

SQUARE FULL COMPOSITION IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE FIGURE PAINTING: SPATIAL DENSITY AND VISUAL NARRATIVE IN THE 12TH–14TH NATIONAL ART EXHIBITIONS

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Received: 18 May 2026 | Revised: 10 June 2026
Accepted: 26 June 2026 / Published: 30 June 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51200/ga.v16i1.7904>

ABSTRACT

In the development of contemporary Chinese figure painting, changes in compositional methods have gradually become an important factor influencing visual expression and spatial narrative. This article examines Square Full Composition in selected Chinese figure paintings from the 12th to 14th National Art Exhibitions. It defines Square Full Composition as a square or near-square pictorial structure characterized by dense surface occupation, boundary saturation, compressed spatial layering, and integrated figure-environment relations. Using image analysis and comparative case study, the article analyses three award-winning works: *A Happy Family* (2014), *Mission* (2019), and *Golden Land* (2024). The analysis shows that Square Full Composition supports different narrative scales: domestic intimacy, professional collectivity, and agricultural labour. The article argues that this compositional mode reworks the traditional principle of “management of position” through modern strategies of density, compression, and exhibition-oriented visual organization. Square Full Composition not only reflects the evolving formal tendencies of figure painting in the National Art Exhibition, but also demonstrates the ongoing integration and transformation of Chinese figure painting between traditional cultural contexts and modern visual experience.

Keywords: Square Full Composition, Contemporary Chinese Figure Painting, Spatial Structure, Visual Narrative, National Art Exhibition

INTRODUCTION

The development of contemporary Chinese figure painting has consistently been shaped by the dual construction of traditional cultural spirit and modern visual concepts. With changes in social aesthetic structures and modes of image dissemination, figure painting has gradually moved beyond the singular expression of traditional brush-and-ink language toward a comprehensive exploration of pictorial composition, spatial order, and formal language. Among these aspects, composition has become a crucial factor influencing visual narration and aesthetic expression. Since the twentieth century, Chinese figure painting has undergone continuous formal transformation through exchanges between Chinese and Western art. From the introduction of Western realist systems to the integration of expressive brushwork with modern compositional concepts in the new era, the traditional principle of “management of position” has gradually broken away from formulaic arrangements and evolved into a more open spatial structure. While inheriting the holistic perspective and rhythmic spirit of Chinese painting, contemporary artists place greater emphasis on structural order, visual tension, and the expression of contemporary spirit within the picture (Jin, 2023).

This modern transformation of compositional language is particularly evident in figure paintings presented at the National Art Exhibition of China (hereafter referred to as the “National Art Exhibition”), a top-level national art platform in China (Zhang, 2022). This article treats the National Art Exhibition not only as a source of images but also as an institutional context that may shape compositional preference. Square Full Composition is therefore examined as both a formal strategy and a possible response to public exhibition scale, curatorial selection, and the demand for visually legible collective narratives. Taking figure paintings from the 12th to 14th National Art Exhibitions as examples, Recent National Exhibition works increasingly adopt Square Full Composition, a tendency that may reflect both artists’ formal choices and institutional preference for dense, legible narrative images. Through a nearly square spatial structure, this composition fully extends the main figures and environmental elements across the picture plane, creating an integrated visual effect characterized by fullness, cohesion, and strong visual tension. Compared with traditional scattered-point composition, it emphasizes spatial integrity, order, and visual density, while strengthening narrative quality and realistic expression through the unity of figure groups, background space, and brushwork rhythm. The square format is significant because it reduces the directional dominance of horizontal or vertical formats. It produces a compact field in which center, edge, and corner relations become more pronounced. In Square Full Composition, this geometric stasis intensifies boundary control and transforms how narrative movement is organized within the pictorial field.

Although recent studies have noted full composition, spatial compression, and increased visual density in contemporary Chinese figure painting, Square Full Composition has not yet been clearly defined as an analytical category. Existing scholarship does not explain how square format, boundary occupation, figure grouping, visual density, and figure-environment integration operate together to organize visual narrative in recent National Art Exhibition works.

The research questions of this article are as follows:

1. What formal criteria define Square Full Composition in selected contemporary Chinese figure paintings?
2. How do spatial density, boundary occupation, figure grouping, and focal organization operate in selected National Exhibition works?
3. How does Square Full Composition transform the traditional concept of “management of position”?
4. How might the National Exhibition as an institutional platform shape the emergence and visibility of this compositional mode?

Taking figure paintings from the 12th to 14th National Art Exhibitions as the research object, this article aims to explore the generative mechanism and formal characteristics of “Square Full Composition” in contemporary Chinese figure painting, and to analyze its specific manifestations in pictorial spatial organization, the construction of figure relationships, and the shaping of visual order. Furthermore, the article investigates how Square Full Composition, while inheriting the traditional Chinese aesthetic concept of “management of position,” integrates the visual logic of modern compositional art to achieve the contemporary transformation of traditional painting language. Through the analysis of figure painting cases from the National Art Exhibition, this article also seeks to reveal the artistic value and cultural significance of Square Full Composition in strengthening realistic narration, expressing the contemporary public themes, and constructing contemporary visual experience, thereby providing theoretical references for compositional research and formal innovation in contemporary Chinese figure painting (Huang, 2016). This article mainly has four objectives: to define Square Full Composition as an analytical category; to classify its visual features in selected works from the 12th to 14th National Art Exhibitions; to analyze how square format, density, boundary occupation, and figure grouping shape visual narrative; to evaluate whether this compositional mode reworks traditional “management of position” within an institutional exhibition context. Therefore, Square Full Composition not only reflects the innovative tendency of formal language in contemporary Chinese figure painting, but also demonstrates the localized transformation of modern visual experience within Chinese painting. Research on its formal characteristics and aesthetic value is of great significance for understanding the spatial construction and visual transformation of contemporary Chinese figure painting.

LITERATURE REVIEW

At present, research literature on the composition of contemporary Chinese figure painting mainly focuses on the traditional theory of “management of position”, modern compositional concepts, and pictorial spatial forms. In the realm of traditional theories of pictorial placement, traditional Chinese painting theory emphasizes spatial arrangement principles such as “arranging forms and momentum” and the interaction between “emptiness and solidity,” regarding composition not merely as a formal arrangement of the picture, but as a crucial element related to the expression of artistic rhythm, poetic atmosphere, and overall spirit (Fong, 1988). Some

scholars have interpreted the spatial consciousness and holistic perspective of Chinese painting from the perspective of traditional Chinese aesthetics, laying the theoretical foundation for subsequent studies on figure-painting composition.

With the introduction of Western modeling systems and modern compositional theories, Chinese figure painting has gradually undergone a modern transformation in its compositional forms (Chu, 2024). Numerous studies focus on the influence of Western realist modeling on the spatial structure of Chinese figure painting (Zhu, 2019), while research since the new era has paid greater attention to the integration of expressive brushwork language and modern visual composition. Some scholars argue that contemporary figure painting has gradually shifted from traditional scattered-point layouts toward modern compositional approaches that emphasize overall order, visual tension, and spatial coverage, demonstrating a clear awareness of formal construction (Cao, 2023; Gao, 2017).

In studies related to the National Art Exhibition, researchers generally regard the National Art Exhibition as an important platform for observing the development trends of contemporary Chinese figure painting. Since the beginning of the new era, the development trajectory of Chinese painting in the National Art Exhibitions has been closely linked to China's modernization process. Beyond thematic content, artists have also engaged in formal exploration of visual elements such as dots, lines, planes, and composition. Their depictions of public spaces, rural life, urban landscapes, and the people's army indicate a shift from grand narratives to a focus on everyday life (Li, 2024). Existing literature mainly analyzes figure paintings exhibited at the National Art Exhibition from the perspectives of realist themes, narrative expression, and the embodiment of the contemporary public themes, while also pointing out the growing tendency toward "full composition," "large-scale scene construction," and "overall integration" in terms of pictorial structure and visual language in recent years (Yu, 2024). Some studies have begun to focus on phenomena such as group figure arrangement, spatial compression, and increased visual density, suggesting that these characteristics reflect contemporary figure painting's absorption of modern visual experience and compositional art (Zhao, 2020; Chen, 2023; Hao, W.-K, Koo, M.-C, 2023).

Yu (2019) reviews the historical context of successive National Art Exhibitions over the 70 years since the founding of the People's Republic of China. By summarizing their characteristics, phenomena, and challenges, the author takes the opportunity to reflect on and analyze the arduous development of the exhibitions. The article proposes that the National Art Exhibition has played a guiding and constructive role in shaping the development of art in New China by gathering outstanding works of the era, summarizing fundamental artistic principles, fostering innovation and talent, and expanding the disciplinary scope. However, specialized discussions on "Square Full Composition" remain relatively limited in existing research. Most studies merely treat it as a pictorial formal phenomenon, lacking a systematic analysis of its spatial structure, formal logic, and visual mechanisms. In particular, there is still no complete theoretical framework regarding how nearly square spatial organization strengthens pictorial integrity, narrative quality, and contemporary relevance, or how it integrates the traditional concept of "management of position" with modern compositional language. Therefore, research

on the formal characteristics and aesthetic value of Square Full Composition in contemporary Chinese figure painting can not only supplement the current deficiencies in studies of figure-painting composition, but also contribute to a deeper understanding of the spatial transformation and formal innovation of contemporary Chinese figure painting within both traditional and modern, as well as local and global visual contexts.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article takes figure paintings from the 12th to 14th National Art Exhibitions as the research objects, focusing on the spatial structure and formal mechanisms of “Square Full Composition” in contemporary Chinese figure painting. In terms of research methodology, this article primarily adopts image analysis methods, combined with case study approaches, to systematically deconstruct and interpret Square Full Composition from the perspectives of visual structure and compositional logic, thereby revealing its compositional characteristics, spatial organizational methods, and mechanisms of aesthetic formation (Condorovici, 2015). This study uses qualitative visual analysis supported by descriptive corpus statistics. It first classifies eligible figure paintings from the 12th to 14th National Art Exhibitions, then analyses three exemplary award-winning works through a shared visual-analysis framework.

Image Analysis Method: Analysis of Visual Structure and Compositional Mechanisms

This article adopts image analysis as its core research approach to conduct multi-layered visual structure analysis and formal interpretation of works employing Square Full Composition, focusing primarily on spatial organization, figure relationships, visual order, and compositional logic (Ma, 2008; Zhang, 2022).

From the perspective of spatial structure, the article analyzes the overall filling methods and boundary control mechanisms within nearly square picture formats, exploring the visual integrity, spatial coverage, and spatial compression characteristics generated by “Square Full Composition.” Through the analysis of group figure arrangements, the relationships between primary and secondary subjects, and the formation of visual centers, the article investigates the organizational methods of figures and the narrative structure within the picture plane.

At the level of visual form, this article further focuses on the visual center and viewing pathways within the picture, analyzing the trajectory of the viewer’s gaze and the organization of internal visual rhythm. By combining image density with spatial tension, the article explores how the visual relationship between “fullness” and “openness” strengthens the narrative and realistic expressive functions of the artwork. Meanwhile, from the perspectives of compositional proportion and spatial order, the research examines how the nearly square structure influences pictorial stability, balance, and visual tension, revealing how an overall covering layout establishes a modern spatial mode distinct from traditional scattered-point perspective composition.

In addition, this article analyzes, from the perspective of formal language, how Square Full Composition inherits and transforms the traditional concept of “management of position”, exploring how it integrates modern visual compositional logic on the basis of traditional Chinese spatial consciousness in painting, thereby forming a compositional language with contemporary visual characteristics (Huang, 2017). Through the above image analysis, the article summarizes the visual structural features and formal generative mechanisms of Square Full Composition and establishes its basic compositional model.

Case Study Method: Analysis of Image Samples from the National Art Exhibition

This article selects figure paintings from the 12th to 14th National Art Exhibitions as the core research samples and conducts case studies by identifying works with typical characteristics of Square Full Composition. The research focuses on pictorial spatial organization, patterns of group figure arrangement, and strategies of visual structural treatment, thereby summarizing their common characteristics and formal modes to ensure that the article is grounded in authentic image samples and visual practice.

The corpus consists of 607 pieces eligible Chinese figure paintings from the 12th, 13th, and 14th National Art Exhibitions, compiled from official catalogues, award lists, and China Artists Association image records. Among these works, there are 269 pieces that meet the criteria of Square Full Composition. The study includes award-winning and Beijing-selected works and excludes those works that have not won awards and those that do not meet the standards of figure painting.

The paper state how a work qualifies as Square Full Composition. A work should be classified as Square Full Composition only when it meets most of the following:

Proposed model inclusion criteria:

- Square or near-square format;
- Figure painting as dominant genre;
- Dense pictorial occupation;
- Limited blank space;
- Strong use of edges and corners;
- Integrated figure-environment relation;
- Centralized or distributed focal structure;
- Visual fullness produced by composition, not merely by subject matter.

Proposed model exclusion criteria:

- Works were excluded if they were square but visually sparse, dense but clearly rectangular, non-figure-dominant, insufficiently documented, or too low in image quality for formal analysis.

For this study, square and near-square formats are defined as formats with a height-width or width-height ratio between 1:1 and 1:1.20. *A Happy Family* measures 172 × 200 cm, approximately 1:1.16; *Mission* measures 195 × 178 cm, approximately 1:1.10; *Golden Land* measures 240 × 240 cm, exactly 1:1.

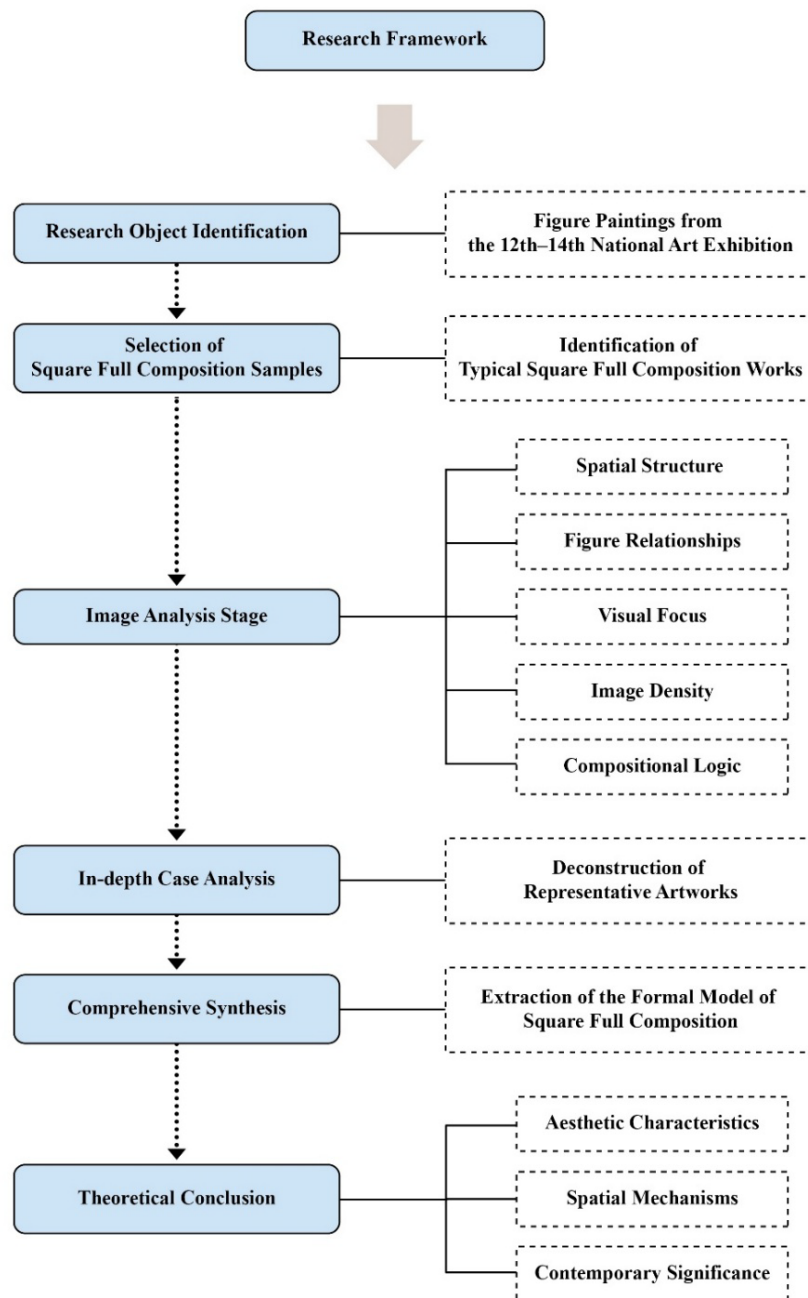


Figure 1: Research Framework

Source: Created by the author

This article adopts image analysis as its core research approach, combined with case study methods, to systematically investigate “Square Full Composition” in figure paintings from the National Art Exhibition. Through the analysis of pictorial spatial structure, figure relationships, visual order, and compositional logic, the article further reveals its formal generative mechanisms and aesthetic characteristics. Meanwhile, based on representative case studies, it summarizes the spatial organizational principles and visual expressive modes of Square Full Composition in contemporary Chinese figure painting, thereby providing a methodological framework (Figure 1) for compositional research and formal innovation in contemporary figure painting.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Through a systematic review and image analysis of figure paintings from the 12th to 14th National Art Exhibitions, this article identifies and classifies works employing “Square Full Composition.” Based on a statistical analysis of award-winning works and those selected for exhibition in Beijing, the author finds a continuous growth trend in the use of this compositional mode: there are 81 relevant works in the 12th National Art Exhibition, increasing to 92 in the 13th, and further rising to 96 in the 14th. (Table 1)

Table 1: Statistical Analysis of Square Full Composition in Figure Paintings from the 12th to 14th National Art Exhibitions (Award-winning and Selected Artworks)

Exhibition	Year	Total eligible figure paintings	Square Full Composition works	Percentage
The 12 th National Art Exhibitions	2014	171	81	47.4%
The 13 th National Art Exhibitions	2019	207	92	44.4%
The 14 th National Art Exhibitions	2024	229	96	41.9%

Source: <https://12qgmz.artron.net/index.html?hcs=1&clg=2> (12th National Art Exhibition catalogue); <https://13qgmz.artron.net/book/index.html> (13th National Art Exhibition catalogue); <http://14jqgmz.yhwtw.com/> (14th National Art Exhibition catalogue)

This development indicates that Square Full Composition has been increasingly adopted in contemporary Chinese figure painting, gradually evolving from a localized formal exploration into a relatively stable and widely applied compositional strategy. Based on the above sampling statistics and selection results, this article further confirms its typological significance and representativeness as a research subject, thereby laying a solid foundation for subsequent in-depth analysis of its spatial structure and formal mechanisms.

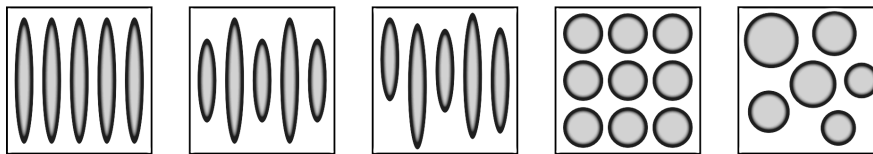


Figure 2: Several Basic Forms of Square Full Composition

Source: Created by the author

Based on the image analysis of figure paintings from the 12th to 14th National Art Exhibitions, Square Full Composition in contemporary practice has gradually demonstrated relatively stable formal characteristics and compositional tendencies (Figure 2). Overall, this compositional approach is not a single fixed model; rather, within the spatial constraints of a

near-square format, it generates diverse visual expressions through different organizational logics of figures and environmental elements. On the one hand, some works emphasize the concentration of a visual center, with group figures converging toward the center, thereby strengthening the narrative core and overall stability of the composition. On the other hand, certain works create a high-density visual effect through the layering of multiple figure relationships and the compression of foreground and background space. In addition, another tendency is the balanced filling of boundary areas, where figures and background elements are evenly distributed around the pictorial edges, enhancing the sense of wholeness and fullness. These varied approaches together constitute the basic compositional typology of Square Full Composition, reflecting the diversified exploration and formal integration in spatial organization and visual expression within contemporary Chinese figure painting.

Case Analysis

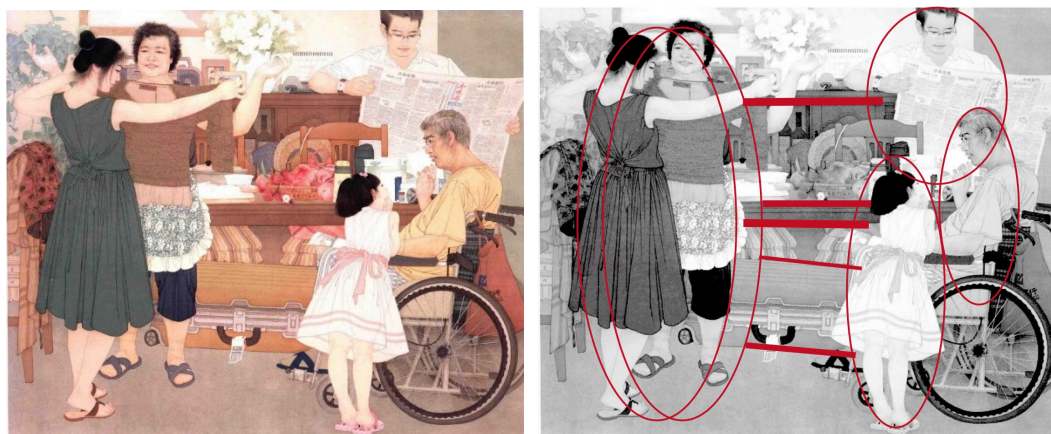


Figure 3: Chen Zhi & Wu Xin (Tianjin), *A Happy Family*, Chinese Painting, 172 cm × 200 cm, 2014

Source: <https://www.caanet.org.cn/specialDetail.mx?id=14>

Taking the gold medal-winning painting *A Happy Family* (Figure 3) from the 12th National Art Exhibition as an example, this work typically demonstrates the spatial organizational characteristics of Square Full Composition. Based on a near-square pictorial format, the composition achieves visual fullness and structural balance through the high-density integration of figures and scenes across the entire picture plane. In terms of spatial structure, the work fully fills the pictorial field through the organic integration of figures and environment, forming a unified structure with no obvious blank areas, thereby reinforcing spatial compactness and overall compositional order. Regarding figure relationships, the mother–daughter motif serves as the central visual focus, and narrative continuity is constructed through their dynamic gestures, while the static figure of the father on the right contrasts with the central movement, enriching spatial hierarchy and enhancing situational expression.

In terms of visual focus, the central area constitutes the primary narrative core, where bodily movements and gaze directions jointly guide the viewer’s reading path, establishing a

clear directional visual flow. The image is characterized by high density, with figures, environment, and detailed elements interwoven into a multi-layered visual structure, enhancing both realism and pictorial expressiveness. In terms of compositional logic, the work employs an overall coverage layout and balanced edge distribution, allowing Square Full Composition to play a key role in unifying spatial structure and emotional expression, fully demonstrating its compositional advantage and narrative function in contemporary Chinese figure painting.

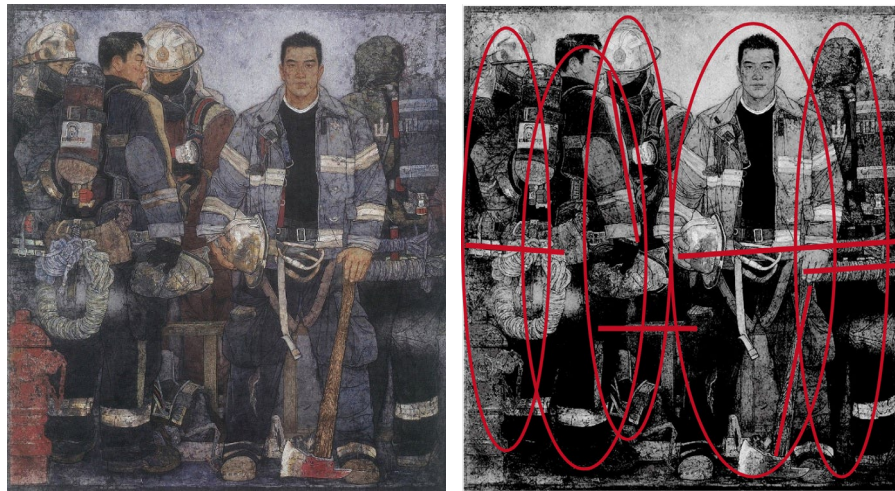


Figure 4: Li Yuwang, *Mission*, Chinese Painting, 195 cm × 178 cm, 2019

Source: <https://www.caanet.org.cn/specialDetail.mx?id=35>

Taking the gold medal-winning painting *Mission* (Figure 4) from the 13th National Art Exhibition as an example, this work appears to exemplify the spatial organizational characteristics of Square Full Composition in contemporary figure painting. Based on a near-square compositional structure, the painting achieves a visually full, compact, and highly ordered pictorial space through the high-density arrangement of firefighter figures and prop elements. In *Mission*, uniforms and equipment should not be treated merely as compositional detail. Their repetition creates a dense sign-system of public service and collective discipline. The compressed grouping of firefighter bodies transforms individual figures into a unified professional identity, aligning formal density with the institutional narrative of heroic labour.

In terms of spatial structure, both figures and environmental elements almost heavily occupy the picture plane, while the pictorial boundaries are fully utilized to create an overall covering layout, thereby enhancing spatial cohesion and visual intensity. Regarding figure relationships, multiple firefighters are distributed throughout the composition in different poses, forming an interconnected group structure. At the same time, the contrast between static standing postures and dynamic details strengthens the situational connections among the figures and reinforces the professional atmosphere. The visual focus is concentrated on the central group of figures, while equipment details, directional movements, and gaze relationships guide the viewer's eye through a cyclical viewing path within the composition.

In terms of image density, firefighting tools, clothing textures, and background elements are layered and interwoven, creating a strong sense of visual depth and realism while intensifying visual tension and thematic expression. In terms of compositional logic, the work achieves a visual order through overall coverage, balanced boundary distribution, and high-density arrangement. As a result, Square Full Composition not only strengthens the overall stability of the picture but also further emphasizes the solemnity, sense of mission, and realistic spirit of the firefighter group.



Figure 5: Shen Xiaoming, *Golden Land*, Chinese Painting, 240cm × 240 cm, 2024
Source: <https://www.caanet.org.cn/specialDetail.mx?id=46>

Taking *Golden Land* (Figure 5), the gold medal-winning work from the 14th National Art Exhibition, as an example, the painting suggests the spatial organizational and visual integration characteristics of Square Full Composition in contemporary Chinese figure painting. Using a 240cm × 240cm square format, the work arranges figures, land, rice crops, and labor scenes across the entire pictorial field, forming a full, stable, and highly ordered visual structure that reflects strong spatial coverage and overall cohesion. In *Golden Land*, the density of crops, tools, bodies, and land should be read as more than spatial fullness. It constructs an integrated labour-field in which human bodies and agricultural environment are visually fused.

In terms of spatial structure, the composition contains almost no obvious blank space, as figures and environmental elements are fully integrated within the confined square format, constructing a unified and complete visual field while strengthening the sense of enclosure and spatial tension. Regarding figure relationships, figures from different labor scenes are organically organized within the same pictorial space. Through the interaction of gestures and group arrangements, the work creates a continuous narrative structure that enhances both realism and the contemporary public themes. The visual focus is concentrated in the central area, where figures and the land scenery together form the core focal point of the composition. The directional movement of rice crops, the gestures of the figures, and the arrangement of farming tools guide the viewer's visual flow throughout the picture. Meanwhile, the high-density layering of figures, agricultural tools, and background scenery creates rich spatial depth and a strong

sense of realism. In terms of compositional logic, the work fully demonstrates the important role of Square Full Composition in achieving spatial unity, narrative expression, and the construction of contemporary spirit through overall coverage, balanced boundary organization, and dense visual arrangement.

Theoretical Conclusion

As an important compositional form in contemporary Chinese figure painting, Square Full Composition can be theoretically analyzed from the following aspects:

1. Its aesthetic characteristics are mainly reflected in its sense of wholeness, density, and visual cohesion. Through a highly saturated arrangement within a near-square spatial format, this compositional mode strengthens the integrity and emotional tension of the picture, allowing figures, environment, and narrative content to form a unified visual entity.
2. At the level of spatial mechanism, Square Full Composition breaks away from the loose structure of traditional scattered-point spatial arrangements. Through boundary control, centralized visual focus, and multilayered spatial overlapping, it establishes a spatial order characterized by compression and enclosure. At the same time, the continuous organization between figure groups and environmental elements creates a stable yet rhythmical visual flow within the composition.
3. From the perspective of contemporary significance, this compositional approach not only continues the holistic spatial consciousness and the traditional concept of “management of position” in Chinese painting, but also reflects the active response of contemporary figure painting to modern visual experience, realist narrative, and the contemporary public themes. The formation of its formal language demonstrates the integration and transformation of Chinese figure painting between traditional cultural contexts and modern visual structures (Yang, 2024; Yu, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This article examines figure paintings presented in the 12th to 14th National Art Exhibitions and finds that Square Full Composition has gradually emerged as a prominent compositional strategy in contemporary Chinese figure painting. By adopting an overall, spatially saturated arrangement, this compositional form departs from the relatively open and dispersed structures commonly seen in traditional figure painting, creating instead a stronger sense of visual unity and spatial coherence among figures, environment, and narrative content. This article has defined Square Full Composition as a compositional strategy based on square or near-square format, dense pictorial occupation, boundary control, figure grouping, and figure-environment integration. Through *A Happy Family*, *Mission*, and *Golden Land*, the study shows that this mode organizes domestic intimacy, professional collectivity, and agricultural labour through different forms of spatial compression. The article argues that Square Full Composition

reworks “management of position” by intensifying relational placement within a dense exhibition-oriented visual field. The study is limited by its reliance on selected works and available reproductions; future research should include non-award-winning works, artist interviews, studio documentation, and direct viewing of original paintings. In this sense, Square Full Composition not only signals an important formal tendency in recent National Art Exhibition figure paintings, but also demonstrates how contemporary Chinese figure painting continues to negotiate the relationship between inherited artistic traditions and modern visual structures.

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