

## Research article

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# From Guo Xi to Shi Tao: A Study on the Inheritance and Evolution of the "Four Seasons View" in Landscape Painting

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## KEYWORDS

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## ABSTRACT

Since ancient times, the "Four Seasons" has been a common theme in traditional Chinese landscape painting. The changes of spring, summer, autumn, and winter embody people's different emotions. From material images to "the creation of artistic conception", and from reality to emptiness, painters use specific natural scenes to arouse viewers' different feelings towards the four seasons. The "Four Seasons View" has been discussed in many poems and treatises. Focusing on the classic painting theories of Guo Xi's *Notes on Landscape Painting from the Lofty Message of Forests and Streams* and Shi Tao's *Bitter Gourd Monk's Painting Manual-Four Seasons Chapter*, this study explores Shi Tao's inheritance and development of Guo Xi's "Four Seasons View". Finally, it reveals that the inheritance and evolution of this concept not only reflects the deepening of the traditional landscape painting's essence of expressing the "mind of forests and streams", but also mirrors the historical transformation of painting in the early Qing Dynasty from representing nature to expressing one's inner thoughts. Shi Tao's theory not only pushed landscape painting into a brand-new poetic realm, but also provided an important reference for understanding the aesthetic connotation of Chinese painting.

## INTRODUCTION

The "Four Seasons", referring to spring, summer, autumn, and winter, is a way people use to describe time. Its interpretation has been quite clear in some ancient books and historical documents. The Book of Rites·Confucius at Leisure states, "Heaven has four seasons: spring, autumn, winter, and summer" [1], tracing the division of seasons back to the pre-Qin period. Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals·The Twelve Months divides a year into four seasons, each further split into three phases: the first, middle, and last months

of the season. [2] Guanzi notes, "Orders should align with the seasons" [3], implying that the state should issue decrees based on the characteristics of the Four Seasons. Understanding the Four Seasons allows one to grasp the laws of grain growth—from this point on, people's understanding of the "Four Seasons" extended beyond its surface and reached a deeper level.

Dong Zhongshu elaborated on the close connections between the four seasons in *Luxuriant Gems of the Spring and Autumn Annals*, transforming the "Four Seasons" from what was initially regarded as a fixed cognitive model into a carrier of painters' emotions. De-

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scriptions of works themed on the Four Seasons have long been recorded in historical documents. For example, *Records of Paintings Seen and Heard* mentions that Li Cheng, Fan Kuan, and Dong Yuan—the three great landscape painters of the Northern Song Dynasty—all created works titled *Landscapes of the Four Seasons*. Guo Xi's *Early Spring* has been passed down to posterity, and Liu Songnian's *Scroll of Landscapes of the Four Seasons* is even more classic. In *Notes on Landscape Painting*, Guo Xi wrote, "Spring mountains are gentle and smiling, summer mountains are lush and dewy, autumn mountains are clear and adorned, winter mountains are bleak and slumbering" [4]. Mountains in the four seasons exhibit different atmospheres, and these varying atmospheres create distinct artistic conceptions. Shi Tao began *The Bitter Gourd Monk's Painting Manual: The Chapter on the Four Seasons* by describing the scenery of the Four Seasons: "Four Seasons" refers to time, while "scenery" describes spatial objects. Thus, time and space have always been key focuses for painters. Starting from the classic painting theories of Guo Xi and Shi Tao, this study focuses on exploring Guo Xi's thoughts on the "Four Seasons View" in landscape painting, as well as Shi Tao's inheritance and development of this view.

## THE DISCUSSIONS ON THE "FOUR SEASONS" IN NOTES ON LANDSCAPE PAINTING

In *Notes on Landscape Painting*, Guo Xi revealed the original purpose of painting landscapes based on intuitive perceptions, and on this foundation, he explored the expression of the four seasons in landscape painting. He used a question-and-answer format to clearly expound the core purpose of landscape painting from the very beginning:

Why do virtuous gentlemen love landscapes? What is the essence of this love? It lies in their aspiration for forests and streams, their desire to be companions of mists and clouds—this longing resides in their dreams, yet remains beyond the reach of their eyes and ears. Now, when a skilled painter vividly brings such scenes to life, one can sit within the hall and fully experience valleys and streams: the cries of apes and songs of birds seem to linger in the ears, and the light of mountains and colors of water glow brilliantly before the eyes. Is this not delightful, and does it not truly resonate with one's heart? This is the fundamental reason why landscape painting is valued in the world. [5]

In this passage, Guo Xi clearly explained that the reason virtuous gentlemen love landscapes lies in their "aspiration for forests and streams". In his view, yearning for natural landscapes is a universal human sentiment. For people trapped in the "chaos and constraints of mundane life," the chance to personally visit landscapes and behold mists, clouds, and celestial-like

scenes is a rare spiritual longing—this is precisely what is meant by "aspiration for forests and streams." The original purpose of landscape painting is to convey the true appearance of natural landscapes. Thus, Guo Xi further noted later in the text:

For valleys and gorges in real landscapes, view them from a distance to capture their depth; examine them up close to perceive their shallowness. For rocks in real landscapes, gaze from afar to grasp their momentum; observe them closely to discern their texture. The clouds and mists in real landscapes differ with the four seasons: soft and warm in spring, dense and lush in summer, sparse and thin in autumn, and dim and dull in winter. If a painting captures their overall essence rather than rigidly detailing their form, the demeanor of the clouds and mists will come alive. The mists and hazes in real landscapes also vary with the four seasons: spring mountains are gentle and smiling, summer mountains are lush and dewy, autumn mountains are clear and adorned, winter mountains are bleak and slumbering. If a painting conveys their general idea rather than leaving traces of over-detail, the scene of mists and hazes will be true to life. The wind and rain in real landscapes can be appreciated from a distance, but when observed up close, one's limited perspective fails to comprehend the full momentum of a valley's paths and their starts and ends. The sunshine and shade in real landscapes can be fully seen from afar, but when viewed closely, one's narrow field of vision cannot capture the traces of a mountain's brightness, darkness, concealment, and revelation. [6]

In Guo Xi's opinion, conveying the true appearance of natural landscapes was impossible without observing and experiencing the four seasons. Drawing on his own experience, he first listed the following:

Human figures in mountains mark paths; pavilions and towers in mountains highlight scenic spots; forests and trees in mountains, with their screening and concealment, distinguish distance; valleys and streams in mountains, with their breaks and continuities, differentiate depth. Ferries, rafts, bridges, and planks in water fulfill human needs; fishing boats and fishing rods in water satisfy human aspirations. [7]

For valleys in real landscapes, the focus of observation should differ between distant viewing and close examination; clouds, mists, and hazes in real landscapes each have unique features across spring, summer, autumn, and winter; wind, rain, sunshine, and shade in real landscapes can only be fully appreciated and grasped from a distance; human figures, pavilions, forests, valleys, ferries, bridges, fishing boats, and fishing rods in real landscapes all have their own characteristics. For landscape painters, it is necessary to grasp the overall traits of seasonal landscapes while attending to details—combining the temporal principle of "viewing mountains step by step as one walks" and the spatial principle of "observing mountains from all angles" [8] to transcend the limitations of "time" and "space". In Guo

Xi's eyes, the authenticity of scenery did not lie in a "single moment," but rather was rooted in the endless changes of all things in heaven and earth. Through the painter's inner reflection, an "artistic conception" that originates from reality yet transcends it is created. The refinement of landscape painting depends on the painter's grasp of the temporal and spatial relationships of scenery. Specifically, the "authenticity" of landscape painting should manifest as "distinct scenes in the four seasons." The changes of the four seasons are not only the alternation of natural seasons, but also the reflection of the painter's inner perspective. As the famous Tang Dynasty poet and painter Wang Wei stated: "When painting landscapes, one must follow the four seasons—sometimes depicting mists enshrouding peaks, sometimes clouds returning to Chu's hills, sometimes clear dawns in autumn, sometimes spring scenery of Dongting Lake....." Liu Xie, a renowned literary critic of the Southern Liang Dynasty, noted in *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*: "Spring and autumn alternate; yin and yang bring gloom and cheer. As the appearance of things moves, the heart also stirs." [9] Therefore, only when "scenery" and "heart" complement each other can the true connotation of landscape painting be formed. Notes on Landscape Painting mentions the changes in mountain and river scenes across the four seasons—comparing them to smiling, sleeping, dewy, and adorned. Though the entire passage contains no first-person pronoun "I", it is infused with the painter's personal perspective. This is precisely the subtlety and brilliance of Guo Xi's "Four Seasons View."

## THE INHERITANCE OF GUO XI'S "FOUR SEASONS VIEW" IN THE CHAPTER ON THE FOUR SEASONS

Shi Tao was praised by the world as a "master of three excellences in troubled times"—excellences in "painting", "calligraphy", and "poetry". Moreover, *Painting Manual*, which he wrote in his later years, is a profound and influential masterpiece of aesthetic theory. The Chapter on the Four Seasons opens with the following discussion:

When depicting scenes of the four seasons, their flavors differ, and their sunshine and shade vary—one must examine the season and gauge the climate to paint them. Ancient people expressed scenes through poetry: for spring, they wrote, "Often sprouting with sand grasses, always stretching to connect with water and clouds"; for summer, "Beneath trees, the ground is always shaded; by the water, the wind is coolest"; for autumn, "Gazing from a cold city, the flat woodlands are lush green"; for winter, "The road is distant, but the brush reaches it first; the pond is cold, yet the ink grows rounder." There are also poems about winter not conforming to its typical character, such as "Snow is scarce, the sky lacks cold; the year nears its end, days

grow longer." Even when winter seems to have no cold, there are poems like "In the remaining days of the year, dawn comes easily; snow mixes with rain, then the sky clears." Using these two poems to discuss painting: "lacking cold", "growing longer", "coming easily", and "mixing with snow"—these are not only to be depicted for winter, but can also be extended to the other three seasons, each following its own climate. [10]

This passage explains that when painting landscape scenes, one must convey the distinctive features of the four seasons on the canvas. Different seasons bring different climates and different flavors of natural phenomena—this implies that the relationship between landscape painting and seasonal phenomena is a crucial theme no landscape painter can avoid. Zhan Ziqian of the Sui Dynasty excelled at depicting the pleasant beauty of spring; Fan Kuan of the Northern Song Dynasty was skilled at painting winter snow and ice; Li Cheng specialized in distant cold forests; Zhao Mengfu was adept at portraying the autumn scenery of Que and Hua Mountains; Mi Youren was famous for painting the misty rain of the Xiao and Xiang Rivers... All these masters paid attention to the seasons, using natural landscapes as material and Chinese philosophy and aesthetics as the foundation, and conveyed their true feelings and emotions towards nature through brush and ink. This idea is also discussed in Guo Xi's *Notes on Landscape Painting from the Lofty Message of Forests and Streams*. Guo Xi wrote: "Mountains in spring are like celebration, in summer like competition, in autumn like illness, in winter like calm" [11], and "Spring mountains, with continuous mists and clouds, make people joyful; summer mountains, with lush trees and dense shade, make people serene; autumn mountains, clear and with falling leaves, make people solemn; winter mountains, dim and blocked by haze, make people lonely" [12]. These share the same core emotion as Shi Tao's statement that "when depicting scenes of the four seasons, their flavors differ, and their sunshine and shade vary" [13]—both believed that seasons are crucial for the expression of Chinese painting. Landscape painting is a combination of the scenes of the objective world and the emotional imagery of the subjective world; changes in seasonal phenomena and seasons themselves must be fully reflected in landscape painting. Shi Tao inherited this theory from Guo Xi and clearly stated that creators must "examine the season and gauge the climate." On this basis, he further required that painters should not only be satisfied with the general laws of the four seasons, but also reflect the four stages of natural life's development in their paintings. They should use natural scenes with seasonal characteristics as objects to express the features of the four seasons and their inner emotions; through observation, they should form certain formal principles and thus transform these scenes into their own artistic language.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF GUO XI'S "FOUR SEASONS VIEW" IN THE CHAPTER ON THE FOUR SEASONS

When Shi Tao discussed the "Four Seasons," he was also expounding on the fusion of sentiment and scene and the integration of poetic spirit and painterly intent. Taking poetry as an example, he explained painterly conception through poetic conception—this idea is evident in the subsequent text of The Chapter on the Four Seasons:

There are also scenes that are half sunny and half cloudy, such as the line [from poetry]: "A wisp of cloud dims the bright moon; the slanting sun shines beside the rain." There are also scenes that seem both sunny and cloudy, like: "No need to worry about the sun setting; light clouds hang on the horizon." I draw on poetic intent to shape painterly intent—there is no scene that does not change with time. The mountains and clouds that fill the eyes change with the seasons. Pondering this, one realizes: Is not painterly conception the intent within poetry, and poetry the profound wisdom hidden in painting? [14]

In this passage, Shi Tao drew on the intent of ancient poetry to define painterly intent, arguing that no scene remains unchanged by time—mountains and clouds visible everywhere alter with the seasons. He concluded with a question: Painterly conception is the intent in poetry, so is not poetry the "chan wisdom" concealed in painting? The first half of The Chapter on the Four Seasons reveals that landscape painting must depict seasonal phenomena, inheriting Guo Xi's view that "scenes differ with the four seasons." The second half elaborates on the relationship between poetry and painting—specifically, the visual representation of poetic conception—thus developing Guo Xi's theory and forming Shi Tao's own "Four Seasons View." Shi Tao believed that the expression of the four seasons must touch upon the conception of poetry and painting, as the two are interconnected: both poetry and painting possess imagery—poetry is a visual experience in the imagination, while painting is a tangible work that directly appeals to the eye; they complement each other as outer form and inner essence. For instance, Guo Xi wrote in *Lofty Message of Forests and Streams*: Painterly Intent: "Poetry is formless painting; painting is tangible poetry" [15]. Su Shi commented on Wang Wei: "There is painting in his poetry, and poetry in his painting" [16]. However, poetry and painting differ in their modes of expression: poetry uses words as its language, while painting uses brush and ink; their ways of thinking also differ—poetry is flowing thought, while painting is frozen imagery. Nevertheless, thought contains imagery, and imagery embodies thought. Only when they merge and interpenetrate can they be mutually utilized and enhanced, leading to three scenarios: "using poetry as the basis for painting," "using painting

as the basis for poetry," and "the unity of poetry and painting."

Representative works of "using poetry as the basis for painting" include: Gu Kaizhi's *Nymph of the Luo River*, based on the poet Cao Zhi's *The Ode to the Goddess of the Luo River*; Qi Baishi's freehand brushwork painting created at Lao She's request, inspired by the Qing Dynasty poetic line "Frog calls echo ten li from the mountain spring"; and the horizontal scroll *Such a Splendid Rivers and Mountains* by Fu Baoshi and Guan Shanyue, based on the meaning of Mao Zedong's poem *Qinyuanchun—Snow*.

"Using painting as the basis for poetry" refers to composing poetry after completing a painting, either inscribing it on the painting or not. Literary figures such as Du Fu and Su Shi engaged in this type of creation. Shi Tao was not only a literati painter but also a poet—he inherently advocated the unity of poetry and painting. Shi Tao's *Poetry Anthology*, compiled by Mr. Wang Shiqing, collects 465 poems by Shi Tao, many of which were inscribed on his paintings. These poems and paintings blended seamlessly, complementing each other and reaching a high level of artistic achievement. The organic integration of poetry and painting greatly promoted the expansion and enrichment of Chinese painting in terms of subject matter, expressive techniques, and aesthetic scope—this was also a triumph of literati painting. Shi Tao concluded this chapter with the line "Painterly conception is the intent within poetry; poetry is the wisdom hidden in painting," expressing his stance and view: Scenes change with time, and the four seasons' transformations in landscape painting must touch poetic intent to reveal the profound "chan wisdom."

## CONCLUSION

In the developmental history of the "Four Seasons View" in landscape painting, Shi Tao's inheritance of Guo Xi's theory is reflected in his recognition of the importance of depicting seasons in landscape painting. Guo Xi put forward the theory that "scenes differ with the four seasons" in *Lofty Message of Forests and Streams*, regarding the expression of seasons as the essence of landscape painting creation and revealing the profound connection between natural laws and artistic expression. Although Shi Tao did not directly quote Guo Xi's discussions in *The Bitter Gourd Monk's Painting Manual*, he continued and strengthened this concept through The Chapter on the Four Seasons. He argued that in nature, "scenes differ with the four seasons," "scenes differ between morning and evening," and the "brightness and darkness" of clouds, clear skies, mists, and rosy clouds also vary. Only by thoroughly comprehending the subtle changes inherent in mountains and rivers can one gain clarity of mind and create superior works of art. Shi Tao's development of

Guo Xi's "Four Seasons View" mainly focused on integrating seasonal changes with the unity of poetry and painting. He stated: "If the painting within poetry originates from one's temperament, then painting does not require imitating Zhang or Li before composing poetry. If the poetry within painting emerges from the scene's charm and the moment, then poetry does not require mechanical copying before creating painting. True principles interact like a mirror reflecting a shadow—no deliberate effort is needed. Today's people inevitably treat poetry and painting without due respect." He elevated the expression of the four seasons to the realm of poetic expression, arguing that the four seasons, poetry, and painting should mutually permeate and reflect each other. They all belong to a broad temporal-spatial system and are the results of "learning from nature externally and drawing from one's inner resources internally" [17]. This development not only enriched the expressive connotation of landscape painting but also elevated the "Four Seasons View" from the technical level to an aesthetic height. To summarize, Shi Tao's inheritance and development of Guo Xi's "Four Seasons View" not only deepened the traditional concept that landscape painting should express the "mind of forests and streams" but also reflected the historical transformation of painting in the early Qing Dynasty—from representing nature to using nature to express one's inner temperament. It provided an important reference for later painters to understand the aesthetic connotation of Chinese landscape painting.

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