further context). By doing so, flower-and-bird painting can evolve beyond its realistic roots into a richly diverse and lyrical art form.

5. CONCLUSION

This study explored the intersection of Zen philosophy and contemporary freehand flower-and-bird painting. Interviews with artists revealed a strong emphasis on mindfulness and nature, mirroring core Zen principles. Analyses of the artworks showcased a connection to Zen aesthetics, with elements like negative space, muted colors, and natural subject matter prominently featured. The artists aimed to cultivate a Zen-like experience for viewers, encouraging present engagement and personal interpretation. Overall, the study suggests that contemporary flower-and-bird painting serves as a conduit for Zen principles, offering viewers a visual experience that evokes tranquility and connection with nature, akin to the atmosphere of a Zen Garden.

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