

# Chinese Art's Influence on Roger Fry's Aesthetics Formalism

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## Abstract:

Roger Fry was one of the greatest art critics of the 20th century, who promoted the rise and development of the Western modern art movement and constructed a set of modern aesthetics formalism and art criticism theories, exerting a huge influence on modern art. Despite the formation of Fry's aesthetics formalism cannot be separated from the background of the transformation of Western cultural traditions, the influx of Chinese art into the West at that time also had an impact on Fry's aesthetics formalism. Fry extracted and reinterpreted from Chinese art, forming a distinctive formalist aesthetic theory. In Fry's various works, the influence of Chinese classical aesthetics can be seen, such as blank space, rhythm, and emotional expression. The research will explore the correlation between Roger Fry's aesthetic formalism theory and Chinese art. The study will analyze how Chinese art was introduced into the West and how Roger Fry was influenced by Chinese art. It will focus some particular elements like rhythm and blank space, explore how Fry reinterpreted them and applied to modern art criticism theory, using his work "Cézanne: A Study of His Development" as an example.

**Keywords:** art, Chinese art, aesthetics formalism, Roger Fry, Modernism

## 1. Introduction

The American poet Ezra Pound once wrote in his book, *A Memoir*: "The Chinese impetus is no less marked than the Greek." [1] This statement elevates the influence of Chinese art and culture to the same level as that of Greek culture, expressing a high recognition of Chinese art. The intersection of Eastern and Western art has always been a fascinating and worthy topic of scholarly inquiry. Notably, scholars such as James Cahill and Michael Sullivan have extensively researched the mutual influences between Chinese and Western art. When discussing this topic, most people focus more on the influence of Western art theories on Chinese modern painting, and seldom consider the impact of Chinese art on Western art, ignoring the more complex, subtle, cultural flow between the two. Sullivan's *The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art* and Cahill's *The Compelling Image: Nature and Style in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Painting*, which provide detailed analyses of these cross-cultural influences. Cahill's work, particularly his studies on Chinese painting and its impact on Western artists [2], and Sullivan's exploration of the cultural exchanges and artistic dialogues between China and the West, highlight the profound and intricate ways in which these two artistic traditions have influenced each other. In fact, the formation of Western modern art theory is inseparable from the influence of Chinese art.

Against the backdrop of close exchanges between Chinese and Western art, the early 20th century witnessed a surge of interest in reexamining and studying Chinese art in Western society. This concept "Oriental Renaissance" was first proposed in 1841. Subsequently, the French Sinologist Ernest Renan further elaborated on it in his book *Oriental Renaissance*, emphasizing the influence of Chinese art on the West[3].

By the early 20th century, in the UK, the Bloomsbury Group, centered around art critics and theorists like Roger Fry, keenly captured the trends and shifted their focus towards Chinese art, renowned for its "spiritual resonance" (神韵), in the process of constructing new modern art criticism theories. The Chinese aesthetic thoughts, marked by concepts such as the "unity of heaven and man" and the "unity of things and self," resonated with the ideas of Roger Fry and his contemporaries. Roger Fry's interpretation of Chinese art coincided almost simultaneously with the formation of his formalist aesthetic theories, and Chinese art elements became an indispensable component of his formalist aesthetics.

As a leading figure of the Bloomsbury Group, Roger Fry organized two Post-Impressionist exhibitions at the Grafton Galleries in London in 1910 and 1912, which truly brought Britain into the mainstream of the European modernist art movement and promoted the development of British visual arts. His formalist aesthetic theory dom-

inated Western art criticism in the first half of the 20th century, earning him the well-deserved title of the “Father of Western Modern Aesthetic Formalism.” Moreover, Fry’s vigorous promotion and commentary on Chinese art helped to interpret early Chinese art as representative of “significant form,” thus facilitating its acceptance within the Western art world.

This paper aims to emphasize the profound influence of Chinese art on Fry’s formalist aesthetic theory and further explore its broad impact on the trajectory of modern art development, highlights the importance of cross-cultural influences in the evolution of art and aesthetics.

## 2. the popularity of Chinese style

Recent scholarly works have delved into the transmission of Chinese art to the West and its subsequent influence on the Bloomsbury Group, particularly on figures like Roger Fry, represents a significant chapter in the history of cross-cultural artistic exchange. Ralph Parfect in the *British Modernism and Chinoiserie* illuminates Fry’s practice as a theorist and an editor interested in the arts of China by examining how these were represented and discussed in the Burlington Magazine under his auspices[4]. It focuses especially on the kinds of language, discourse and textual strategies of Sinophile contributors such as Arthur Waley, Lawrence Binyon, Perceval Yetts and R.L. Hobson.

Certainly, apart from the increasingly close cultural exchanges between China and the West under the background of globalization, the subjective reasons for the change in people’s thoughts have also received attention from researchers. Liu Qing (2021), for example, has analyzed the reasons from the perspective of historical background, providing a comprehensive analysis of the process of Chinese art’s influx, why Westerners became curious about Chinese art again, and how the Bloomsbury Group, represented by Roger Fry, came into contact with and deeply understood Chinese art, integrating it into their own theoretical system, thereby promoting the emergence of new aesthetic ideas. The cultural exchange between China and the West began as early as the Eastern Han Dynasty with the opening of the Silk Road, and with the opening of the Silk Road, trade between East and West increased, leading to cultural exchanges.

The establishment of the East India Company in 1600 also brought a large number of Chinese goods into the British market, influencing the taste of Europeans for art. Chinese silk, porcelain, spices, and other goods were brought to the West, including artworks, which had a certain impact on Western art. The Rococo art that was popular in France in the 17th century can be seen to have been inspired

by Chinese art, with design elements such as beautiful curves and symmetrical layouts. From the Qing Dynasty’s closed-door policy to the Opium War in 1840, Western colonial aggression against China led to a large number of Chinese art treasures being looted, stolen, and traded into the West. Exhibitions and auctions of Chinese artifacts, crafts, and paintings began to appear in Britain, sparking a large number of reviews and discussions on Chinese art, which also led people to have a new understanding of Chinese art, sparking Western interest in Chinese art.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Western art critics became increasingly interested in Chinese aesthetic theory. In the eyes of many British modernist cultural elites, the resurgence of Chinese style in the West at the beginning of the 20th century was no less than a “renaissance.” Many famous scholars conducted in-depth research on this, such as Stephen W. Bushell, who lived in China for 32 years and returned to Britain in the early 20th century, publishing works such as “Chinese Art,” “Catalogue of the Morgan Collection of Chinese Porcelains,” “Chinese Porcelain,” and “Description of Chinese Pottery and Porcelain.” In particular, a group of sinologists who studied Chinese art, represented by Herbert Allen Giles, Ernest Fenollosa, and Laurence Binyon, launched a series of writings on Chinese painting and art, such as Herbert Allen Giles’s “An Introduction to the History of Chinese Pictorial Art,” Ernest Fenollosa’s “Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art,” and Laurence Binyon’s “Painting in the Far East: An Introduction to the History of Pictorial and in Asia Especially China and Japan.”[2] The appearance of various art exhibitions and art works gave Roger Fry and others a richer perspective to study Chinese art. Although Roger Fry had already shown his love for Chinese art before this, these art works undoubtedly further stimulated his enthusiasm for Chinese art.

Of course, in addition to the objective reason of the increasingly close cultural exchanges between China and the West under the background of globalization, the subjective reasons for the change in people’s thoughts have also received attention from researchers. Xie Yaqing (2023) analyzed this reason, pointing out that the frequent development of science and technology and wars have intensified people’s inner sense of unease, leading to doubts about values such as science, technology, and rationality. With the efforts of sinologists such as Michael Sullivan and James Cahill, a coherent system for interpreting classical Chinese art gradually formed and influenced British modernist culture and literary practice. This system reflected significant shifts in taste, aesthetic preferences, cultural stance, and identity within British modernism. [5] The late 19th and early 20th centuries were periods of considerable social upheaval and change, marked by

the rise of movements such as labor rights and feminism. These social movements prompted a greater focus on social issues and human psychology, leading to a reevaluation and challenge of traditional literary and artistic models. There was a growing discontent with the Western literary tradition based on “imitation theory,” leading artists and intellectuals to turn their attention to classical Chinese art [6]. Chinese classical art, with its emphasis on concise, vivid, and elegant forms, and its focus on emotional expression and artistic conception, offered an alternative to Western traditions. This art form resonated with the modernist desire for new modes of expression and a deeper exploration of aesthetic and emotional experiences. Chinese art can be said to be the best source of inspiration for modernist groups that oppose tradition, advocate beauty and freedom, and pursue ideological diversity.

The early 20th century was a period of rapid change and upheaval, marked by technological advancements, shifting social norms, and the aftermath of World War I. The Bloomsbury Group’s activities and ideas were very much a response to these changes. They were heavily involved in the promotion and development of modernist aesthetics, which sought to break away from the traditional forms and subjects of the 19th century. Clive Bell, a close friend of Fry and another art critic of the Bloomsbury Group, similarly believed that due to the influence of Far Eastern civilization, “a spiritual renaissance may be at hand.” [7]. American scholar Martin Powers proposed in his work that Chinese painting theory directly influenced the construction of Western modernist theory: “The comparison between the ‘form resemblance’ and ‘freehand brushwork’ of Tang and Song theorists directly influenced European modernist theory through Bunyan and Fry, playing a crucial role in the construction of modern formalist theory.” [8]

Similarly, the political factors hidden behind cultural ideologies are also a focus of exploration for researchers. Yang Lixin (2019) pointed out in her study that Fry used formal aesthetics as a way to understand Chinese art. Fry saw in Chinese art a purity of form and spiritual depth that resonated with modernist ideals. Starting from the needs of the British modernist art revolution, he reinterpreted Chinese art, making it an important source for the formation of the British modernist formal aesthetic concept. However, Fry’s interpretation of Chinese culture did not start from the Chinese context but was closely related to the needs of British modernism. This superficially non-political aestheticism actually contains certain political implications.

### 3. The Alignment of Chinese Art with Roger Fry’s Thought

As one of the greatest art critics of the 20th century, Roger Fry’s two Post-Impressionist exhibitions were groundbreaking, profoundly changing the way people appreciated art and establishing his formalist aesthetic ideology. [9] His ideas helped redefine and teach people how to appreciate modern art, bringing artists like Van Gogh and Cézanne into the public eye. From a wealth of literature, both domestic and international scholars generally agree on Fry’s formalist theory, which emphasizes the importance of the formal structure and visual elements of artworks. Taylor (1977) pointed out that Fry believed the value of an artwork lies not only in its formal beauty but also in the emotions and ideas it conveys. Artists need to create unique visual effects through the use of materials, colors, and other elements to express their emotions and ideas. At the same time, artists need to have a certain level of aesthetic literacy and cultural cultivation to truly achieve artistic heights. Therefore, artists need to continuously learn and explore, constantly improving their artistic skills. In other words, the value of an artwork lies in its formal innovation and visual impact. Fry rejected the traditional theory of imitation, believing that artworks are not simple reproductions of the real world but expressions of the artist’s emotions and ideas through formal structures. Fry advocated for the recreation of nature through painting—a meaningful art form. In Fry’s view, the essence of art is the form of emotion, a type of art that leans towards abstract emotions like poetry and music, rather than realistic imagery. This theory emphasizes emotion as the core, which can be achieved by integrating elements from life and nature in an orderly manner, allowing people to feel a sense of transcendence beyond nature. Thus, artists express their personal emotions through meaningful forms in their artworks. Fry once mentioned an interesting example in his book *Cézanne and His Development*, comparing the straight lines drawn freehand and those drawn with a ruler, suggesting that the former better expresses the emotions the artist intends to convey through the work. This formalist aesthetic ideology resonates to a certain extent with the Chinese aesthetic philosophy that emphasizes “likeness to spirit” rather than “likeness to form.” Fry emphasized the similarity between Chinese classical art and Western modernist art, believing that “Chinese painters are more or less like us; their use of formal language presents no obstacles to us, and their art is purely an aesthetic experience we provide them with.” [10]

Thanks to the work of British Sinologists such as Laurence Binyon and Herbert Allen Giles, Roger Fry’s study of Chinese art was provided with a steady stream of re-

sources and perspectives. Among them, one of the most representative theories of ancient Chinese art, the “Six Canons of Pictorial Art” (谢赫六法), had a profound impact on the formation of Roger Fry’s formalist aesthetic ideology. The “Six Canons of Pictorial Art” proposed six important principles for Chinese painting creation: rhythmic vitality, anatomical structure, conformity with nature, suitability of coloring, artistic composition, and finish. Roger Fry distilled and reinterpreted these aesthetic ideas and elements, applying them to the construction of his formalist aesthetic theory. He frequently emphasized rhythm, blank space, and brushwork in his writings.

### 3.1 Rhythm

Rhythm corresponds to the concept of “rhythmic vitality” in the Six Canons of Pictorial Art. Rhythmic vitality refers to the spirit or charm that runs through a painting, which is the highest level of aesthetic pursuit in Chinese painting tradition. It is the first canon in the Six Canons,[11] embodying the painter’s temperament, comprehensive literacy, life taste, and spiritual realm. Rhythmic vitality in painting generally manifests as the vitality of the painter’s creation, the vividness of the image, and the overall vitality of the painting. In Roger Fry’s thought, the manifestation of rhythm has been deeply explored by many researchers. Liu Qian (2016) pointed out in her research that Roger Fry believed linear rhythm predominates in Chinese art [12]. This coincides with Zong Baihua’s idea that rhythmic vitality refers to the “rhythm of life” or “rhythmic life.”[13] Chinese painting, as an art of lines, is characterized by the simplicity of lines, which determines its expressive features. Painters are often not satisfied with mere resemblance to nature but strive to capture a broader, deeper life, emotion, and thought.

Roger Fry himself frequently used the term “rhythm” in his analysis and interpretation of Cézanne’s style in “Cézanne: A Study of His Development,” especially in regards to Cézanne’s late and final period landscape paintings. When interpreting “Mont Sainte-Victoire,” he mentioned: “The perfect harmony between the figures and the landscape, the rhythmic emotion so coherent and overwhelming, Cézanne’s bizarre lyrical mood is clearly expressed here.” It can be seen that Roger Fry used rhythm as a criterion to distinguish between Western traditional painting and Western modern painting. Indeed, a significant distinction between modern and classical painting is the shift from “realism” to “expressiveness,” with “expressiveness” being a major characteristic of Chinese painting.

### 3.2 Brushwork

The understanding of brushwork in Western academia

can be traced back to Baudelaire, who believed, “There are also all kinds of sketches. Those who regard sketches purely as a craft, first of all require meticulousness, and this meticulousness excludes the expressiveness of brushwork. Originally, brushwork is very beautiful. When a colorist uses color to depict nature, he will abandon the exquisite brushwork due to the pursuit of rigorous sketches and weaken the expressiveness.” [14]. This view is consistent with Roger Fry’s thinking. In his study on “Calligraphic Lines,” Liu Qing (2021) proposed that in Western art, painters usually pursue a sense of completion in the picture. Since the Renaissance, European paintings have been meticulously cleaned, smooth to the point where no brushstrokes or lines can be found. Therefore, in European classical traditional art criticism, there is a serious lack of theory and aesthetics regarding lines. After the Impressionist era, art inspired by Eastern art emerged with a plethora of lines and brushstrokes, which naturally led Fry to turn his attention to China, as Chinese art excelled in line expression. Through his study of Chinese calligraphy, Roger Fry discovered that Chinese painters value brushwork, using it to express the spirit of nature and convey the painter’s noble emotions. This is consistent with the views of traditional Chinese painting theory. Fry believed that leaving clear brushstrokes on the canvas allows viewers to better understand the painter’s creative process and the personal emotions they want to convey.

Cézanne, as a representative painter of Post-Impressionism, was indeed deeply influenced by Impressionism early in his painting career. Particularly in his early works, one can discern clear Impressionist stylistic traits. Through his use of sketching and color, Cézanne began to focus on the interplay of light and color, attempting to capture the transient atmosphere of natural scenes. Like Impressionist painters, he frequently painted outdoors, aiming to directly capture the effects of changing light on objects. However, unlike pure Impressionism, Cézanne’s interests gradually shifted towards the exploration of form and structure began to move beyond Impressionism’s focus on immediate visual sensation. As a post-impressionist painter, Cézanne explore deeper emotional and symbolic meanings through his work, often using bold colors, geometric forms, and unique perspectives.

In “Cézanne: A Study of His Development,” Fry’s analysis of Cézanne’s work methods runs throughout the book, including “Intellectual,” “Correction and Adjustment,” “Sensory,” and “Realization.” “Intellectual” [15] is the core of Fry’s critical theory of Cézanne. Fry repeatedly mentions in the text that Cézanne’s intellect refers to the extraction and processing of what the eyes see in nature, which is simplification and generalization, as mentioned earlier. Cézanne himself once said, “The shapes of na-

ture always appear as spheres, cones, and cylinders.” In Cézanne’s view, these shapes are a convenient intellectual “scaffold.”[16] Cézanne processes and integrates nature in an orderly manner through these shapes. Under this intellectual framework, Fry proposes that Cézanne’s specific methodology in painting is correction and adjustment. Cézanne shapes the blocks step by step in the picture through small brushstrokes, following the changes in nature step by step to adjust the picture. Fry vigorously promotes the aesthetic value of these brushstrokes to the public. Before the Impressionists, the old masters of classicism did not dare to leave any traces of brushstrokes in order to depict the spatial three-dimensionality of the picture. As a result, Impressionist paintings were often labeled as crude and hasty. However, Fry believed that this texture formed by brushstrokes, like the composition of colors, is a factor serving form and is also aesthetically meaningful. It is the expression of the artist’s sensitivity (emotion).

### 3.3 Blank Space

Blank space is a commonly used and unique artistic technique in Chinese literary and artistic creation, as well as a distinctive feature of classical Chinese art and aesthetics, widely applied in painting, poetry, gardens, architecture, and other arts. Roger Fry directly pointed out Cézanne’s use of blank space when analyzing Cézanne’s “The Road to the Black Castle.” Fry believed that Cézanne seemed to understand its mystery, so in his watercolor paintings, “he seemed to try to avoid filling the canvas as much as possible, so that there were some white subtle gaps here and there, even after the work was completed.” By Cézanne’s later years, his style became even more simplified and abstract, emphasizing the flatness of shapes and colors. His works formed an orderly whole, as Cézanne himself put it, “Various sensations are combined logically.” However, at the same time, in his paintings, the traces of blank space and brushstrokes were retained. He found a balance between rationality and sensibility, being rational but not rigid, and being sensitive but not excessive. This artistic technique of blank space and the aesthetics embodied thereby are ubiquitous in Chinese painting. Fry’s introduction of blank space in his analysis and interpretation of Cézanne’s paintings is an affirmation and support of Cézanne’s departure from Western tradition, revealing the transformative action and significance of Cézanne in the field of painting, injecting new vitality and elements into the interpretation of Cézanne, and opening a new window for understanding Cézanne.

### 4. Conclusion

The intersection of Eastern and Western art, particularly

the influence of Chinese art on Western modernism, has been a topic of growing interest and scholarly inquiry. While much attention has been paid to the impact of Western art theories on Chinese modern painting, the influence of Chinese art on Western art has often been overlooked. However, as evidenced by the work of scholars like Roger Fry and the Bloomsbury Group, Chinese art played a significant role in shaping Western modern art theory. Roger Fry’s engagement with Chinese art, particularly his exploration of Chinese aesthetic principles such as rhythmic vitality, brushwork, and blank space, deeply influenced his formalist aesthetic theory. Fry’s formalist theory, which emphasized the importance of formal structure and visual elements in artworks, was reshaped by his study of Chinese art, leading to a broader understanding of artistic expression. Through his writings and interpretations, Fry not only promoted the acceptance of Chinese art within the Western art world but also contributed to a richer understanding of modern art’s development. His recognition of the aesthetic value of brushwork and blank space in Chinese painting, for example, challenged traditional Western notions of realism and representation.

In conclusion, the study of Roger Fry’s engagement with Chinese art highlights the complex and dynamic nature of cross-cultural artistic exchange. It underscores the importance of considering both Eastern and Western influences in the evolution of modern art and aesthetics, enriching our understanding of artistic innovation and creativity. As we continue to explore the connections between different artistic traditions, we gain deeper insights into the universal language of art and its ability to transcend cultural boundaries.

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