

Medial Characteristics and Regional Experience: An Artistic Study of the Development of the Watercolor Language in Inner Mongolia

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Abstract: The emergence of Inner Mongolian watercolor painting is not merely a simple combination of grassland themes and watercolor techniques, but rather a regional visual language that has gradually evolved under the combined influence of multiple factors, including the ecological environment of the northern frontier, multi-ethnic cultural experiences, the academic education system, and regional exhibition mechanisms. From an art-theoretical perspective, this paper places the characteristics of the medium and regional experience within a unified analytical framework, examining how the transparency, fluidity, chance, and paper-based nature of watercolor acquire specific modes of expression within Inner Mongolia's spatial perception, social structure, and cultural memory. The author argues that the regional character of Inner Mongolian watercolor painting should not be confined to the repetitive depiction of external thematic symbols such as grasslands, herders, and horses, but should primarily manifest in the processes of spatial organization, color layering, the rhythm of light and shadow, and the formation of viewing practices. Inner Mongolia's composite ecological landscape—comprising forests, meadows, typical grasslands, desert grasslands, and sandy terrain vegetation—provides a visually rich and layered field for the watercolor medium. At the same time, the educational systems and creative platforms long established at institutions such as Inner Mongolia Normal University and the Inner Mongolia Academy of Arts have enabled individual experiences to gradually crystallize into a linguistic structure with distinct regional identity. Currently, although Inner Mongolian watercolor painting has developed a relatively distinct regional character, issues such as the over-representation of specific subjects, a tendency toward safe and conventional language, and a relatively conservative understanding of the medium still persist. Its future development should shift from depicting the region to organizing regional experiences, and from the reproduction of landscapes to the generation of spiritual structures, thereby further enhancing its theoretical interpretive power and linguistic self-awareness within the context of Chinese contemporary art.

Keywords: Inner Mongolia watercolor painting, medium characteristics, regional experience, visual language, art studies.

1. Introduction

Within the overall framework of contemporary Chinese watercolor painting, Inner Mongolia is not a regional case that can be simply categorized as “regional landscape painting.” The formation of its artistic character is closely tied to the natural geography of Northern China, as well as to the ongoing construction of regional cultural structures, the academic education system, and exhibition and dissemination mechanisms. Contrary to the simplistic notion of a monotonous grassland, Inner Mongolia is not a homogeneous visual landscape but a composite region comprising diverse ecological types such as forests, meadow grasslands, typical grasslands, desert grasslands, and sandy vegetation. The landscape layers, variations in light and color, and spatial rhythms presented by these different ecological spaces not only shape artists' perceptions of the region but also profoundly influence the organizational logic of their visual expressions.

The development of watercolor painting in Inner Mongolia is not a scattered, sporadic phenomenon of individual creation, but rather a regional artistic practice that has gradually unfolded within a relatively sustained educational and creative framework. Since the introduction of watercolor courses in the 1950s, relevant universities in Inner Mongolia have progressively established a relatively stable professional teaching system. Relying on creative platforms, research centers, exhibition activities, and teaching practices, they have driven the continuous deepening of watercolor painting

from foundational training toward the construction of an independent artistic language. It is evident, therefore, that the formation of Inner Mongolian watercolor painting is both the result of individual artists' accumulated experience and a manifestation of the long-term development and continuous accumulation of the regional art system [1].

Based on this, this paper does not merely offer a general description of the common themes and stylistic features of Inner Mongolian watercolor painting; rather, it seeks to further explore: why has watercolor been able to develop a relatively distinct visual language within the specific regional context of Inner Mongolia? How do the material properties of the medium integrate with local experience, and how do they transform into a distinctive visual expression through the ongoing shaping of that local experience? Centering on this question, this paper examines the internal logic of the generation of Inner Mongolia's watercolor language and its current challenges by exploring the interactive relationship between the medium's characteristics and regional experience, in conjunction with regional educational platforms, creative mechanisms, and the real-world context. This paper argues that the research value of Inner Mongolian watercolor painting lies not only in its provision of a concrete case study for observing regional artistic development, but also in its revelation of potential pathways through which local experience can enter contemporary art discourse via the transformation of the medium.

2. The Nature of the Medium: Why Watercolor Is Suited to Translating Inner Mongolian Experience

As an independent painting medium, the core characteristics of watercolor lie not only in its “lightness” and “speed,” but also in the open pictorial structure formed by the interplay of transparent layers, negative space on the paper, water penetration, and accidental traces. Compared to the opaque, sculptural quality of oil painting, watercolor more readily preserves the sense of breathing and fluidity in an image; compared to the imprinted, boundary-defined nature of printmaking, watercolor approaches a visual state suspended between emergence and dissipation. It is precisely this “incompletely enclosed” medium structure that creates an intrinsic resonance with the regional experience of Inner Mongolia.

One of the most striking visual experiences in Inner Mongolia is the vastness of space. This vastness manifests not only in the stretching horizon and the boundless sky but also as an experience of “emptiness” formed by sparse objects, vast landscapes, distant vistas, and highly transparent air. In this sense, the negative space in watercolor paintings is not merely a void, but rather a space where light, wind, distance, and atmosphere collectively participate in the creation of the image. The white of the paper is not merely a background but an active element in the construction of space. The truly powerful images in Inner Mongolian watercolor paintings often do not rely on dense details, but rather transform the regional experience into a visual structure through large expanses of breathing space, low-density compositional organization, and the translucent relationships between layers of color. Furthermore, the fluidity of watercolor naturally endows it with the ability to express time [2]. The natural landscape of Inner Mongolia is not static; it is in constant flux amid the changing seasons, daily temperature fluctuations, shifting wind directions, and the progression of light. The colors of the grasslands are not always bright and vivid; they often exist within subtle shifts between warm and cool tones, light and shadow, and varying shades of gray. The blurred edges, color bleeding, and textural serendipity created by the diffusion of water in watercolor are precisely what transform this unstable natural experience into a visual language. In other words, watercolor’s suitability for capturing the Inner Mongolian experience lies not only in its ability to depict scenery but also in its capacity to express a sense of temporality inherent in the process of change.

Watercolor is a medium that relies heavily on bodily experience. It requires the artist to continuously assess the paper’s moisture level, pigment settling, brushstroke speed, and the timing of layering while observing the subject. Here, the medium is not merely an external tool, but a field where bodily perception and visual judgment interact. The reason why the experience of Inner Mongolia finds effective expression in watercolor is not merely because the artists see the grasslands, forests, or deserts, but because, through prolonged sketching and creation, they have gradually transformed their bodily experience of the climate, wind, luminosity, and spatial distances of the northern frontier into “tacit knowledge” within the practice of the medium. In this sense, the creation of Inner Mongolian watercolor painting is first and foremost an interactive process involving “body—medium—region,” rather than a simple cause-and-effect relationship where subject matter precedes artistic expression.

3. Regional Experience: From Visible Landscapes to Spiritual Structures

For a long time, the most recognizable features of Inner Mongolian watercolor painting to outsiders have been superficial images such as grasslands, cattle and sheep, yurts, and traditional clothing. While these visual elements certainly constitute the first layer of regional identification, if regionality is confined solely to the recognition of subjects, the so-called local style easily slips into mere symbolism and display. True regional experience is by no means limited to “what is painted,” but lies more in “how the image is organized.”

The regional experience of Inner Mongolia is first and foremost reflected in differences in viewing perspectives. The forested areas and grasslands of the east emphasize depth and layered coverage; the typical grasslands of the central region emphasize horizontal expansion and distant perspective; while the deserts and sandy lands of the west highlight the rugged texture of the surface, low color saturation, and stark contrasts between light and shadow. It is evident, therefore, that Inner Mongolia does not possess a singular “grassland visuality,” but rather a diverse and complex set of spatial experiences. If artists merely replicate fixed imagery, they cannot truly engage with the region; regionality is only genuinely generated when the spatial rhythms, chromatic tendencies, and light-and-shadow logic of different ecological zones are transformed into compositional structures. Secondly, regional experience encompasses a deeper cultural and psychological structure. Inner Mongolia’s visual culture is not merely a product of its natural geography; it is also closely intertwined with nomadic memory, frontier urbanization, multi-ethnic coexistence, festive rituals, modes of labor, and the ethics of daily life. Precisely for this reason, when regional experience is integrated into watercolor painting, it should not be understood merely as the “use of local motifs,” but rather as the artist’s reorganization of the lived world. Behind the seemingly simple elements in the composition—the light of the sky, the snowy ground, the hues of the grass, and the figures’ postures—there often lies a specific emotional atmosphere: the stillness within vastness, the clarity amidst the cold, the restraint within desolation, and the steadiness within movement. This emotional structure is the key to the true integration of regional experience into artistic language.

From an art-theoretical perspective, once regional experience undergoes artistic transformation, it often shifts from a narrative of objects to a narrative of relationships. The grasslands are no longer merely a backdrop but become the spatial conditions that determine the characters’ gaze and the compositional focal point; clothing is no longer merely folkloric decoration but becomes a crucial factor in controlling the rhythm of color and the emphasis within the composition; snow is no longer merely a seasonal subject but an overall field that tests the relationships of luminosity, subtle differences between warm and cool tones, and the construction of a quiet atmosphere. It is precisely in this transformation from “object” to “relationship” that regional experience truly moves from visible landscapes into invisible spiritual structures. Consequently, the value of Inner Mongolian watercolor painting lies not in displaying locality as a cultural label, but in transforming the spatial sense, rhythm, and emotional texture of local life—which are difficult to articulate directly—into a visual order that can be

viewed, felt, and repeatedly recognized. Once this transformation is established, the region ceases to be merely an object of depiction and instead becomes an organizing principle within the language itself.

4. Institutions and Platforms: How a Regional Language Takes Shape

The formation of a regional artistic language is never solely the result of an artist's individual talent; it also requires the sustained support of educational systems, exhibition mechanisms, and academic platforms. The fact that Inner Mongolian watercolor painting has evolved from scattered individual works into a relatively distinct regional identity is closely tied to the long-term development of local academic institutions and public platforms [3].

The establishment and development of the Watercolor Department at Inner Mongolia Normal University have provided a continuous mechanism for cultivating talent in regional watercolor painting. Official records indicate that the university has offered watercolor courses since 1954. In late 1994, it established a watercolor major and began enrolling students, and in 2002, it founded the Watercolor Teaching and Research Office, gradually forming a relatively comprehensive curriculum system and disciplinary framework. This process of institutionalization signifies that watercolor in Inner Mongolia is not merely a subsidiary of basic color training but is regarded as a specialized field with independent artistic value.

Building on this foundation, Inner Mongolia Institute of Arts has in recent years further promoted the integration of creation, teaching, and research through initiatives such as the Watercolor Art Creation and Research Center, teaching demonstration platforms, and faculty-student exhibitions. The 2024 Faculty-Student Watercolor Exhibition at the institute demonstrates that watercolor is no longer merely a showcase of classroom training outcomes but has become a significant public space for regional artistic exchange. The college's existing research and practice platforms also indicate that the development of watercolor painting in Inner Mongolia has gradually shifted from purely creative practice toward the establishment of institutional frameworks.

At the individual level, Jie Yuanfang, the academic leader of the watercolor program at the Inner Mongolia Academy of Fine Arts, won the Gold Award at the 3rd China Art Award and the 13th National Art Exhibition for her work **The Distant Horizon**. This achievement demonstrates that Inner Mongolian watercolor painting is no longer confined to a local, self-contained cycle but has secured a significant position within the national evaluation system for watercolor art. Such individual breakthroughs often signify that a regional artistic language has achieved a certain level of public visibility and academic recognition. At the same time, Chang Hai, as a member of the Watercolor Art Committee of the China Artists Association and a former judge for multiple National Art Exhibitions, has also played an active role in elevating the overall status of Inner Mongolia's watercolor art. His works have won awards in national exhibitions on multiple occasions, and his 2025 solo exhibition, *"Impressions of Inner Mongolia: Vast Horizons,"* held at the National Art Museum of China, further elevated the profile of Inner Mongolian watercolor art.

The significance of institutional platforms lies in their ability to facilitate the continuous training, comparison,

selection, and dissemination of individual artistic experiences. Exhibition mechanisms establish explicit value judgments, educational systems consolidate transferable technical expertise, and research platforms transform scattered creative phenomena into discourse worthy of discussion. This is why Inner Mongolian watercolor has maintained a degree of continuity over a long period: it does not rely solely on a handful of representative artists, but rather has gradually formed a mutually supportive ecological structure through the interplay of education, creation, exhibitions, and regional academic engagement.

5. Current Challenges and Directions for Deepening: From "Regional Imagery" to "Linguistic Consciousness"

Although Inner Mongolian watercolor has established a strong regional identity, this does not mean that the development of its artistic language is complete. On the contrary, precisely because the "Inner Mongolian style" is gradually being recognized by the outside world, new issues have emerged.

The most evident issue lies in the representational use of regional experience. Some works simplistically interpret "local character" as a collection of typical elements, thus endlessly repeating highly recognizable images such as blue skies, white clouds, grasslands, and herders, while failing to delve deeply into the changes in real life, ecological differences, and the complexity of individual experiences. The result is that while the works appear "very Inner Mongolian," their artistic language lacks internal tension, remaining merely at the level of recognizability rather than reaching a deeper level of artistic depth.

Due to a certain resonance between academic training, exhibition evaluations, and local aesthetic tastes, certain compositional patterns, tonal structures, and brushwork techniques are constantly replicated, ultimately forming a reliable yet relatively conservative set of expressive habits. While such a visual language is certainly easy to gain recognition, it also tends to confine creation within existing experiences, making it difficult to continue expanding the boundaries of the medium. Especially against the backdrop of contemporary art increasingly emphasizing critical awareness and linguistic self-consciousness, mere technical proficiency is no longer sufficient to support the further development of regional watercolor. Watercolor painting should not be understood merely as a traditional craft involving transparent layers of color on paper; rather, it should be viewed as an open medium capable of conveying spatial experiences, cultural psychology, and contemporary issues. The establishment of platforms and research centers at the Inner Mongolia Academy of Arts has already provided the conditions for cross-media exploration in watercolor painting; however, judging from the overall creative landscape, there are still few works that truly elevate the medium itself to a conceptual level.

Therefore, the future direction of Inner Mongolian watercolor painting should not merely be a continuation of depicting the local landscape, but rather a more proactive organization of local experience. On the one hand, there is a need to shift from narratives of singular landscapes to expressions of complex regional structures, incorporating different spatial logics—such as forests, meadows, typical

grasslands, and desert grasslands—into the construction of images. On the other hand, there is also a need to shift from visible landscapes to invisible experiences, integrating life structures, historical memory, frontier consciousness, and contemporary reality into the language of watercolor. Only when “region” ceases to be merely a source of subject matter and instead becomes the internal driving force behind compositional logic, color choices, spatial order, and emotional structure can Inner Mongolian watercolor painting truly evolve from regional landscape painting into a mature regional artistic language.

6. Conclusion

The formation of the Inner Mongolian watercolor language is, in essence, the result of the combined influence of the medium itself, regional experiences, and the institutional ecosystem. The reason watercolor has developed a strong regional identity in Inner Mongolia is not merely because it is well-suited to depicting the expansive, austere, and fluid visual experiences of the northern frontier, but also because, through long-term practices of sketching from life, teaching, and exhibition, this medium has gradually established deep connections with local cultural psychology, spatial perception, and the structure of everyday life. It is precisely through this ongoing process of interaction that watercolor has gradually transformed from a technical tool into a visual language that embodies local experiences and aesthetic judgments.

Based on the discussion in this paper, the regional character of Inner Mongolian watercolor painting should not be understood as a simple accumulation of local imagery, nor should it be confined to the repetitive use of superficial symbols such as grasslands, herders, and horses. Truly academically significant regional expression is manifested in how artists transform complex natural landscapes, life experiences, cultural memories, and emotional structures into

the spatial order, color logic, rhythmic relationships, and visual temperament of the pictorial composition. In other words, the value of Inner Mongolian watercolor painting lies not primarily in what place it depicts, but in how it organizes these elements through the medium to transform local experience into an artistic language possessing intrinsic structure and aesthetic depth.

In its ongoing development, Inner Mongolian watercolor painting still faces several issues that require further attention, such as a pronounced tendency toward the symbolization of subject matter, a stylistic approach that leans toward conservatism, and room for deeper understanding of the medium. These issues indicate that once a regional artistic language has established a certain degree of local distinctiveness, it may simultaneously face the risks of stagnation and repetition. Based on this, the future development of Inner Mongolia watercolor painting should not merely remain a continuation of existing styles, but should further shift from “representing the region” to “constructing regional experience,” and from “image recognition” to “linguistic self-awareness,” thereby continuously expanding its expressive dimensions and research significance within the context of contemporary Chinese art.

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