

A Brief Discussion on the Teaching of Landscape Painting in Universities

Haiyan Yan*

Anyang Normal University, Anyang 455000, Henan, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

Copyright: © 2026 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: The instructional program in landscape painting at universities consists of three main stages, including copying (lin mo), sketching from life (xie sheng), and creation (chuang zuo). In the copying stage, students can understand and absorb the painting philosophies of historical masters, gain experience and knowledge from them, understand and master the technical execution and spiritual content of landscape painting, and build the theoretical and practical basis for subsequent sketching and creation. In the sketching from life stage, students can come into contact with nature themselves, express nature's scenery using the techniques of landscape painting, and seek creative content and inspiration, so the process of artistic re-creation can be carried out. Finally, in the creation stage, students can understand the artistic rules of landscape painting, learn from the ancients, draw inspiration from nature, and create landscape works that reflect the culture of Chinese art.

Keywords: Landscape painting in universities; Landscape painting teaching; Copying; Sketching from life; Creation

Online publication: May 26, 2026

1. Introduction

The instruction of landscape painting in universities is also an important part of the pedagogy of Chinese painting, and it is required for students who specialize in Chinese painting. In the history of the development of Chinese painting, landscape painting has always been in the most important position. In every era, there were a lot of famous landscape painters and representative works, and there were many theories and technical methods. They not only laid a good foundation for the present teaching and research of landscape painting, but also helped later scholars to make further inquiries and later artistic practice. The students are guided by the three instruction steps of copying, sketching from life, and the creation to go on the way of inheritance, absorption, integration, and innovation. So that the students can correctly understand the beauty of landscape painting and the way of learning landscape painting and make the work of art ^[1].

Copying helps students understand and master the philosophy, aesthetics, expressive methods, and formal language of the historical masters; students learn from prior artistic experience, which forms the basis

for their sketching and creating. Sketching from life helps students experience and approach nature, go into nature for discovery and creative inspiration, see aspects of the world that others cannot, and find the best synthesis of content and form. In this way, the techniques acquired from the ancients are fully combined with insights from nature; therefore, they are ready for re-creation. The creation stage enables students to understand the artistic laws of landscape painting comprehensively, exercise creative freedom, and gain a synthetic understanding and mastery of the medium. Starting from emulating the ancients, then drawing from nature, and further cultivating the mind to be the source of creativity, the students are all capable of producing Chinese landscape painting that expresses the cultural spirit of Chinese art. In this integrated triad of copying, sketching and creation, the three pieces are mutually reinforcing and indispensable, and they jointly constitute the pedagogical sequence and learning principles of Chinese landscape painting. It is absolutely imperative that the students do the gradual stepwise training to improve their proficiency in landscape painting creation ^[2].

2. Copying in landscape painting

As the first stage in landscape painting pedagogy, copying is an indispensable way of directly getting the techniques, aesthetic concepts, and structural forms of landscape painting. Because the formulaic characteristics of this genre are obvious, by way of copying, the students can directly feel the techniques of tradition, and also feel the aura and charm of the classic works; thus, they can understand the spatial formal language, the composition of brush-and-ink methods, and the whole structural relationship in the pictorial plane. By copying, the students can quickly and effectively internalize the principles and expressive form of the landscape painting, have a firsthand feeling of different schools and individual artists' ways to represent nature, and also develop their aesthetic discernment. For the research copying and the in-depth study, the students can deeply appreciate the artistic thought, the ways of creation, and the spiritual connotation of traditional landscape painting, thus better prepared for the subsequent instruction of sketching and creation.

The pedagogy of copying follows discernible patterns and is supported by a relatively well-defined set of sequential steps. When guiding students in copying, one first provides theoretical instruction, that is, the history of landscape painting, and an analysis of, say, a representative painter and the canonical work from each successive dynasty. The objective is for students to at least know the development of landscape painting, to know celebrated landscape painters and their canonical works from each period, and to gain an overall grasp of the genre, in order to prepare for the next copying. The second step is the choice of model works. The choice of the model is of critical importance. As the saying goes, to learn from the highest, one will become the middle; to learn from the middle, one will become the lower; and to learn from the lower, one will get nothing! This saying, in a certain sense, underscores the criticality of judicious selection in learning, and this is also true in landscape painting copying. In choosing a model, students can select, according to their stylistic preference, classic representative works by master painters from various dynasties. Such a selection can not only help students learn the techniques, including brush-and-ink interest, structural relations, and compositional arrangement, but also help them avoid unnecessary detours and thus enhance their artistic appreciation and sensitivity. Once the model is selected, the next phase is the careful study and reading of the work. This is more commonly called reading the painting (*du hua*). Reading the painting means analyzing the work in multiple dimensions, that is, macroscopic and microscopic, horizontal and vertical. Macroscopically, one considers the work's atmosphere and conception; one can discern its compositional

form, linguistic structure, and brush-ink relations. Microscopically, one examines the brush movement and the ink application. Horizontally, one places the work in the artist's developing track; vertically, one compares the artistic style across different periods. Such analysis can help students understand the full artistic identity of the work and prepare for copying.

The third step is partial copying. The purpose of partial copying is to master as well as to master the work's principles of artistic expression and technical execution, as well as its brush-ink characteristics and structural relationships, as effectively and as efficiently as possible. Partial copying may start with copying a single tree or a single rock from the composition, in order to learn the methods to draw trees and rocks. Next, it copies the combinations of trees and rocks, in order to learn the combined compositional methods and the brush-ink relationship handling. Then the student copies partial integrations of trees and rocks, and so on, step by step, until the techniques, expression methods and handling approaches of landscape painting are mastered and the full-scale copying can be prepared. The basic training of brush-and-ink has been set after the above; the students may go from the small to the large to do the complete copying. The purpose of full copying is that by the disciplined handling of brushwork and structural relationships, the students are able to grasp the work's conception, for the formal likeness is relatively attainable but the spirit (shen) is considerably more difficult to grasp. Full copying lays a solid technical and aesthetic base for students' future sketching and creation. It helps to excavate the essence of traditional landscape painting, and the students are able to master the art not only by learning the traces of the ancients (shi gu ren zhi ji) but also by learning the mind of the ancients (shi gu ren zhi xin).

3. Sketching from life in landscape painting

Sketching from life is a critically important stage within the instructional process of landscape painting. It is an important way for us to observe life and experience nature, to gather source material, and to integrate with tradition. Within this stage, students not only improve their aesthetic judgment, summary ability, and compositional skills, but also improve their creative capacity, that is, to seek new content and new language forms in nature, to find out the points of integration of the traditional landscape painting, to produce their own brush-and-ink vocabulary and expressive modes, and thereby to lay the solid foundation of future creative direction and accomplishment ^[3].

In teaching sketching from life, direct sketching from the scenery is a major pedagogical method, alongside other forms such as quick sketching and memory sketching. The principal aims of sketching from life are to help students understand the laws of objective nature; to cultivate their modeling ability, basic professional ability, and technique; and to cultivate their ability in pictorial organization, refinement, selection, summary, memorization, and imagination. Students should be familiar with the structural relationships among natural elements, such as trees, rocks, clouds, mist, buildings, and other objects. They should apply copying to explore brush-and-ink techniques and artistic principles of expression. At the same time, through other methods such as slow sketching from the scenery, quick sketching, memory sketching, and the use of photographic references, students integrate learning from the ancients with inspiration from nature. These four sketching methods are related, complementary, and may be used alternately, helping students comprehend the essence of Chinese aesthetic imagery. By approaching nature as directly as possible and depicting natural objects, students can better understand the more spiritual connotations and creative principles of Chinese landscape painting.

Teaching sketching from life has some basic steps too. The first is the selection of view. View selection is an important part of sketching. The principle is to choose a scene that he likes himself and has some affective response to. In the selection of view, one should think of and realize observing thoroughly and wandering fully (bao you wo kan), observing and thinking extremely. The second step is conception and drafting. Chinese painting emphasizes the idea of having before the brush (yi zai bi xian). When he is determined what to sketch, he should think about how to sketch it, how to compose, what technique to use, how to put the picture, how to complete, what effect to make, so that the middle of the idea is clear. For the draft, he can use either a pencil or a brush. The last step is delving into the picture and organizing. In the deepening process, the subject is to be fully expressed, seeking unity in variety and variety in unity; in the final organization part, all the various relationships in the picture should be adjusted to exalt the theme. Training in sketching from life not only integrates and assimilates the knowledge which he has acquired in copying, but also lays the foundation for later creation, so that it is a link and transitional bridge between copying and creation. It is of great pedagogical significance.

4. Creation in landscape painting

The teaching of creation in landscape painting is a higher stage of artistic practice, and it is based on the stage of copying and sketching from life. It is a fundamental means of cultivating students' all-around qualities, artistic cultivation and cultural refinement. The purpose of the creation instruction is that the students can engage in practice and master the integration of the brush-and-ink technique, the compositional forms, the aesthetic thought, and the artistic sensibility in the landscape painting. In the artistic creation, the students are to express and integrate their own feelings. Through this, the students discover their own artistic language and means of expression. Through this, they can know the aesthetic ideal of "truthful representation" (tu zhen) and "contemplating the Way while purifying the mind"(cheng huai guan dao) in the landscape painting, and thus enhance their own aesthetic taste and capacity. Therefore, they can produce works of character, refined taste with profound meaning that reflect the new era and new stylistic direction.

When teaching the creation of landscape painting, in theoretical instruction, Chinese philosophy, aesthetics, painting theory, and the spirit and thought of Chinese culture should be involved so that the student will understand the cultural ideas and spiritual connotations underlying the creation of landscape painting, in order to establish the theoretical basis of artistic production. At the same time, the creation should be taught as basic knowledge. There should be forms and types of composition, the creation of artistic conception, the types of conception, creative form, and exploratory method, and so on. The steps of creation should be explained and analyzed. Firstly, the idea should be conceived, and the theme to be expressed should be determined; secondly, materials should be gathered. Gathering materials is divided into two aspects: one is from nature, and the other is from existing artworks. Then to process the imagery and to produce a small draft; finally to apply the brush and ink, and to organize the work. The steps of creation are broadly the same as the sketching process; the only difference is that the objects of representation are enriched with much more image processing and the integration of emotions and ideas. The creative subject, starting from the subjective spirit, seeks to understand, explore, and represent nature. Such creation, of moving from subjectivity to objectivity and back to subjectivity, achieves the state of "expressing feelings through objects", "unity of subject and object", and "harmony between self and things", and thus an unfettered realm of "spiritual roaming", then forms the creator's own artistic expression.

The contemporary teaching of the creation of landscape painting has diversified trends, mainly in three aspects. The first is to emphasize the study of traditional landscape painting, emphasize the “ancient conception” (guyi), and value the return of humanistic awareness. The second is returning to nature, valuing sketching from life, and following a course to sketch and create. The third is to absorb the modern Western art form, the modern artistic element integrated into artistic creation; it forms a style of conceptual landscape that is like abstract painting. These three creative paradigms constitute contemporary landscape painting. In teaching creation, what we should pay attention to is that innovation can not be put to the exclusion of tradition; tradition can not only be used to support the performance of innovation. We must strike a better balance between tradition and innovation so as to create excellent landscape painting works.

5. Conclusion

The integrated triad of copying, sketching from life, and creation can help students understand and master the traditional techniques, aesthetic thought, and the creative laws of landscape painting. Copying makes us inherit and understand the tradition, absorb the traditional painting experience and expressive techniques; this is the foundation of sketching and creation. Sketching from life, it is to integrate the tradition with nature, it is to develop while to inherit, to innovate while to develop, “learning from the ancient without to be strictly bound to the ancient”, it guides the students to find, explore, seek the new artistic language and the new form of expression, and then to create the artistic forms which suit the contemporary era and embody their own thoughts. The teaching of landscape painting is not only the inherited pedagogical system, but also a developing, open, inclusive, and pluralistic one. In the teaching practice, the instructors should be active in cultivating the students’ cultural grounding and the ability of inheritance and innovation in the traditional culture. Grounded in the traditions of Chinese and Western culture and art and also in the frontiers of modern art, the students should do the exchange and the integration between the traditional painting and the Western painting, to form a new landscape painting style which is traditional but also modern. As Mr. Li Keran said: “Use the greatest power to enter, and the greatest courage to come out.” We should act with professionalism and a sense of the historical mission, and contribute our own strength to the inheritance and development of Chinese painting.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Xu FG, 2010, The Chinese Artistic Spirit. Commercial Press, Beijing.
- [2] Wang BM, 2008, A General History of Chinese Painting. SDX Joint Publishing Company, Beijing.
- [3] Chen CX, 2001, A History of Chinese Landscape Painting. Tianjin People’s Fine Arts Publishing House, Tianjin.

Publisher’s note

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.