Western Painting Terms: Analysis in Characteristics and Discussion on Translation

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Abstract. Art terms act as a core element in art discourses, therefore their translation is a key factor in message delivery in cross-cultural communication. In the last century, Western art theories have been introduced into China in quantity. During this process accurate translation should be crucial, but in fact some translations are confusing or even unfixed. This study analyzes characteristics of Western painting terms from the perspectives of word formation and semantic change for more in-depth insight into the terms, and, taking Chinese translation as an example, discusses their translations by delving into their origins and evolution in the hope of better translation of Western art terms. This contributes to not only art discourses but also artists to better understand art skills and theories.

Keywords: Western painting terms; Characteristics; Translation

1 Introduction

Western paintings derive from Grace together with the development of other art forms including sculpture, music and dance, and closely related to human life. The years during 5th to 15th centuries witnessed the prosperity of icon frescos, icon paintings, mosaic icon paintings, stained glass icon paintings, miniatures, etc. Then the Renaissance swept across Europe, followed by styles such as Baroque, Rococo, impressionism, modernism, expressionism, dadaism, etc., and the development of art has never come to a halt. Meanwhile, art discourse has been evolving and developing, too, so as to meet the verbal need. As new techniques, forms, styles, tools, etc. have been continually emerging and updating, new terms are certainly needed to describe them.

In the history of China, there were two huge waves to introduce Western fine art: the period between the end of 19th century and the beginning of 20th century, and the period after 1949. History, theories, techniques of art were introduced to Chinese artists and scholars, and Western fine art history was established as an independent discipline which had systematic development as the wide establishment of art schools
and further progress of art business [1]. As a matter of course, translation of fine art monographs from foreign languages into Chinese became increasingly necessary. Terms in a specific domain always act as a core element and play a determining role in semantic transmission. Painting terms, as an important component in art terms, takes on complexity and variety for the sake of inextricable connection with history, culture, literature, music, dance, sculpture, science, etc., and such features are also represented in translation of painting terms. Accuracy and standardization of term translation is undoubtedly of vital importance, and very often the quality of terminology translation is considered a major criterion in evaluating the quality of the whole text [2]. However, although the current translations of painting terms from English into Chinese are mostly reasonable, our research has found that some are very confusing or even unfixed. The ultimate purpose of this paper is to offer some assistance in solving this problem, and Figure 1 shows the framework.

![Fig. 1. Framework: Analysis of characteristics of Western painting terms and discussion on translation](image)

We have collected painting terms from eleven books on Western painting [3-13], English and Chinese, some being the translated versions of the English originals. The books chosen for our research are classic and influential, some being groundbreaking works and having been used as art textbooks in many countries for years. We use these terms as samples to analyze characteristics of Western painting terms from the perspectives of word formation and semantic change. This sets up the discussion on their Chinese translation, which is done by inspecting into their origins and evolution, in the hope of better translation. This will be of help not only in the domain of languages in terms of terminology translation but also for artists to better understand art skills and theories.

2 Analysis on Characteristics of Word Formation of Western Painting Terms

There is always synchronic evolution along with human activities. New verbal expressions are accordingly needed when, for example, a new style forms, a new technique is created or introduced, or new pigments begin to be used. Sometimes new painting terms are directly “borrowed” into English and sometimes produced based on existing lexicon. Therefore, word formation explains not only how but also, in part, why new painting terms emerge.
2.1 Compound Words

Putting two or more words together to form a new one is one of the simplest and most often adopted way of word formation.

Example 1: *brushstroke*

*Stroke* means “a mark made by moving a pen, brush, etc. once across a surface” (*Oxford Dictionary, hereinafter to be referred as Oxford*). As *brush stroke* is increasingly used, they were put together to form a new word *brushstroke*, which means “a stroke of a brush, especially a paintbrush” (*thefreedictionary*), and later “an artist’s characteristic manner of applying paint, as manifested in his or her finished works” (*etymonline*).

Example 2: *watercolor*

In 1502, Albrecht Dürer produced the first watercolor painting in the world. Gradually, European artists mixed transparent and semi-transparent pigments with water and binder to paint on parchment. It was not until 1590s that the word *watercolor* was created from *water* and *color*, which means “pigment that dissolves in water,” and later “picture painted in watercolors” (*etymonline*).

Other examples include *stereoscope* (“instrument allowing binocular vision of two identical pictures that appear as a single image with relief and solidity,” *etymonline*), *hand-painted* (“painted by a person rather than a machine,” *collins*), *cire-perdu* (“a method of casting bronze, in which a mould is formed around a wax pattern, which is subsequently melted and drained away,” *collins*), etc. This kind of words are straightforward in meaning and easy to understand.

2.2 Derivation Words

The suffix -*ing* is used to turn verbs into nouns, such as *painting, drawing, coloring, underpainting, tracing*, etc., turning the action in art into a noun.

Some words are formed with the suffix -*esque* meaning “in the style of.” Examples such as *picturesque, statuesque, Romanesque*, etc. indicate the resemblance of a certain character or style.

Most words with reference to art schools are derivations ending with the suffix -*ism*, for example, *symbolism, impressionism, expressionism, cubism, dadaism, fauvism*, etc.

2.3 Borrowed Words / Loanwords

According to Vinay and Darbelnet (1995), borrowing is the often used to overcome a lacuna, usually a metalinguistic one (e.g., a new technical process, an unknown concept) [14]. During some time in history, countries including Italy, French, Netherland, etc. were where art developed the most prosperously and were in the leading position, so their artists pioneered to create new meanings and new words to

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1 https://www.thefreedictionary.com/
2 https://www.etymonline.com/
3 https://www.collinsdictionary.com/zh/
describe new techniques, tools, pigments, styles, and schools of art. These new words then found their way into English and got settled. Examples we have collected fall into three types: denizens (art, mural), aliens (art nouveau, gesso, tempera, chiaroscuro), and loadblends (fauvism, dadaism). For example, art is from Old French art (10c.) (etymonline), mural is from Latin mūrālis (of a wall), meaning “a large painting or picture on a wall” (thefreedictionary), and dada in dadaism is commonly believed to be from French.

Take tempera. Tempera was the most used technique from the 12th or early 13th century until the 15th, when it began to give way to oils. Its use has been identified on some Roman Faiyum portraits and it was, and remains, the principal paint medium for the icons of the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches. Later on it was in Italy where this technique got carried forward and spread to other European countries. In this process, the Italian term tempera together with related terms such as gesso were also brought into some of the other languages, including English.

Dadaism is another typical example. Some say that dada is stochastically selected from a dictionary by some artists. Another theory is that dada is French meaning “hobbyhorse”, a child’s nonsense word. Whichever the origin of the word is, it shows how randomly and playfully the word dadaism began to be used. The English language takes it in, together with the sense of “nonsense”.

3 Semantic Change: Semantic Broadening

According to Meillet (1958), the mechanism of semantic change consists of reanalysis and analogy. Reanalysis refers to metonymy, meaning one concept transiting into another, while analogy is the metaphor, meaning one concept rejecting onto another [15]. This chapter mainly talks about semantic broadening based on reanalysis.

There is a favorite principle among linguistics, “Every language possesses the necessary resources (including borrowing as well as compounding, derivation, and syntactic organization) to say whatever can be said in any other” [16]. For the purpose of denoming newly-appeared things, people endow new meanings to already-existing words besides creating new ones or borrowing from other languages. This lingual phenomenon of semantic innovation is named semantic broadening, one of the major forms of semantic change.

3.1 Examples of Semantic Broadening

Examples of semantic broadening of painting terms are listed in Table 1. When there are more than one original meanings, only the one the most similar with the broadened meaning is included in the table for better comparison.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Words</th>
<th>Original meanings</th>
<th>Broadened meanings in art</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>miniature</td>
<td>a very small copy or model of sth.; a very small version of sth.</td>
<td>a very small detailed painting, often of a person (Oxford)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Take texture. *Texture* originally meant “a woven fabric” [17], or “the quality of the weave” [18]. In early stage of Western painting, artists mainly put emphasis on shape and color and made very smooth painting surface. During the Baroque period, artists including Rubens, Rembrandt, Vermeer, etc. adopted thicker pigment onto their paintings, hence uneven painting surfaces were produced. This is the process of how artists’ attitude changed towards the painting surface and how the new meaning of *texture* came into being with its meaning broadened.

### 3.2 Semantic Changes in Color Words

Colors are subjectively perceived by human. Color words are actually a description of the perception of animals, plants and objects in nature. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) believe that linguistic usages frequently reflect our inherently metaphorical understanding of many basic areas of our lives, the mechanism of which is “likeness” between different things and metaphors [19]. Eve Sweetser (1990) examines the particular metaphorical mappings involved in our cognitive and linguistic treatment of mental states and speech acts to explain the reasons of semantic changes [20]. This semantic innovation based on analogy also falls into the category of semantic broadening.

Take lemon. *Lemon* originally refers to a kind of tree and the fruit of this tree. People are so familiar with the yellow color of this fruit that the color has become a distinctive feature in cognition. Gradually, the meaning “a greenish-yellow or strong yellow color” (*thefreedictionary*) found its way into the word *lemon*.

### 3.3 Influences Between Domains

Another big proportion of examples of semantic broadening is the names of schools and styles. Art, music and literature have been influencing each other in their contents, genre, ideological trend, and theories [20]. Lexical exchanges also happen between art domains and languages.

Take *Arabesque*. *Arabesque* is originally Arabic with reference to the designs in Moorish architecture. Later on, it was used in art, ballet as well as music with broadened meanings.
The influence between art and other domains is bidirectional. Take style terms such as *Baroque*, *Rococo*, *impressionism*, *symbolism*, *expressionism* as examples, just to name a few. Impressionism, for instance, originated and developed in France during the 1870s. Since 1880s it extended to music (represented by Debussy and Maurice Ravel) [21], literature, photography, as well as films.

4 English-Chinese Translation of Art Terms

Different translation strategies are adopted in translating Western painting terms from English into Chinese and there are problems in those translations. The preceding discussion contributes to a more insightful discussion on this by answering “how” and “why”.

4.1 Transliteration

Transliteration is a strategy often adopted when it comes to terms of proper names (especially names of persons and places) and schools and styles, and sometimes painting techniques. Examples are shown in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English terms</th>
<th>Chinese translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rococo</td>
<td>洛可可</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baroque</td>
<td>巴洛克</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dada/dadaism</td>
<td>达达主义</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbizon</td>
<td>巴比松</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pech-Merle</td>
<td>佩奇马勒（洞穴）；派契迈尔；佩克莫尔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lascaux</td>
<td>拉斯科（洞穴）</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rembrandt</td>
<td>伦勃朗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Van Gogh</td>
<td>梵高</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Proper names are typical examples of this kind. Most translations have been adopted for years and there is only one corresponding translation.

Some of these terms are culture-loaded words, including some loanwords from other languages, which means there is no equivalents in the target language. It is rather difficult to create new and condensed words or expressions which can fully convey the original meanings. Transliteration is often adopted to transit culture-loaded words into the target language in order to avoid information loss and is often supplemented with notes of explanations. The translations in the examples above have been accepted and taken hold.

However, they would be difficult to comprehend for a layman since the Chinese characters put together do not really make sense. Therefore, to trace the origins of the English terms would be necessary, which is of great help in comprehending the meaning. Let us take *Baroque* and *Rococo* as examples.
There are several theories on the origin of *Baroque*: French *baroque* meaning “irregular” (15c.), which might be from Portuguese *barroco* meaning “imperfect pearl”, or Spanish *berruca* meaning “a wart” (*etymonline*). Whatever the origin is, *Baroque* was initially a derogatory term, introduced by critics of a later generation wishing to discredit the art that had preceded them [12].

*Rococo* was originally meant as a mocking joke. It is said to have been coined by a student of Jacques-Louis David in the 1790s, when the reputation of the style was at its lowest ebb [12]. Old French *roque* is the source of English rock “stone”. From its modern French descendant *roc* was derived *rocaille* (“decoration in the form of pebbles, shell, etc.”), which was altered to *Rococo* as a term for a style characterized by convoluted ornamentation (*etymonline*).

*Barbizon* is also such an example. It is originally the name of a village in France where a group of French landscape artists gathered and actively produced and developed landscape paintings of a particular style, which became part of the Realist movement [12].

*Dada* and *dadaism* are also examples of this kind. As is explained above, a comprehension of its origin would provide a better assistance to understand such an art style.

In spite of controversial opinions on transliteration [22], the translations of above-mentioned terms have been long accepted and applied, which means they are reasonable and do not cause confusion for artists, especially experienced artists. But for art beginners, it is necessary to look into their origins for better comprehension when they use such terms.

### 4.2 Literal Translation

A number of English terms are translated into Chinese in the way of literal translation, examples of which are shown in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English terms</th>
<th>Chinese translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>impressionism</td>
<td>印象主义</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>realism</td>
<td>现实主义</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>surrealism</td>
<td>超现实主义</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>watercolor</td>
<td>水彩</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oil painting</td>
<td>油画</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pastel drawing/painting</td>
<td>色粉画</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>color temperature</td>
<td>色温</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>decorative painting</td>
<td>装饰画</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self-portrait</td>
<td>自画像</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>group portrait</td>
<td>团体画像</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Literal translation conveys the meanings of source terms in a direct and understandable manner. For example, *Art nouveau*, as an alien from French, is formed by *art* and *nouveau* (French, meaning “new”), literally translated as 新艺术 (“new art”).
Besides, as can be seen from the table above, painting types are often literally translated as well. What’s more, most color names are literally translated into Chinese, as is shown in Table 4.

**Table 4. Examples of C-E literal translation of color names**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of color</th>
<th>Color coding</th>
<th>Color</th>
<th>Chinese translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>rose</td>
<td>#FF007F</td>
<td>玫瑰红</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>coral</td>
<td>#FF7F50</td>
<td>珊瑚红</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>firebrick</td>
<td>#B22222</td>
<td>砖红/耐火砖红</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>salmon</td>
<td>#FA8072</td>
<td>鲑红</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tomato</td>
<td>#FF6347</td>
<td>番茄红</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>peach</td>
<td>#FFE5B4</td>
<td>桃色/桃红</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>camellia</td>
<td>#E63995</td>
<td>山茶红</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are far subtler colors in Western paintings than in Chinese, which means it is not necessary for Chinese artists to create so many color words as Westerners. Except for a few already-existing color words in Chinese such as 青色 (cyan) that can be used directly, new names need to be created for colors introduced from Western paintings and art theories. Such words are often literally translated since they identically arouse association with the objects and the color, and therefore, the original terms and the translated terms function similarly in assisting people in perceiving the colors through languages.

### 4.3 Free Translation

Very often there is no equivalent in the target language that can be translation of some terms, and this is when free translation should be adopted. Table 5 lists such examples.

**Table 5. Examples of C-E free translation of painting terms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Term</th>
<th>Chinese Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>glaze</td>
<td>罩染; 透明画法</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fresco</td>
<td>湿壁画</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gouache</td>
<td>树胶水彩画</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>impasto</td>
<td>厚涂法</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diptych</td>
<td>双联画</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>triptych</td>
<td>三联画</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rough sketch</td>
<td>草图</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Be it literal translation or free translation, the bottomline and the ultimate purpose is to keep fidelity to the original text [23]. Take Impasto. There is no such a technique as to apply thick pigments onto paintings in Chinese art, for neither pigment features nor Chinese philosophy agrees with so. Therefore, the term 厚涂法 (“the technique
to apply thick pigments onto the painting”) is created to name the technique in a describing way.

4.4 Loaning from Existed Lexicon

Loaning, in terms of translation strategy, means expressions that have already existed in the target language are adopted as the translation. Since target readers have already been familiar with, or heard of, or at least known of the characters/words in their culture, it would be easier for them to comprehend the meaning of the expressions in the context of the source language. Such examples in our collection include brushstroke (笔触), drawing from nature (写生画), landscape (风景画), texture (肌理), perspective (透视), etc. For example, 笔触 in Chinese originally refers to “writing styles or characteristics”, while brushstroke means “the marks by a painter’s brush.” Its meaning equivalent to brushstroke first appeared during the early 20th century [23].

It would be worth mentioning that, like scientific and technological terms, some art term translations were directly introduced from Japanese translation works from Western art works. Such examples among the above table include 笔触, 写生画, 风景画, and 透视 [24].

4.5 Discussion on Problematic Translation

Western art was introduced into China in abundance during the Ming and Qing Dynasties after several hundreds of years of sporadic spreading [25]. In this process, translations of painting terms gradually became established. However, there is a small number of them that are problematic.

Multiple translation. Some terms have more than one translations, which can be confusing.

Example 1: mannerism

The Chinese translations of mannerism include 风格主义, 手法主义, 样式主义 as well as 矫饰主义 in Chinese.

(a) 风格主义

The translated version of The Oxford Dictionary of Art defines mannerism as 风格主义 [13].

(b) 手法主义

我们把这种现象放在一个宽泛的术语“手法主义”[Mannersim]下进行介绍。[26]

(c) 样式主义

ST: El Greco had learned much from Tintoretto’s unorthodox method of lopsided composition, and that he had also adopted the mannerism of over-long figures like that of Parmigianino’s sophisticated Madonna. [6]
TT: 不难看出埃尔·格列柯深深地受益于丁托列托一反常规的不平衡构图法，而且他也采用了帕尔米贾尼诺的矫饰的圣母那种拉长人物形象的手法主义。[7]

(d) 样式主义

ST: Mannerism is a term derived from the Italian word maniera, meaning “style” or “manner.” [5]

TT: 样式主义是对晚期文艺复兴艺术中出现的特定风格倾向的称呼。[4]

(e) 矫饰主义

矫饰主义[Mannerism]夹在文艺复兴和巴洛克风格之间,是一个容易被忽略的流派。[27]

Mannerism derives from Italian maniera meaning “style” or “manner”. Mannerism emerged in the 1520s in Italy and is usually defined as a style as a characteristic or representative mode, especially of an artist or period. This style is characterized by style (being stylish, cultured, elegant), but can also include artifice in the sense that art is not “natural” – it is something humans fashion [3]. Owing to its rich meanings, mannerism is translated as the four Chinese terms listed above. 风格主义 highlights personal styles, 手法主义 personal skills, 样式主义 styles of a certain period or works, and 矫饰主义 the feature of artifice. The meanings of both 风格主义 and 手法主义 are respectively closer to the etmological meaning of Mannerism and reveals more personal styles of artists. Unfortunately, all of the four Chinese translations are commonly used.

Other typical examples of unfixed translation include Archaic period with surprisingly four translations at least (古风时期, 古拙时期, 古朴时期 and 远古时期), vanish (清漆 and 罩光漆), and even some important proper names such as Pech-Merle (佩奇马勒, 派契迈尔, and 佩克莫尔).

The translation with the closest meaning to the original term should be fixed in order to avoid such confusion.

Semantic narrowing in translation. We have talked about semantic narrowing. Semantic narrowing also happens during the transmission of art terms between languages.

Example 2: miniature

The Chinese equivalent of miniature is 细密画, the comprehension of which, however, shrinks into Persian miniature, a branch style of miniature, in the recognition of Chinese artists. I would propose that the Chinese translation of Persian miniature should be specially worded with 波斯 to have it distinguished from miniature.

Mistranslation. This happens when a translator fails to fully interpret the meaning of the original term.

Example 3: monochrome and chiaroscuro

Although chiaroscuro is mostly translated as 明暗对比法 (“the technique with contrastingly light and dark colors”), the translation of both the two words is sometimes the same: 单色画 (“a drawing of a single color”). The problem would be easily solved if we look into their origins. In monochrome, mono- means “one or single”, and -chrome refers to “color”. While chiaroscuro is a combination of chiaro (meaning “clear, bright”, from Latin) and oscurro (from Latin obscuro). The
mistranslation might result from misinterpretation of the chiaroscuro technique, and, on the contrary, a better grasp of their origins would be of great help in understanding the technique.

Example 4: study
Translators should be careful with study which should be translated as 习作 (“an exercise in drawing”) instead of 研究 (“research”) or 学习 (“study” as in “to study English”). For example, The Tuileries (study) by Claude Monet should be translated as 杜伊勒里 (习作), and Study of Mme Gautreau by John Singer Sargent 高特鲁夫人 (习作).

5 Conclusion
In analyzing characteristics of painting terms in English from the perspectives of word formation and semantic changes, we delve into the historical and social contexts and find out the routes and rules of lexical evolution in paintings. With these as foundation, this paper continues to summarize the Chinese translation of painting terms and discusses current problems.

There are at least three dimensions of contributions of this study: (1) to help artists, especially artists in the target culture, better understand Western art techniques and theories with deeper insights into art terms, (2) to propose better solutions to some problematic translations, and (3) to provide elicitation for future translation of art texts.

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