

A Comparative Study of the Concept of “Time” in Chinese and Western Painting

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ABSTRACT

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This study compares how “time” is conceived and represented in Chinese and Western painting through pictorial narration, viewing mode, and cultural temporality. Using comparative visual analysis of representative Chinese handscroll/landscape traditions and Western Renaissance-to-modern works, the paper identifies two dominant patterns: Chinese painting tends to articulate temporality through unfolding sequences and mobile viewing that integrate time and space, while Western painting more often concentrates temporality into a framed instant through composition and perspectival organization. The study argues that these pictorial differences correspond to broader cultural orientations toward cyclical/continuous versus linear/eventful temporality. It concludes that the two traditions are complementary and offers implications for contemporary cross-cultural visual practice.

1. Introduction

Time and space have long been enduring themes in artistic creation. In the eighteenth century, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing distinguished painting from poetry by treating painting as a spatial art and poetry as a temporal art. In *Laocoon*, Lessing (1766/1984) argued that painters should select a single, narratively suggestive moment from which viewers can infer what precedes and follows. This principle encouraged Western painters to condense temporal development into a fixed viewpoint and a decisive instant. The moment therefore became central to Western pictorial temporality: a static image could imply duration by concentrating a dynamic sequence into one expressive configuration.

Later theorists complicated this spatial-temporal division. W. J. T. Mitchell (1994) argued that image and text continually interact, while Keith Moxey (2013) emphasized that images acquire temporal force through historically situated acts of viewing. Chinese painting offers a materially different viewing structure. The handscroll is encountered section by section as it is unrolled, and its shifting viewpoints turn visual perception into a durational process (Cahill, 1996; Wu, 1996). Rather than freezing a single instant, the

format organizes space as an unfolding experience in which the viewer's movement and attention become part of pictorial time.

Accordingly, Chinese painting does not adhere to the fixation of a single moment but emphasizes time in flow. Through continuous scroll formats and dispersed viewpoints, the viewer enters a temporal journey that unfolds with the act of viewing (Cahill, 1996; Wu, 1996). For example, *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* guides the gaze along a winding horizontal route and creates the sensation of traveling across space and time. These cultural and philosophical divergences define the core issue of this study: how do Chinese and Western paintings differently perceive, structure, and represent time? What philosophical roots shape these variations, and how might the two traditions inform contemporary art practice? This paper addresses these questions through a comparative framework grounded in iconology, visual semiotics, and philosophical aesthetics.

2. Literature Review

Western art theory and Chinese aesthetics offer distinct but related approaches to time in painting. In *Laocoon*, Lessing (1766/1984) distinguished spatial from temporal arts and proposed that painting should select a condensed, narratively suggestive moment. Viewers could then infer the event's temporal sequence from a static image. This account strongly shaped Western discussions of pictorial temporality: Renaissance perspective reinforced a fixed viewpoint, turning the painting into a framed stage that concentrates motion within an extended present.

E. H. Gombrich (1964), in *Moment and Movement in Art*, questioned any rigid confinement of painting to one instant. Through numerous examples, he showed how composition, contour, and visual ambiguity can suggest movement in a static image. This argument accords with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1964) phenomenological aesthetics: viewing is embodied and durational, so a painting's temporality also emerges through the viewer's perceptual participation.

Contemporary scholar Keith Moxey (2013), in *Visual Time: The Image in History*, proposed that the historicity of images lies not only in their production but also in later acts of perception and interpretation. His account provides a cross-cultural perspective on visual time. Meanwhile, Erwin Panofsky (1939) examined temporal imagery iconologically. His analysis of the Father Time motif showed how symbols such as the ouroboros, winged figures, and hourglasses change meaning across historical contexts. This perspective demonstrates that pictorial symbols of time are shaped by the philosophical assumptions of each period.

In Chinese art theory, temporality is often embedded in discussions of spatial organization, vital resonance, and *yijing* (artistic conception). Landscape handscrolls and narrative scrolls ask viewers to connect successive sections through an extended act of looking, allowing finite pictorial surfaces to imply temporal continuity (Cahill, 1996; Wu, 1996). The material form of the scroll therefore contributes directly to the temporal experience of the image.

Modern scholarship has described this viewing structure as processional and durational. James Cahill (1996) connected poetic painting to a viewer's progressive encounter with imagery, while Wu Hung (1996) emphasized that the material formats and cultural

conventions of Chinese painting shape how an image is experienced. Together, these accounts explain why a handscroll can integrate spatial extension with temporal continuity without relying on a single fixed viewpoint.

The handscroll can thus be understood as a form of processional art: the viewer physically unrolls and rerolls the work, encountering only part of the composition at a time (Cahill, 1996). Unlike the Western framed picture, which normally presents a bounded field at once, the scroll distributes visual information across a sequence and makes the duration of viewing integral to its meaning (Wu, 1996).

This material distinction also affects pictorial narrative. Chinese handscrolls and murals may connect successive scenes, repeat figures, and guide the gaze along paths or architectural sequences. These devices temporalize space by allowing the viewer to reconstruct event order while moving through the image (Cahill, 1996; Wu, 1996). Western painting, particularly after the consolidation of linear perspective, more often compressed a narrative into one decisive scene, although later artists repeatedly challenged this convention (Gombrich, 1964; Lessing, 1766/1984).

After Renaissance perspective established a stable viewing position, Western pictorial narrative increasingly favored depth-oriented, instantaneous scenes. Movement was condensed within perspectival construction, and the frame presented one temporal slice (Lessing, 1766/1984). Chinese painting, by contrast, continued to exploit scroll-based formats in which spatial succession and temporal succession could operate together (Cahill, 1996; Wu, 1996). These are broad tendencies rather than absolute divisions, but they clarify why the two traditions often produce different viewing rhythms.

Visual semiotics provides a further way to examine pictorial time. Images can organize temporal meaning through repeated figures, directional paths, seasonal motifs, light, gesture, and spatial sequence. Mitchell (1994) emphasized the interaction between visual and verbal modes, while Panofsky (1939) showed how iconographic conventions and cultural knowledge transform visible motifs into historically specific meanings. Applied to temporality, these approaches explain how abstract duration becomes legible through concrete visual signs.

In summary, painting is static as an object but can express time through composition, narrative implication, symbols, material format, and the duration of viewing. Western theory has often emphasized how a selected instant implies temporal sequence, whereas scholarship on Chinese handscrolls stresses the viewer's progressive encounter with an unfolding image (Cahill, 1996; Gombrich, 1964; Lessing, 1766/1984; Wu, 1996). These perspectives provide the theoretical foundation for the comparative analysis that follows.

3. Research Methods

This study adopts an interdisciplinary methodological framework integrating iconology, semiotics, and philosophical aesthetics to comparatively interpret the conception and representation of time in Chinese and Western painting.

First, at the iconological level, the study applies Panofsky's (1939) threefold analytical method: pre-iconographical description, iconographical analysis, and iconological interpretation. In *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* and *The Last Supper*,

figures, seasonal motifs, variations in light and shadow, and movement sequences are examined as temporal cues. Panofsky's analysis of the Father Time motif demonstrates how pictorial metaphors and symbols embody historically specific concepts of time.

Second, at the level of visual semiotics and narratology, painting is treated as a system whose compositional grammar constructs temporal meaning (Mitchell, 1994). The analysis focuses on sequential scenes, repeated figures, directional movement, seasonal motifs, and changes in light. The Nine-Colored Deer Jataka mural in Dunhuang, for example, uses segmented continuous composition to indicate event progression. These visible cues form networks through which viewers infer order, duration, and causality.

Third, philosophical aesthetics deepens the analysis of temporal experience. Merleau-Ponty (1964) emphasized embodied perception, suggesting that viewing is itself temporal. Heidegger (1927/2010) examined temporality as fundamental to human existence and described the moment as a convergence of past possibilities and future projection. These ideas support comparison of the experiences elicited by different formats: Chinese landscapes often encourage prolonged, mobile viewing, whereas Western classical paintings often concentrate attention on a decisive configuration.

To ensure systematic analysis, representative paintings were selected as case studies, and comparative dimensions are presented in tabular form. To clarify the distinctions between the two traditions, Table 1 summarizes key differences in visual composition and temporal cues, while Table 2 highlights contrasting narrative structures of temporal representation. Research materials derive from both art-historical literature and pictorial evidence, combining primary sources such as painters' treatises with secondary scholarship including journal articles and monographs. Each case study was examined individually and then situated within a comparative framework to identify recurring patterns of similarity and divergence, thereby ensuring comprehensive and reliable conclusions.

Table 1: Key Differences in Visual Composition and Temporal Cues

Aspect	Chinese Painting	Western Painting
Perspective / Viewpoint	Scattered perspective and multiple viewpoints unfold successively, embedding time in the viewing process.	Fixed-point perspective and a single focal point frame the scene like a window and freeze one instant.
Spatial Depth	Shifting high, level, and deep-distance views link near and far space into a spatial-temporal continuum.	Linear perspective creates a geometric illusion of depth within one moment.
Narrative Structure	Continuous handscroll composition; figures and scenes may recur at different narrative moments.	Single-scene composition; one moment per canvas or panel.
Light and Atmosphere	Even illumination and seasonal transitions imply recurring rhythms and gradual change.	Dramatic light and shadow define a specific time of day and momentary emotion.
Symbolism and Imagery	Seasonal flora, poems, paths, and blank space	Hourglasses, shadows, and arrested gestures condense time

imply temporal flow.

into an instant.

Source: Author's analysis based on representative works from Song-Yuan and Renaissance painting.

Table 2: Comparative Temporal Structures in Chinese and Western Painting

Narrative Dimension	Chinese Painting	Western Painting
Temporal Framework	Cyclical recurrence; natural and human rhythms repeat.	Linear history; events proceed in chronological and causal sequence.
Compositional Mode	Continuous scroll mode combines successive episodes within one extended image.	Condensed single-scene mode focuses on a climactic moment.
Representative Case	Nine-Colored Deer Jataka: sequential episodes converge across one mural.	The Last Supper: one decisive instant implies events before and after.
Viewer's Role	A temporal traveler who invests time in unrolling and reading the image.	A witness who grasps the narrative focus in one concentrated view.
Symbols and Metaphors	Seasonal imagery, inscriptions, journeys, and blank space suggest duration.	Father Time, hourglasses, and light-shadow contrasts signify transience.

Source: Comparative summary by author from iconological and semiotic analyses (see Sections 3-4).

Figure 1: Leonardo da Vinci, *The Last Supper*, 1495-1498, dry wall painting, 460 x 880 cm, Museo del Cenacolo Vinciano, Milan.



Source: Museo del Cenacolo Vinciano (Leonardo da Vinci, 1495-1498).

<https://cenacolovinciano.org/en/museum/the-works/the-last-supper-leonardo-da-vinci-1452-1519/>

Leonardo employed linear perspective to condense the instant when Jesus dined with his disciples, rendering their shocked and indignant gestures and expressions to capture the drama of that very moment, thereby crystallizing time into an eternal present. The

viewer seems to be physically present, witnessing the climax of the biblical narrative. The vanishing point of the composition lies at the faint light beyond the window behind Christ, symbolizing the dawn of redemption and also implying that time will continue—Christ's Passion and Resurrection are already latent within the scene.

Figure 2: Anonymous, *Streams and Mountains without End*, 1100-1150, handscroll, ink and slight color on silk, 35.1 x 213 cm (image), Cleveland Museum of Art.



Source: (Anonymous, 1100-1150). <https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1953.126>

This long landscape scroll constructs a visual journey through continuous mountains and rivers. Streams and villages draw the viewer into the foreground; peaks and forests rise through the middle ground; and distant forms dissolve into mist. Because the scroll lacks a single focal point, the viewer must unroll it gradually and move through successive sections. Temporal continuity thus emerges from the unfolding spatial image, while collector's seals record later stages in the work's historical life (Anonymous, 1100-1150; Cahill, 1996; Wu, 1996).

4. Research Findings

Through comparative analysis of representative cases, this study distills several distinctive features of the conception of time in Chinese and Western painting, while also noting parallel attempts in certain domains.

First, Chinese painting tends toward dynamic, open-ended structures that immerse the viewer in an unfolding spatial-temporal experience. Western painting more often favors static, framed compositions that condense a temporal instant. For example, *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* links suburban Kaifeng to its urban center in a continuous scroll: villages, boats, roads, bridges, and markets appear in succession. The viewer experiences time through the progressive act of looking. Hans Belting (1994) argued that an image's presence emerges through its relation to the beholder, while Wu Hung (1996) showed how Chinese pictorial formats construct meaning through culturally specific modes of viewing. In the handscroll, this mediated viewing makes temporal flow part of pictorial composition.

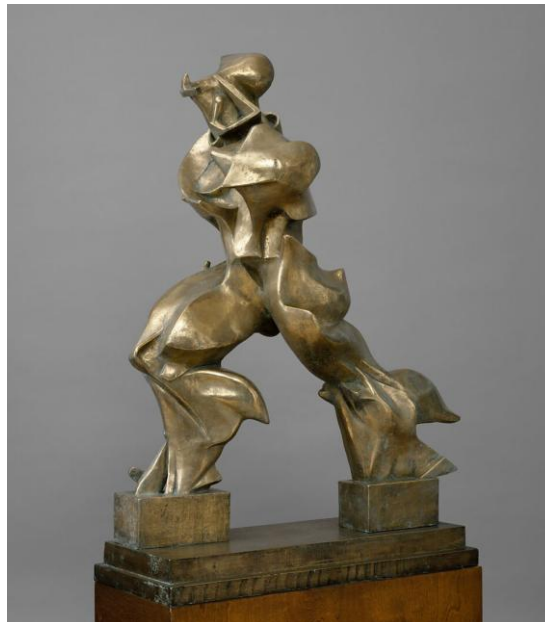
By contrast, Western paintings of urban life often fix a single moment. Dutch Golden Age genre scenes, for instance, usually present a market stall or interior gathering as a bounded event rather than as an extended narrative. Claude Lorrain's *Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba* (1648) similarly concentrates attention on a dawn harbor as the queen prepares to depart. The voyage remains outside the frame. Such one-scene composition typifies the Western tendency to elevate transient light and gesture into a self-contained image. Chinese urban handscrolls, by comparison, use spatial continuity to imply passage from one episode to another. Table 1 summarizes these compositional differences (Cahill, 1996; Lessing, 1766/1984; Wu, 1996).

Second, Chinese painting developed strong traditions of continuous narration. The Nine-Colored Deer Jataka mural in Dunhuang Cave 257 presents multiple episodes across an extended wall: the deer rescues a drowning man, the queen urges the king to capture the deer, and the story culminates in the deer's confrontation with the betrayer. The viewer follows these episodes spatially to reconstruct the narrative's temporal order (see Table 2). This horizontal progression resembles the sequential logic of a handscroll and makes the viewer's movement across the image part of the narration (Cahill, 1996; Wu, 1996).

This tradition of continuous narration is long-standing: works such as Gu Kaizhi's *Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies* use scroll formats to connect successive episodes. From the Renaissance onward, mainstream Western painting more often favored unity of action and avoided repeating the same figure in multiple temporal states within one composition. Extended narratives were commonly distributed across panels or cycles, while each panel concentrated on a single scene (Lessing, 1766/1984).

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Western avant-garde artists challenged this convention. Giacomo Balla's *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash* (1912) used repeated legs, tails, and speed lines to suggest continuity within one canvas. Futurist artists similarly multiplied contours and overlapping forms to visualize motion. These strategies departed from the traditional fixation on one stable instant and approached a more sequential representation of time, although their industrial celebration of speed differed from the moral and processional aims of Chinese narrative art (Gombrich, 1964).

Figure 3: Umberto Boccioni, *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, 1913 (cast 1950), bronze, 121.3 x 88.9 x 40 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Source: (Boccioni, 1913). <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/485540>

This sculpture interprets speed and time through the abstraction of human motion. The walking figure is stretched and fragmented into continuous aerodynamic forms, so that movement appears to persist through space rather than stop at one pose. Boccioni thus replaced static bodily description with a visual synthesis of force, duration, and forward momentum (Boccioni, 1913). The work exemplifies Western modernism's attempt to integrate temporal continuity directly into visual form.

Third, Chinese and Western painting project different cultural attitudes toward time. Chinese landscape painting often creates a meditative temporal experience through seasonal imagery, empty space, layered distance, and the slow movement of the viewer's gaze. Rather than documenting one particular instant, these devices relate transient human experience to recurring natural rhythms. The long handscroll intensifies this effect because the image cannot be apprehended all at once; its temporal unity emerges progressively (Cahill, 1996; Wu, 1996).

Western painting after the Renaissance more often reflects linear history and an awareness of mortality. Vanitas still lifes use flowers, skulls, candles, and hourglasses to signify life's brevity, while history paintings concentrate on decisive events. Panofsky's iconological analysis shows that such temporal motifs change meaning with their historical and philosophical contexts (Panofsky, 1939). Western artists also developed serial formats, such as William Hogarth's narrative print cycles, to represent longer temporal arcs across separate images.

Finally, different modes of temporal representation create contrasting viewer experiences. Looking at a Chinese handscroll resembles reading a slowly unfolding prose poem: it requires time, patience, and physical participation. As new sections appear, foreground and background respond to one another and the temporal unity of the work develops gradually. The experience is immersive and meditative because completion depends on the viewer's sustained movement through the image (Cahill, 1996; Wu, 1996).

By contrast, a Western framed painting often produces an immediate overall impact. The viewer may later examine expressions, brushwork, and color in detail, but the composition first establishes a concentrated event or mood. This experience is more dramatic and focused: the viewer approaches the scene as a witness to a turning point whose wider narrative must be inferred (Lessing, 1766/1984). Neither mode is superior; each organizes attention and duration according to different pictorial purposes.

5. Discussion

Through the above comparisons, we can further discuss the fundamental causes behind the differences in temporal representation between Chinese and Western painting, as well as their potential complementarity and integration in contemporary contexts.

First, these differences are closely tied to philosophical conceptions of time. Chinese landscape traditions often relate human finitude to recurrent natural rhythms, while Western Christian and humanist traditions place greater emphasis on linear history and irreversible events. The material conventions of handscroll viewing reinforced the former tendency by making duration and spatial extension inseparable (Cahill, 1996; Wu, 1996). Western framed painting, by contrast, encouraged artists to select decisive moments whose significance depended on a before and an after (Lessing, 1766/1984). These general orientations help explain why Chinese art often values lingering resonance, whereas Western art often emphasizes the expressive force of a singular event.

Second, artistic media and viewing practices shape these differences. A handscroll must be physically unrolled in sequence, so only part of the image is visible at one time. This format encouraged continuous composition and imaginative participation. Framed

canvases and frescoes, by contrast, normally offer a bounded field that can be apprehended at once. Chinese scrolls were also often viewed in intimate settings, whereas Western monumental paintings frequently operated in public or devotional spaces. These material and social conditions favored gradual immersion in one case and condensed dramatic address in the other (Cahill, 1996; Wu, 1996).

Third, Chinese and Western modes of temporal representation are not entirely opposed. Futurism and Cubism challenged the stable viewpoint by representing motion, simultaneity, and multiple aspects of objects. Modern Chinese artists likewise adopted linear perspective, oil painting, and dramatic lighting while retaining scroll-based, calligraphic, or ethical dimensions. These exchanges show that pictorial temporality is historically mobile rather than culturally fixed (Gombrich, 1964; Mitchell, 1994; Moxey, 2013). Productive integration therefore requires selective adaptation rather than wholesale transplantation.

In the twenty-first century, digital media offer new ways to combine continuity with instantaneity. Animation can set landscape imagery in motion; virtual reality can turn spatial depiction into a durational journey; and interactive installations can make the viewer's actions part of the work's temporal structure. Peter Osborne (2013) argues that contemporary art is defined through dynamic relations among concepts, media, institutions, and processes. This perspective suggests a pathway for combining Chinese sensitivity to rhythm and continuity with Western traditions of dramatic focus, light, and event.

6. Conclusion

The comparison of time in Chinese and Western painting reflects different cosmologies, material formats, and aesthetic priorities. Chinese painting often presents time through flowing continuity and recurrent natural rhythms, drawing the viewer into a prolonged *yijing* (artistic realm). Western painting more often concentrates time into a framed instant and highlights a unique historical or experiential moment. These tendencies do not imply superiority or inferiority; rather, they demonstrate that pictorial forms acquire meaning through historically specific cultural structures (Panofsky, 1939).

The two traditions are complementary. Chinese painting foregrounds duration, mobile viewing, and the continuity of space and time; Western painting demonstrates the expressive force of concentrated gesture, perspectival organization, and transient light. Contemporary practice can combine these strengths by treating time as both an unfolding process and a decisive event. Such integration can expand the spatial-temporal possibilities of painting while preserving the historical specificity of each tradition (Moxey, 2013; Osborne, 2013).

In sum, the differing expressions of time in Chinese and Western painting demonstrate the creative value of cultural diversity and a shared human concern with temporality. The comparison has relevance for art history and aesthetics, but it also suggests practical possibilities for contemporary visual practice. Future research could examine how photography, film, animation, and virtual reality inherit or transform these painting traditions. Art continues to record, extend, and reshape human experience within the ceaseless passage of time.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study did not require ethics approval or participant consent because it involved no human participants.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare there are no conflicts of interest.

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