Stylization and individuation: the concept and style of space in Chinese and Persian painting images in Han and Tang Dynasties

Yuqi ZHANG
School of Art & Design, Shaanxi University of Science & Technology, Xi’an 710021, Shaanxi, China. https://orcid.org/0009-0008-2926-441X

Abstract
During the Han and Tang Dynasties, the exchange of handicraft culture between China and Persia significantly promoted economic development, advanced diplomatic relations, improved the material and cultural life of the people, enriched their spiritual enjoyment, and held a critical position in the history of East-West handicraft cultural exchange. The methods of image composition in Chinese painting and Persian miniature painting differ, yet there are mutual influences. The images reflect the national uniqueness and cultural diversity of both countries due to the differences in functional space. This paper explores the communication between China and Persia in painting images during the Han and Tang Dynasties by examining three aspects: composition, space concept, and style of Chinese painting and Persian detailed photos. It reveals the mutual influences formed in exploring stylization and individuation while maintaining the distinctive characteristics of the art communication path.

Keywords Han and Tang dynasties, Persian painting, Space concept, Style

During the Han and Tang Dynasties, China and Persia maintained a continuous friendly diplomatic relationship. Both artistic exchanges, as representatives of material culture, and religious communications, as aspects of spiritual culture, enriched the material lives and national cultures of the two peoples. During this period, traditional Chinese paintings and images developed unique spatial concepts and styles, reflecting the character traits and aesthetic ideals of the Chinese nation.

Persian miniature painting, a quintessential and invaluable representation of Persian medieval art, originated with the decoration of border patterns in the Qur’an. It was extensively used in book illustrations and covers, jewelry boxes, mirror frames, badges, and other items. The themes of Persian miniature paintings initially focused on myths, fables, and legends, gradually incorporating history, love, war, and hunting. These artworks emphasized the depiction of intricate
details and the overall delicacy of the images, forming a distinctive and localized Persian style that accentuated the beauty of decoration.

Throughout its artistic evolution, Persian miniature painting continuously absorbed the artistic styles and cultural essences of various foreign nations, eventually developing its own unique art form.

1 Composition Methods of Chinese and Persian Painting Images in the Han and Tang Dynasties

During the Han and Tang Dynasties, the composition of Chinese and Persian painting images was predominantly horizontal. To depict a complete world within a limited space, craftsmen had to meticulously organize the elements of the picture using specific techniques, with the primary focus being the composition of the image.

1.1 The Overall Layout of the Image

1.1.1 Horizontal Layout

The horizontal composition, which extends horizontally in length, is more common in Chinese murals and scroll paintings. For instance, the legendary painting “Han Xizai’s Evening Banquet” (Figure 1) employs this method to gradually reveal Han Xizai’s activities over the course of one night. This comic-strip-like technique often appears in Buddhist-themed murals. A typical example of horizontal composition is found in the Northern Zhou Dynasty painting “The Story of the Buddha” (Figure 2) in Cave 290 of the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang. This mural is vertically wide and arranged in several layers, depicting plots of multiple times and spaces within a single picture.

Some scholars have suggested that this technique was introduced from the Western regions. Although many horizontal frescoes have been discovered in the murals of Han Tombs, they typically depict only a single storyline. Before the advent of Buddhism, there were few compositional forms in Chinese murals that expressed continuous storylines. Most Chinese mural paintings are executed in a horizontally continuous development and left-right symmetrical format. For example, the murals of Yongle Palace and the Dunhuang Grottoes murals achieve subtle variations within the consistent left-right composition, creating a unified and serene formal beauty.

Additionally, this practice highlights the importance of the subject matter, making it the most common and influential work in Chinese mural paintings. China has a long history and rich tradition of mural art, characterized by its horizontal layout and continuous storytelling.

1.1.2 Pingyuan Style

The Pingyuan (flat and far) composition style, which involves freely arranging elements on a flat plane, is often seen in the paintings of Sassanid Persia. Persian fine painting interprets Persian aesthetics, and its decorative and symbolic connotations have become a carrier of distinct
national characteristics in Islamic art. As a result, fine painting has evolved into a unique type of craft painting. Etymologically, miniature painting was a form of “color decoration” painting—characterized by its limited size, meticulous drawing, and brilliant color.

The composition method of Persian miniature painting is freely arranged in a flat space, akin to the Pingyuan composition in Chinese painting, narrating the content of the picture without the use of the focal perspective found in Western painting. The flat and far composition style allows creators to more intuitively express their perspective on the pictorial space and provides a subjective imaginative space for artistic expression.
Persian miniature painting demonstrates its comprehensive layout through visual observation, using local light and shade techniques to establish spatial relationships on a flat plane. The influential Persian Sassanian miniature paintings from the 3rd century to the 7th century AD marked the earliest period of using naturalism to depict concrete and vivid objects. During this period, miniature paintings employed naturalism to illustrate animal images. For instance, in the illustrations of the “Chronicles of Kings,” Rustam’s horse hunting scene (Figure 3) serves as a decorative pattern in the codex illustrations, with explanation and preaching becoming one of its main purposes. The horizontal composition technique became the primary method for emotional narration.

Persian miniature painting not only has a strong decorative character but also allows viewers to directly understand the content of the picture, imparting a sense of stability and order. The image composition of Persian miniatures can be traced back to the traditional paintings of Persia Sassanid and China’s Central Plains.

Figure 3: Rustam’s horse chase in the Book of Kings
1.2 The Dividing Line of the Image

The dividing line in painting refers to the visual segmentation within the plane image, playing a crucial role in rendering the subject's temperament. In Persian miniatures, the dense lines necessitate the clever use of dividing lines to segment the plot of the image. Different means, such as simple lines, Islamic patterns, and Arabic calligraphy, are employed to divide the picture. The length and thickness of the lines in miniatures complement the decorative patterns, creating a unique exotic beauty and charm.

Given the limited space in Persian miniature painting, the rhythmic and structured lines enhance the order of the composition. Persian painters possess a unique aesthetic concept of line control. They use decorative lines to outline forms, ensuring that the lines in the picture are smooth and regular, with the line tone conveying emotional information. This is akin to the cadence of the brush in Chinese calligraphy.

The segmentation of images by miniature painters draws on the use of lines in traditional Chinese painting. Lines hold the same decorative significance in both Persian miniatures and Chinese paintings, serving to enhance the visual and emotional impact of the artwork.

2 The Concept of Space in Chinese and Persian Painting Images in the Han and Tang Dynasties

The decorative pictures of Chinese and Persian craft images in the Han and Tang Dynasties are mostly displayed on two-dimensional planes, which poses certain spatial limitations compared to the three-dimensional space expression in modern paintings. In this method of art image composition, artisans aimed to present a complete world within a limited space.

2.1 Planarization and Trivialization

2.1.1 Planarization

Planarization is a commonly used form of decorative painting. The painter intentionally transforms three-dimensional objects into flat two-dimensional patterns, making the picture effect more subjective and highly stylized. Unlike European painting, which emphasizes three-dimensional space and uses focal perspective to express vertical, horizontal, and high three-dimensional effects, Chinese painting attempts to build three-dimensional space within a two-dimensional plane, expressing the panoramic style of objects based on scatter perspective. Persian painting, on the other hand, seeks pure visual enjoyment of two-dimensional space and also employs scatter perspective to represent objects.

The two-dimensional representation in Persian miniatures is closely related to the prohibition of idolatry in Islam. The figures in the paintings often have round faces, resembling the Bodhisattva images influenced by Buddhism. These figures are soft and gentle, rarely depicted frontally, and are mostly shown in three-quarter or profile views. In handling spatial relationships, Persian painters place objects closer to the viewer at the bottom of the picture and those
further away at the top, with the layout distinguishing near and far objects. They use lines to outline the layers of the picture and flat color blocks to achieve pure decoration.

In shaping decorative images, Persian art often adopts more flat and stylized processing. For example, in the war illustration in the “Book of Kings” (Figure 4), the painter uses flat composition and the interspersing of figures and buildings to express spatial relationships. The depth of the characters’ skin tones distinguishes character levels, while three-quarter views depict facial expressions in a stylized manner. This drawing uses lines to delineate figures, plants, animals, and architectural forms, enhancing the picture’s depth and fully embodying the unique decorative art beauty of Persian miniatures.

In terms of painting concepts and theories, Iranian artists are entirely devoted to their own religious and cultural spirit. The spatial concept in miniature painting is fundamentally different from that in European and Chinese paintings.

Figure 4: Illustration from the Book of Kings Ahab at war with the Yahaites

The spatial representation of Chinese painting differs significantly from that of European painting. First, Chinese painting uses scatter perspective instead of fixed-point perspective, mean-
ing that there are several focal points in a painting rather than one fixed focus. In Chinese painting, there are three distances: from the bottom of the mountain to the top, known as high distance; from the front of the mountain to behind it, called far-reaching; and from the near mountains to the far ones, known as Pingyuan. The painter’s creative vision flows, rather than being fixed in one place.

Secondly, traditional Chinese painting de-emphasizes the expression of light and shadow and instead emphasizes the creation of artistic conception, rather than the representation of three-dimensional space. Third, traditional Chinese painting utilizes the flow of “qi” (energy) and the relative arrangement of near and far to depict natural landscapes such as mountains and rivers.

The uniqueness of Persian miniature painting lies in its clear distinctions from both Eastern and Western painting styles. First, the painter’s composition has multiple visual focal points. These focal points shift with the viewing angle, the volume of objects near and far remains the same, and inner and outer spaces are presented on the same plane, often creating an illusion. This illusion captures the viewer’s attention, encouraging deeper engagement with the painting.

Additionally, while neither traditional Chinese painting nor Persian miniature painting directly represents three-dimensional space, Chinese painting distinguishes landscape visual space by using near large and far small techniques. Therefore, compared to Chinese painting, Persian miniature painting possesses a more flat decorative sense in both color and composition.

2.1.2 Three-dimensional

The inner spirit of traditional Chinese culture and the unique aesthetic taste of the Chinese nation have given rise to the distinctive spatial expression in traditional Chinese painting, which uses static modeling to convey the dynamic art of time and space. The composition of many mural paintings is not only rich in philosophical meaning but also holds modern aesthetic reference value. The flexible and adaptable composition form is well-suited for depicting scenes with numerous plots and scenarios.

For example, the themes and contents of many mural paintings are closely related to religion, with most pictures depicted in multiple scenarios. These scenarios are painted by artists using rich and free imagination, focusing on mental imagery. Traditional mural painting has consistently employed line modeling techniques, and traditional scroll landscape painting has continued this tradition. However, the line expressiveness and generality in scroll landscape painting do not match the depth found in traditional mural painting. Historically, the most accomplished line drawers in Chinese history were mural painters.

To incorporate the subject and surrounding scenes into the same picture, artists primarily used scatter perspective, a unique method in Chinese painting. This technique, combined with the “looking at the big and looking at the small” approach, allows for greater freedom, avoiding the spatial limitations imposed by nature. Like Persian miniatures, this method is not bound by fixed perspective rules, providing painters with more creative liberty.

The space in traditional mural painting, similar to that in scroll painting, creates a three-dimensional world within a two-dimensional space. It often represents the spatial relationship
between the foreground and background through planarization, interleaving, and overlapping of images. The scene is fully displayed, varied, and complex, often filled with numerous figures and their life plots.

For instance, in Cave 061 of the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang and the mural painting of Wutai Mountain (Figure 5), each spiritual trace in “Manjusri’s Transformation into Reality” implies an important Buddhist story. The painting artists use unique Chinese methods such as bird’s-eye view, distance reduction, and scatter perspective to express the vast Wutai Mountain. There are multiple visual centers in the picture, and each small part can be regarded as an independent picture. Compared with the Western focal perspective, this method makes the landscape appear more grand and imposing.

Figure 5: Wutai Mountain Map

2.2 “Frame” and “Leave Blank”

2.2.1 Picture frame

The “picture frame” in traditional cognition is a device designed to protect, display, and enhance the expressive force of paintings. The “frame” of Persian miniature painting is an integral part of its overall composition, imbued with creative consciousness. In Western painting, the physical frame serves as a decorative supplement, reflecting the integrity of the work and enhancing its interest and decoration after completion. In contrast, the “frame” of Persian miniature painting is a flat element drawn on paper by the painter according to their own subjective will. It is an expression of the artist’s emotion and a decorative element intimately connected with the work itself.

One characteristic of Persian miniatures is their clear and obvious borders. Setting such borders requires the painter to fully incorporate specific images of characters, plants, mountains, rivers, and the specific plots of stories and legends. This pursuit of rigor and integrity aims to express a broad and rich scene within a limited picture. There is no fixed format for the “frame” in Persian fine painting. The most common frame styles are single line and double line frames, characterized by neat and uniform pictures that strictly adhere to stylization.
The frame styles in Persian fine painting can be quite unique. For instance, some images use a “superframe” technique. In an illustration from the manuscript of the “Book of Kings,” the story of Rustam being saved from a lion’s mouth by a horse (see Figure 6) features a horse that extends beyond the frame, adding a dynamic sense to the scene. Another illustration from the “Book of Kings,” depicting a noble hunt (see Figure 7), shows a frame within a frame, adorned with patterns.

As an indispensable part of miniatures, the “frame” integrates the plots depicted in a flat visual space and closely links the elements inside and outside the frame. This not only enhances the decoration of the picture but also reflects the painter’s subjective aesthetic consciousness.

Figure 6: Illustration of "Kings" The horse rescues the sleeping Rustam

2.2.2 Leave White Space

There are differences in connotation and layout between the “blank” in Persian miniatures and the “blank” in Chinese paintings. The white space in Chinese painting is a careful arrangement by the painter, serving as the finishing touch to the picture. It is essential for expressing artistic conception and spirit. For example, in the Tang Dynasty painting “Jiangqian Snow Scroll” by Wang
Wei, privately collected in Japan, the white space makes the picture more empty and charming, embodying Su Shi’s saying: “there is painting in poetry, and there is poetry in painting.”

In contrast, the white space in Persian miniatures is closely related to the layout of the picture frame. This white space often appears as seemingly useless areas, which are sometimes cut out when the painting is bound, centering the fine painting on the paper. Persian detail painters do not arrange their compositions based on the size of the paper but draw the frame according to their own subjective ideas. Thus, the frame defines the compositional scope, resulting in large areas of white space. However, this “white” is not completely empty. Sometimes, patterns that echo the theme are drawn within this space.

For example, in an illustration from the “Book of Kings” showing the roc bird flying to assist Rustam’s birth (Figure 8), the theme picture occupies the bottom left of the paper. The birds, shaped like the Chinese phoenix, leap into the frame, while other animals and plants, such as lions, leopards, and deer, fill the white space. This approach forms part of the fine painting’s decorative art and should not be overlooked.

It can be seen that the “frame” and “blank space” in Persian painting images represent the unique charm and innovation of Persian miniatures. Painters can set limitations on the painting...
paper but also transcend these limitations, making the picture fresh and interesting. This approach fully demonstrates the ingenuity and new ideas in the painting, highlighting the distinctive artistic style and creative spirit of Persian miniatures.

3 The Style of Chinese and Persian Painting Images in the Han and Tang Dynasties

3.1 Stylization and Individuation of Image Styles

The images in Persian crafts tend to be more stylized to unify the style and make them easily recognizable, which, to some extent, aids in the spread of Persian-style images. The universality and commonality of Persian miniature painting make it a highly stylized art form. When a stylized painting becomes a classic, it possesses a special aesthetic appeal. The creative subject matter, forms, and skills of predecessors serve as models for later generations of apprentices to imitate, essentially inheriting the stylization in both form and content.

The classic stories and scenes in Persian literary works have retained their narrative and plot...
charm through the repeated depictions in miniatures across different times. These highly stylized representations continue to attract public interest and readership, showcasing the aesthetic value and enduring appeal of Persian art within its stylistic framework. This consistent aesthetic identity is a testament to the unique charm and cultural significance of Persian miniature painting.

When describing specific plots, Persian miniatures pay attention to the universality and commonality of the subject. They capture the personality and particularity of the subject with human eyes and summarize the universality and commonality of the figure through the painter’s understanding. People’s understanding of universality and generality is derived from many personalities and particularities, which require thought and reflection. It is the universality and generality that people realize after a certain amount of contact, which they then incorporate into their understanding.

In the eyes of God, all people and things are the same, and human memory is the understanding granted by God, often obscured by the complexities of the world. After long and repeated training, the innate memory of a miniature painter is awakened, and the miniature painting presents a universal image. Persian miniature painting inherits the beauty of the artistic conception of Eastern poetry and painting while absorbing the rigorous order of Byzantine painting. For example, the miniature painting “The King and His Seven Domed Pavilions of Different Colors” (see Figure 9), housed in the Cleveland Museum of Art, uses numerous straight lines to geometrically divide the picture, forming orderly spaces of varying sizes.

In this geometric space, the round and soft figures break the monotony of the formula and add infinite interest to the rigorous and orderly picture. The composition includes squares and circles, unifying curves and straight lines. The delicate figures are arranged in neat combinations, and the lines are soft and intricate, complementing the geometric architecture, tapestries, and doors and windows.

The essence of the picture conveyed by Chinese craft images lies in the expression of individual characteristics. The decorative pictures involved in Chinese arts and crafts focus more on capturing the spirit and essence rather than lifelike accuracy. Chinese crafts emphasize personalized creation to highlight the style of the maker and the identity of the user, allowing for flexible learning and innovation based on different objects of consumption and appreciation.

Since the Wei, Jin, Southern, and Northern Dynasties, Chinese figure painting has gradually become a formal and complete type of painting. From Shaikh’s “Six Methods,” we can discern the “vividness” that Chinese figure painting highly values. These methods also reveal the creation requirements for other art forms, such as calligraphy, furniture, and garden landscapes.

During the Sassanid Dynasty, with the improvement of color concepts and artistic techniques, along with the understanding of light and color from Byzantium and the influence of Eastern painting paradigms, Persian miniature painting also reached a complete and systematic level. In figure painting, the grasp of verve in Persian miniatures is crucial in shaping the distinctive personality or characteristics of the subject. The outline, posture, facial features, and clothing of the figures collectively create the effect of “likeness” to someone. At the same time, “likeness” also embodies the commonality of the figures.
3.2 The “Protagonist” and “Omniscient” Perspective of the Image

3.2.1 The “Protagonist” Perspective

The “protagonist” perspective in an image refers to the position and function of the central figure established in contrast to other elements in the composition. This contrast mainly exists in figure murals, where size variations create a visual effect of convergence, expressing relationships of strength and weakness and highlighting the important position of the main figure. This approach unifies the painting, emphasizing differences in status and identity among figures while maintaining overall commonality and connection. It creates a strong sense of rhythm and aesthetic harmony, aligning with traditional Chinese aesthetics—size contrast, density contrast, and the interplay of gathering and scattering.

For example, Yan Liben’s figure painting “Picture of Emperors of All Dynasties” (Figure 10) from the Tang Dynasty uses the “protagonist” perspective to structure the image. Even if viewers cannot identify the protagonist’s identity among the figures, they can immediately discern the status of the figures at a glance through the composition.
3.2.2 “Omniscient” Perspective

The “omniscient” perspective in Persian painting images refers to the way decorative images on craft works depict what we see with our naked eyes, without altering the presentation of objects due to the perspective method of near and far. This painting language uses multiple perspectives to show different events occurring in different places within the same picture. In Islamic belief, as seen through the eyes of Allah, objects do not disappear because of obstacles. Although people’s naked eyes can be deceived, the eyes of the heart remain clear.

This perspective suggests that although people may appear in different sizes in the painting, in reality, they are all the same size, reflecting a perfectionist vision. Persian paintings rarely focus on partial scenes; instead, they are often rich and grand in content, designed to satisfy both psychological satisfaction and visual enjoyment.

Persian painters use bird’s-eye view observation and the artistic techniques of space omission and space juxtaposition to lay out the “omniscient” composition angle. First, painters often use a top-down perspective to represent things, allowing the viewer to have a complete view of the picture when facing it. Since Allah is supreme, He should be seen from the highest vantage point. Therefore, the adoption of the “God” perspective is also a tribute to Allah.

Secondly, space omission involves removing superfluous objects that hinder the understanding of the main subject, using the frame to show what is happening in different spaces within the same picture. Thirdly, space juxtaposition involves dividing several rooms within a building and arranging them into the same picture. For example, in the Persian miniature painting “Zal Climbing to Ludaba” (see Figure 11), now housed in the Art Institute of Chicago, the painter uses walls to divide the picture and employs space omission to remove parts that obstruct the view. This allows the activities of people outside the wall and the layout and furnishings inside the room to be clearly seen. At the same time, spatial juxtaposition is used to show stories occurring in different spaces within the same picture.

This painting perspective, with its “omniscient” effect, enhances the narrative of the picture, making the plot unified and complete within the same plane space.

4 Articulation

Images are never static; they are attached to specific eras and civilizations. Image exchange not only provides various choices for artistic creation but also offers visual evidence for the history of cultural exchange among different regions and nations. Persian craft images depict the inner feelings of artisans and their interpretations of the objective world, serving as a typified visual language. On the other hand, Chinese craft images use pen and ink to convey personal ideals, uniting reality and idealism. These images interpret the thoughts of ancient Chinese literati and express Chinese wisdom.

In the continuous dialogue between art exchange activities and surrounding regions, static images integrate with local culture, constructing a process of imitation, variation, expansion, and re-creation. Whether in Chinese traditional painting or Persian miniature painting, different art
forms initially carry certain symbolic meanings. However, through continuous communication and integration, the original symbolic meanings gradually evolve into richer cultural connotations, forming new visual images. This phenomenon applies not only to the exchange and dissemination of painting images between China and Persia during the Han and Tang Dynasties but also holds reference value for the study of art form exchanges in various regions.

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**Author Biography**
Yuqi Zhang, was born on 1990, Doctor of History, Lecturer, School of Art & Design, Shaanxi University of Science & Technology, research interests: History of art and culture, cultural exchange of Silk Road craft, lacquer craft, etc. Email: 706420696@qq.com, https://orcid.org/0009-0008-2926-441X.

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Figure 11: “Zal’s Climb to Ludaba”

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