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The Interpretation of the Creating Truth Ecological Aesthetic Connotation in *Jiezhou Xuehua Bian* and Its Contemporary Value

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Abstract

Jiezhou Xuehua Bian (《芥舟學畫編》) is a systematic work about painting that emerged in the late Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty, and it is unique in the history of Chinese painting theory. The author Shen Zongqian emphasizes that painting should not be seen as a game like “play with objects for emotions (玩物適情),” but rather focuses on elucidating the truth of the painting path (畫道), linking the concept of artistic authenticity with the artist’s mind and brushwork skills. His artistic concept of creating truth (創真) has evolved through two stages: firstly, starting from the theory of artistic creation of truth and secondly, constructing the living environment of the real world. The second is the artistic language created by the creative subject with Tao Rong thinking (陶鎔心性) which combines the heart and nature of brushwork and ink, and enters a feeling in a harmony aesthetic (審美感合) state of integrating human feelings and physics in the composition of language theory. On the other hand, Shen Zongqian’s theory of creating truth has always been inseparable from creative practice, indicating that painting creation is not imitative, but should explore the way of running through brush and ink like nature, continuing from ancient to modern times. The ecological aesthetic connotation contained in it still has positive value for contemporary art education.

Key Words

Creating truth, ecological, contemporary

Shen Zongqian’s *Jiezhou Xuehua Bian* is a masterpiece of Qing Dynasty painting studies. On the one hand, it systematically aggregates and advances the theories of landscape aesthetics in previous works. On the other hand, it conducts a systematic study of the theories and techniques for figure painting. Importantly, he reconstructed and interpreted the aesthetic relationship between form and spirit (形神) in landscape and figure painting through the concept of consistent thinking (一致之思), essentially forming his own ecological system for a creating truth aesthetic (創真生態審美).

1. The Construction of the Real World in Works: The Realm of Life (生生之境)

Shen Zongqian proposed in *Jiezhou Xuehua Bian* that all things in the world of works should reach the realm of

connecting Qi (貫通一氣) in order to be true paintings. It is obvious that Shen Zongqian, as a master of painting studies, had absorbed the theory of Chuan Shen Xie Zhao (傳神寫照) after Gu Kaizhi in the field of figure painting. On the other hand, in the field of landscape painting, he had absorbed the creating truth aesthetic of landscape by Jing Hao of the Tang and Five dynasties and built his own distinctive ecological aesthetic system with creating truth and Chuanshen (傳神) as the core. He said “When making a picture, if you don’t first make up your mind and fill in the gaps, adding things freewheeling, without considering each other, it is the most serious illness.”¹

Shen Zongqian pointed out in the chapter *Arrangement* (《佈置》) that if there is a lack of overall and internal correlation between the objects in a work, then the work is sick; that is, it is difficult to give people the enjoyment of beauty. Su Shi of the Song Dynasty

once said in his essay on painting: “After studying painting, I believe that people, animals, palaces, and utensils all have regular shapes. As for mountains, rocks, bamboo, wood, water waves, and smoke, although they do not have regular shapes, they have common sense... Although the loss of regular shapes is limited to what is lost, it cannot be completely cured. If common sense is not appropriate, it will be abolished.”²

Obviously, Shen Zongqian inherited Su Shi’s aesthetic of common sense (常理) and, at the same time, he further deepened his ecological awareness. He said “Firstly, we need to determine the density, virtuality, and substance, clarify the general idea early, stylish and elegant sprinkle ink, and create a corresponding relationship between each other. When we open it up, we will follow each other to achieve consistency, and when we close it up, we will connect the whole body (先要將疏密虛實, 大意早定, 灑然落墨, 彼此相生相應, 濃淡相間而相成; 拆開則逐物有致, 合攏則通體聯絡).”³ In this point, Shen Zongqian emphasized the construction of the connected body (通體聯絡) world of objects, and pointed out the ecological realm of the interaction between objects and pen and brush (物物相生與筆筆相生). That is to say, in Shen Zongqian’s view whether a work can achieve the beauty of reality depends on whether it can create a picture of the interplay between pen and brush, and even the interplay between objects, constructing an ecological environment that is like nature (天成), casting (鑄就), one breath of ink (一氣貫通), and twists and turns that can be connected (曲折可通).

If this kind of connecting power (貫通之勢) cannot be manifested in the picture, then even if each local object is painted like a photograph, in Shen Zongqian’s view, it is still a fake painting (假畫) or dead painting (死畫). As Zhang Yanyuan said “Dead paintings fill the walls, like dirt? A real painting can see its vitality with just one stroke. Come out (死畫滿壁, 曷如汗墁? 真畫一劃, 見其生氣).”⁴ Later, Jing Hao of the Tang and Five dynasties discussed the authenticity of landscape painting in his book *Painting Notes* (《筆法記》), stating: “Pursuing mere similarity can only capture the outer form of an object, but misses its inner spirit; true artistic expression, however, fully embodies and harmoniously unifies both the outer form and the inner spirit. (似者得其形遺其氣, 真者氣質俱盛).”⁵ That is to say, a true painting should not only highlight the characteristics of each object, but also show the relationship between objects. It is the ecological atmosphere of “the mutual needs of things and the creation of pen and brush (物物相需, 筆筆相生)” as described by Shen Zongqian. Shen Zongqian believes

that the so-called interplay between pen and brush means that every stroke in the picture can interact and reflect with the front, back, left, right, and other strokes, as if there is a sudden inspiration of Qi communication (一氣相通). If the pen and brush are not related to each other, although they may look good individually, when viewed from a distance, the “objects are all strange” and do not form a cohesive whole, appearing both scattered and lacking real vitality.

“What is the mutual growth of pen and brush? When painting a person, the facial features are formed by the direction of the eyebrows and eyes, and the posture of the limbs is formed by the direction of the head and face. When making clothing patterns, a stroke must be placed first at the critical point to connect with the brush that is closely attached. As for the background, like making a tree, branches must be born from the trunk, leaves must be born from the wood. When making a stone, strokes that are broken due to the contour must be created, strokes that are rubbed due to the break must be created. And when bamboo and wood are hidden, moss and grass are embellished, there is always a sense of mutual growth.”⁶

So, what is the concept of the mutual needs of things? Shen Zongqian believed that only when the scenery in a work reaches a dialectical relationship of various opposites and unity can the form and color, virtual and real, complexity and simplicity of the scenery appear to coexist harmoniously, and achieve the state of “pulling a hair to move the whole body (牽一發而動全身).” “To make a painting that is nothing but the way of mutual growth and need, to cut and match it appropriately, to add and supplement it appropriately, so that players can see it from afar and up close, and it is all worth it. This is what we have achieved.”⁷

The theory of mutual generation and mutual need (相生相需論) proposed by Shen Zongqian is essentially his understanding of the realm of “the unity of heaven, earth, and all things (天地萬物一體).” Since Zhuangzi, a Taoist philosopher, first naturalized the concept of heaven (天), most literary and aesthetic scholars in later generations have regarded the return to the mutual creation and construction of nature as the highest standard of authenticity in their works of art, from the Tang Dynasty’s Zhang Yanyuan’s “Nature is above the highest grade (自然者, 為上品之上)” and “Lose the naturalness and then achieve a vivid and lifelike realm (夫失於自然而後神)”, to Shi Tao’s proposal of understanding the great principle of one painting (一畫): “then there is no reason that cannot be absorbed, and there is no state that cannot be exhausted (則理無不入而態無不盡也),” and “as deep as water, as hot as fire, and

as natural as not allowing a single hair to be strong (如水之就深，如火之炎上，自然而不容毫發強也)，”⁸ and so on. *Jiezhou Xuehua Bian* is no exception. Shen Zongqian not only recognized that the world is a region of accumulating spirits, but also that the spirituality between objects, and between people and objects, needs to be mutually felt, generated, and even developed, changed, and sublimated. The presentation of this original realm in the work should achieve the goal of “Connect the various parts together and form them separately (合之則統相聯屬，分之又各自成形)” “In short, the unity of qi to present the interest of its activities is what is called momentum (總之統乎氣以呈其活動之趣者，是即所謂勢也)”⁹

In summary, we find that Shen Zongqian’s theory of the interaction between brush and ink is essentially an ecological understanding of the construction of the real world of objects in his works. This realm can also be called the “realm of life.”

2. The Key to Creating Truth and Feeling in Harmony: Self-Awareness (自明) and Uncovering (去蔽)

Shen Zongqian believed that the authenticity of a work is precisely based on whether it can present the vitality and energy of Qi communication in the painting, which is essentially the consensus of masters throughout history. However, how can creators achieve such works with the connotation of truth?

Shen Zongqian advocated that creators should first have high standards and strict requirements for themselves, “to aspire to do first-class work, step by step, and not forget or help (要立誌做第一等功夫，循序漸進，勿忘勿助)”¹⁰ After the goal is clear, the next step is striving to approach the personality (格) of the sages of the past. The height of the pen frame actually depends on the height of the aesthetic creative subject’s personality (人格). Western modern philosopher Heidegger, when talking about true artistic creators, believed that the two major issues of returning to the true self are to first go to death and transcend sinking. The so-called transcendence and sinking refers to transcending the average state of daily life, not following others’ opinions, not wasting oneself in idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity, and not cutting off the connection between self and existence, thus causing the lack of Great Self. Returning to the source was the key path for Heidegger to rebuild his true self. Only by returning the emotions of the ego in daily life to the place of existence can we generate the true essence of the self, cut off all negative emotions of survival, and move towards a one pure emotion reflected

in a clear state. In this clear and bright light of emotions, the physical nature of things can be revealed, and human nature can be presented. The truth of beauty can also be placed into the construction of the world of works on its own.

In fact, as the culmination of Qing Dynasty painting studies in China, Shen Zongqian advocated for the high standards and uniqueness of personality (人格) in his creative ecological aesthetic system. In *Jiezhou Xuehua Bian* a special chapter is dedicated to the theory of establishing the grid (立格論), proposing four methods for seeking the height of the grid (求格之高): one is to break away from the secular utilitarian mentality and enter the state of emptiness and stillness (虛靜) as described by Zhuangzi; Shen Zongqian said “To clear one’s mind and dispel worldly concerns (清心地以消俗慮)” The second is to read more books, broaden one’s horizons, enrich one’s cultivation, and obtain opportunities to enter Tianmeng (天蒙). Because the works of ancient sages often embody the true meaning of the universe through the mystical nature of the heart, good reading (善讀書) can also reveal the realm of the truth of the great path. Third, Shen Zongqian believes that “early praise can reach several miles away (卻早譽以幾遠到),” which can play a certain role in the cultivation of creators returning to their true heart. Fourth, Shen Zongqian emphasized that creators should possess both innate talent and the ability to actively connect with refined individuals, absorbing their excellent potential: “Deep and profound cultivation is the true elegance and the highest physique (蘊深而植厚，乃是真正風雅，亦是最高體格)”¹¹

In summary, Shen Zongqian proposed that the foundation of establishing a character lies in first establishing lofty ideals and a realm of life, and then gradually reaching the state of conscience and heavenly principles of knowledge through a positive heart, sincerity, and understanding of things, thus constructing a new aesthetic image with a bright world in a state of harmony with the gods of all things. In fact, Shen Zongqian’s advocacy of standing up aims to achieve the openness of the true self. In the openness of the subject, the Qi (氣) and quality (質) of natural mountains and rivers are also uncovered (去蔽), thus opening up to creators and presenting their natural patterns, principles, veins, and networks. The facial expressions of the characters are also vivid and moving. In the continuous mutual illumination and uncovering of aesthetic subject and object, a clear and radiant realm (澄明的光輝之境) has been reached. Human emotions and physics have also been fully expressed through this! Shi Tao describes the process of subjective and objective feelings in this



Figure 1. Shen Zongqian, *Chunyang Liandan*, paper and coloring, 103.5×48.5cm, 1768, Qing dynasty.

kind of creation as encounter with gods (神遇) and transformation into traces (迹化).

As Xu Fuguan said in his *Collection of Essays on the History of Chinese Thought*: “Chinese culture is the culture of the heart. Some people believe that Chinese culture is subjective morality, which is opposite to objectivity. This is a great misunderstanding. The human heart is the root of value, and the heart is the subject of morality and art. However, ‘subject’ is not ‘subjective’. The commonly referred to ‘subjective’ refers to a person’s knowledge and desires. The manifestation of the



Figure 2. Shen Zongqian, *Zhulin Tingquan*, paper and coloring, 90.6×35.4cm, Qing dynasty.



Figure 3. Shen Zongqian, *Xisai Mountain Villa* (Part), paper and coloring, complete work, 26.37×289.28cm, Qing dynasty.

original heart requires first ‘self-restraint’, ‘ignorance without desires’, and ‘abstinence from desires’, that is, through a process of breaking free from the constraints of subjectivity, the nature of the heart can be revealed. Therefore, the heart as the root of value can only be established after overcoming subjectivity. At this point, objective things cannot be distorted by subjective prejudices and desires, and can only enter people’s hearts in their original form. Only then can objectivity truly be integrated with the heart to make judgments that match objectivity. It can be said that only when the value subject of human beings is presented can objective things stand in their rightful position and obtain true value. A heart that is not bound by prejudice or selfish desires can not only distinguish between good and evil, but is also good and evil.”¹²

For example, in the work *Chunyang Liandan* (《純陽煉丹圖》) (figure 1), Shen Zongqian vividly depicted the connotation of the above theory. The work presents the overall nature of mountains, rivers, and land through the serene and clear state of an alchemist.

Shen Zongqian believed that the arrival of this creative opportunity is “unstoppable, like the departure of a crossbow arrow from a bowstring, unpredictable, like the emergence of thunder (其不可遏也, 如弩箭之離弦, 其不可測也, 如震雷之出地).” This is how “prosperity and opportunity lead to the creation of an unattainable masterpiece (興與機會, 則可遇不可求之傑作成焉).”¹³ On the path to becoming a masterpiece, Shen Zongqian mentioned two key links that are worth our deep understanding: one is brush fusion (筆鎔), and the other is seizing power (取勢). As shown in *Zhulin Tingquan* (figure 2), he integrates his own brush fusion and taking momentum techniques into the mountains and waters, creating a myriad of appearances on paper that follow nature and continue to thrive.

The theory of brush fusion should be an extension of Shi Tao’s theory of transformation into traces. Shen Zongqian believed that the so-called brush fusion

“implies that when writing, there is a sense of Tao Rong’s everything, although not ink, and ink is already present in it (蓋言行筆之際, 有陶鑄一切之意, 雖不言墨, 而墨固已在其中).” To achieve such a powerful force in writing, the creator must be able to enter the realm of the too simple and inseparable cosmic origin. Shen Zongqian believed that cultivating and replenishing the true essence of energy is its core path. “When it is not yet decayed, one first desires to refine one’s qi, with a clear prejudice in the chest, and is pleased with the beauty of blood circulation and harmony between the beginning and the end (當於未落朽時, 先欲一氣團煉, 胸中卓然已有成見, 自得血脈貫通、首尾照應之妙).”¹⁴ “Therefore, in order to gain power, one must first cultivate one’s qi. If the qi can flow smoothly, then the power will be in harmony (故欲得勢, 必先培養其氣, 氣能流暢, 則勢自合拍).”¹⁵ As shown in his large-scale work *Xisai Mountain Villa* (Part) (figure 3), the combination of power and strength, emotion and scenery, and power can reveal the meaning of the gods, the Qi in the chest and the scenery in the eyes, and integrate Qi and refinement into the painting.

In Shen Zongqian’s view, momentum has visible forms, while Qi is invisible. When the conscience of the subject reaches the generation effect, the object where the intention is located can be connected to Qi, “the harmony of heaven and man can be obtained by hand (天人合發, 應手而得),”¹⁶ strokes are generated from the intention, the intention is generated from the brushwork, and the brushwork is seamlessly integrated. Therefore, it can blend the past and present, crossing the space (橫絕太空), and the overall yin and yang of the picture complement each other, just like the natural internal order, with smooth and harmonious Qi veins. As Heidegger said, truth is neither subject nor object. It is a clear realm that arises from the fusion of subject and object. When this realm fills the inner world of aesthetic creators, the spirituality of external scenery is also associated with the subject, constantly ascending in the painting. The life of things and the inner spirit of the subject reach a mutual

light network, and the light of truth also reconstructs the unity of the self and the object in the work, presenting a truth similar to the composition of the world. This truth, Shen Zongqian used a more understandable philosophy to tell us, is that the entire world is filled with the power of opening and closing, and the opposite and complementary. So in the shaping of painting images, only by grasping this power at all times and everywhere can we reach the realm of being in harmony with nature and sharing the same virtues as nature! To understand the principles of painting, from paragraphs to trees and stones, one must tidy up their hair and brush, and then it can be said that ink and brush can connect with nature. This is the connotation of Shen Zongqian's theory of aesthetic creation and true feeling.

3. The Significance of Authenticity Appraisal (鑒真) in Contemporary Art Education

Shen Zongqian's *Jiezhou Xuehua Bian* essentially discusses painting theory and techniques from the perspective of painting inheritance, integrating analysis, criticism, and teaching. Upon closer reading of the text, we will find that Shen Zongqian extensively discussed painting education in at least six places. But overall, he always hoped to focus on key issues when studying the works of ancient people, rather than just superficial appearances. The key issue is the homologous and symbiotic relationship between people and objects, as well as between objects themselves, expressed in ancient paintings and the corresponding brushwork that matches this relationship. In Shen Zongqian's view, if readers can discover the beauty of this connection in the great works of masters throughout history and be good at activating the ink and brush essence in ancient creations, and by forming their own unique artistic language characteristics, then he believes that this inheritance will obtain its truth!

Heidegger also talked about the understanding of the realm of truth in the works of masters in his theory of the aesthetic appreciation of art, calling it maintaining truth (葆真). In Heidegger's view, if works with the implication of truth do not meet suitable readers who can enter the realm of existence, the truth images created by the author will not be truly understood and it will be difficult to exert their important social value and function. Heidegger said "The preservation of a work means being immersed in the openness of the existence that arises in the work." In fact, Shen Zongqian also earnestly taught future learners from the perspective of discerning truth. The content of *Jiezhou Xuehua Bian*

is relatively rich. This section combines the current situation of contemporary art education to discuss Shen Zongqian's comments that are beneficial to contemporary young artists.

Firstly, Shen Zongqian's theory of writing as if there were objects is precisely the aspect that many contemporary painting enthusiasts lack. Shen Zongqian believed that those who study painting should master the art of brushwork and not use extravagance instead of substance. The pen seems to have the true appearance of the object, and its form, appearance, sense of body, quantity, and texture should fully express their spirit (一一盡其靈, 而足其神) in order to grasp the core of painting: "The ancient people's skills, but what can be gained from starting from here (古人工夫, 不過從此下手而有得焉)." ¹⁷ And he particularly emphasized that if you don't put effort into this aspect, even if you are extremely intelligent and sensitive, you will only waste your talents. In essence, Shen Zongqian's emphasis on objects in the pen (筆中有物) advocates that artists can transform themselves and objects in their hearts, and form a transformation image that can make people immerse themselves in the collision of aesthetic subject and object feelings. This kind of view seems to be on the painter's pen, and the author immerses themselves in this situation, presenting the overall atmosphere of it on paper and pen! Shen Zongqian believed that a deep grasp of authenticity is the goal that scholars should establish from the beginning. Only in this way can they feel like gods (如有神), enter at a glance (一超即入), and reach the essential characteristics of things. Otherwise, they can only write superficially, only achieving a similar appearance. As they continue this way, they will aim further and further. Therefore, Shen Zongqian advocated that "scholars of ancient Chinese philosophy should not seek too many, but first gather their strength, and from then on, there will be no danger of going astray (故誌學之士, 且勿求多, 先鼓定力, 從此著腳, 便無旁門外道之虞矣)."

Although Shen Zongqian's theory has been around for a long time, it still plays an important guiding role in the teaching of traditional Chinese painting in contemporary art! Many of our students nowadays pay great attention to the surface strokes and details of copying, without delving into the understanding of cultural connotations, resulting in the disadvantage of not being able to capture the essence of the ancients. The mountains, rivers, plants, and trees depicted in their works may appear similar in appearance, but when viewed from a distance and overall, it is difficult to feel their vitality of life (生生之活力)! The deliberately drawn object is not like the object is free.

Secondly, Shen Zongqian's method of using one's own intention (以己之意) to empathize with the meaning of ancient paintings, which combines the aesthetics of discerning truth, is also very valuable in contemporary teaching. Copying is an essential basic skill in teaching landscape painting. Shen Zongqian emphasized the importance of mastering the Tao (要得道) in copying. "Without mastering the Tao, even if one does not change a single thing, one's own image will be varied, and I will force myself to fill the paper. If one masters the Tao, there will be many and I may be few, and they will be heavy and I may be light, which does not affect the general idea or the painting theory. The natural harmony between brush and ink is the benefit of copying (未得其道, 縱一絲不改, 彼自氣象萬千, 我則牽強滿紙. 如得其道, 則彼多而我偶少, 彼重而我或輕, 無妨於大概, 無害於畫理, 而筆墨之間, 自然合拍, 乃是臨摹得益功夫)." ¹⁸ Shen Zongqian advocated for discerning truth as the core and encouraged learners to follow the path of understanding the origin realm in the works of masters, so that scholars can achieve success in their creations without exceeding the norm. Here, Shen Zongqian proposed specific methods. First, at the beginning of copying, one should first take a certain section from a master's work, carefully appreciate, comprehend, and discern its essence, and then copy the entire section as a whole. Second, after a family has matured in the chest, they will be exposed to the methods of various families. At a certain point, scholars will find that all families are at the origin, as if exhaling from the same nostril. On the basis of this understanding, the author can communicate with them with their own brushwork, achieving a unique style without losing the inheritance of ancient methods.

Shen Zongqian provided a more in-depth interpretation about the aesthetics of copying in the chapter "Imitation of the Ancient (摹古)." He believed that copying was to use the life and temperament of modern people, and through the intermediary of ancient works' ink and brush, to feel the temperament of ancient people, so as to achieve the intersection of ancient and modern life, time and space, in understanding: in ancient

times, there was me, and I was in ancient times; imitation of ancient times is precious because it embodies the true nature of my life. "Abandoning me for the sake of the past not only loses me, but also the past (假舍我以求古, 不但失我, 也失古也)." ¹⁹

Shen Zongqian has a clear and thorough understanding of this issue. He believes that the paintings of ancient masters were created in a dynamic environment, rather than being created by craftsmen using templates. Therefore, in the process of copying by modern people, we should not adopt a fixed mentality and blindly adhere to geographical features. Instead, we should grasp the essence (究竟) of the famous relics (名跡) and use our own lives to sense the subtle aspects, so as to have our own face. "Moreover, the works of ancient people are full of ingenious spiritual mechanisms that come from the wrist, and even the ancients did not know the reason behind them. How can later generations imitate them?" ²⁰ Shen Zongqian believed, "Therefore, those who value the calligraphy and painting of ancient people also value their essence and spirit (故貴古人筆墨者, 貴其精氣也)." ²¹ If we can use the rules of ancient people and utilize our own spiritual abilities, even if we cannot achieve the achievements of ancient sages, we can still greatly unleash our own spiritual and interesting skills so as to gradually present one's distinctive language style!

In summary, Shen Zongqian viewpoints undoubtedly still have a very important enlightening effect on today's traditional Chinese painting education, so it is still necessary to conduct further in-depth research on *Jiezhou Xuehua Bian*.

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ENDNOTES

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《芥舟學畫編》創真生態審美內涵的詮釋及其當代價值研究

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摘要: 《芥舟學畫編》作為清代乾隆朝後期出現的一部具有體系性的畫學著作, 在中國畫論史中獨樹一幟, 作者沈宗騫於其中多強調不應將繪畫看作「玩物適情」的藝事, 而側重闡發「畫道」的真理性內容, 將藝術真實觀與畫者的心性、筆墨的技藝聯系起來。其藝術「創真」思想經由兩個階段而成: 一是從藝術創真的作品論出發, 構建真實世界的生生之境; 二是由創作主體陶鑄之心性合於行筆落墨的繪畫語言, 在語言論的構成中進入融「人情」與「物理」的審美感合狀態。另一方面, 沈宗騫的「創真」論始終不離創作實踐, 指明繪畫創作非摹仿式的, 應探求如自然一般運作而貫通筆墨之道, 接續古今, 其中蘊含的生態審美內涵對我們當代的美術教育仍然有著積極的價值。

關鍵詞: 創真; 生態; 當代