

# A Comparison of Watercolor Painting and Boneless Painting: From Technique to Connotation

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**Abstract:** Watercolor painting is a western painting method, which is concerned with the relationships of light and shadow as well as brightness and darkness. Chinese painting includes brush painting and ink painting; there is a special painting method that is known as “boneless painting.” This technique involves painting directly with color without outlining, and it is between brush painting and freehand brushwork. Both, boneless painting and watercolor painting are rich in color expression, and their techniques have many similarities in expressing the relationship between man and nature as well as the inner feelings of the painter. Watercolor painting was introduced to China from the West at the end of the 19th century, and it soon became a popular type of painting. The technique of brush painting in boneless painting has a history of several thousand years, from the Warring States period to the Song Dynasty. It pursues the shape of modeling and focuses on realism. Boneless painting, on the other hand, is mainly concerned with flowers and birds, between brush painting and painting with a sense of style, without outlining, directly painting flowers and leaves with colors or ink. They are both painted with brushes on paper, and they use water as a medium to mix pigments. The wet and dry intensity of watercolor painting as well as the interplay of ink and colors in Chinese painting have both developed their own unique charms. The two different types of painting represent the cultural epitomes of two different nationalities. In contemporary times, the techniques of watercolor painting and Chinese painting can be learned from each other. This paper explores the different connotations and expressions of boneless painting and watercolor painting through the combing of watercolor and Chinese painting techniques.

**Keywords:** Watercolor painting; Boneless painting; Technique; Connotation

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## 1. Introduction

Watercolor painting is a painting method that uses water to mix and paint with transparent pigments. It came into being during the European Renaissance. There are two basic characteristics of watercolor painting: the first is the visual perception of transparency, and the second is the fluidity of water during the painting process. Both, watercolor painting and Chinese painting use water as a medium to mix, so it is popular among Chinese people. Although boneless painting also belongs to the realistic style, it is more subtle with the method of brush painting and the painting with a sense of meaning. It is about painting within painting, the poetry of a picture, and the details in it. Boneless painting can be painted not only on rice paper, but also on silk.

## 2. Boneless painting

Boneless painting is a method used by painters to paint directly with colors or ink without the outlines in brush painting. Boneless painting was developed by Xu Xi’s grandson, Xu Chongsi. Xu Xi was one of the

representative painters of bird-and-flower paintings in the Five Dynasties period, who introduced “Huang Jia Fu Gui” and “Xu Xi Ye Yi.” “Huang Jia Fu Gui” is a brush painting technique, with the subject matter coming from rare birds and animals in the court. It is much neater, more three-dimensional, and looks rich, reflecting the term “Fu Gui” in Chinese, which is in line with the aesthetic requirements of the court at that time. “Xu Xi Ye Yi” refers to an ink painting technique, in which the subject matter comes from nature. It mainly emphasizes on the use of ink, followed by the use of colors. The use of brush and ink techniques are more relaxed and casual. It carries with it the term “wild and elegant,” which mirrors the term “Ye Yi” in Chinese. Xu Chongsi, the grandson of Xu Xi, combined both techniques and came up with boneless painting.

Boneless painting refers to a painting method mainly used for flower (bird and flower) painting. It is a method of painting flowers and leaves directly with colors or ink, without the “bones of the brush” – the ink lines as outlines.

Boneless painting skillfully combines ink, color, water, and brush as one on paper, with emphasis on meaning.

### **2.1. Coloring**

The coloring in boneless painting can be borrowed from the technique of brush painting and dyed layer by layer or from the direct water coloring in painting, but also focusing on the brush and ink brush, directly with dot dyeing once completed. Dot dyeing involves the use of the dry and wet intensity of ink to complete chafing and dabbing, and finally dyeing, which is the use of colors.

### **2.2. Ink**

In boneless painting, the painter can also paint using ink directly. Using ink and water, the painter can mix them to form thick ink, light ink, or even a lighter shade of ink. The ink itself can be divided into five shades: very heavy, heavy, medium, light, very light. Each shade has a different amount of water, and each layer is completed by adding water on top of the previous shade.

### **2.3. Breaking**

This painting method involves adding other colors partially when the picture is wet. However, it can also be stacked with colors after drying, with the purpose of “breaking.” There are several methods such as light breaking thick, thick breaking light, color breaking ink, ink breaking color, etc. “Breaking” refers to the addition of other colors. For example, “light breaking thick” can be done by adding water and lighter ink to “break” the thick ink.

## **3. Brush painting**

One of the techniques used in boneless painting is brush painting, with layers of rendering and coloring. Boneless painting does not outline the contour lines; however, it applies the layer-by-layer staining technique of brush painting and the direct color painting technique of freehand painting. The term “brush painting” originated from the Han and Warring States period. It focuses on subjects, such as figures, landscapes, flowers, and birds, and its techniques include sub-dyeing, catch-dyeing, and unified-dyeing. Brush painting reflects the ancient people’s knowledge of nature, society, philosophy, and politics. Although the overall style of brush painting is realistic, it is the pursuit of “change.” The pursuit of “variation” is not realistic; rather, it is the realism that one feels within oneself. Brush painting expresses the philosophical concept of the unity of heaven and man through color, composition, and content. The color and the content of the painting can be expressed through subjective expressions, conveying self-perception and philosophy.

Poetry, calligraphy, painting, and seal have become a part of painting. It is possible to understand poetry through painting, or the content of painting through poetry. For seals, besides engraving one's name for stamping, the term "casual" exists, which allows one to engrave whatever one likes to stamp on paintings. Baishi Qi once said, "The excellence of a painting lies in its being alike, yet unlike. Too much likeness flatters the vulgar taste; too much unlikeness deceives the world." This means that paintings should be between "alike and unlike" as beauty lies in between them. This concept applies to brush painting as well. Although brush painting has a more realistic style, this "realistic feeling" is not quite the same as the that of watercolor painting. Brush painting is a little more poetic and subtle, but more rigorous in its approach. Watercolor painting, on the other hand, is more "watery" and depicts "freedom" in its expression.

#### **4. Watercolor painting**

The transparency of watercolor pigments, the fluidity of water during the painting process, the changes of wet and dry watercolors, and the visual effects of fantasy and creation are the closest to those of boneless painting in terms of methods and techniques. Watercolor painting is not only rich in color and realistic, but also emphasizes more on the expression of the relationship between brightness and darkness, the instantaneous change between light and shadow, as well as the accuracy of proportion. It expresses the painter's rigorous side, but it also has various subjective and arbitrary expressions. Watercolor painting is more "watery" and realistic, expressing the relationships between brightness and darkness as well as light and shadow in a more casual manner.

#### **5. Comparing the techniques of boneless painting and watercolor painting**

Boneless painting and watercolor painting have certain similarities in terms of techniques, but they also have their own unique techniques and expressions.

##### **5.1. Boneless painting involves the techniques of brush painting and freehand painting**

In brush painting, it is common to start by drawing lines with a pencil, then using a copy stand, or placing it over a glass window with light transmission, fix it well; following that, put a piece of Xuan paper (rice paper) on top of the lines, fix it, and then start to make a good topography on the Xuan paper (depicting the line drawn below). The lines drawn on the Xuan paper are the lines of the official draft, so use lighter ink to outline the lines, and draw the lines in a certain order according to certain brushwork. Then, fill in the colors.

Freehand painting is about brushwork and inking, directly using light ink, strong ink, or light color, and heavy color methods.

##### **(1) Firm first impressions**

In using ink, whether it is light ink or heavy ink, the first stroke will be the front part of the picture, in which latter strokes will not cover the traces of previous strokes. This is the meaning of "firm first impressions."

##### **(2) Breaking the ink but the meaning is connected**

In brush painting, boneless painting, and even in freehand painting, there are often spaces that do not need to be painted. It is better not to connect two lines in a painting directly, but to leave a little space between them; this is known as "breaking the ink but the meaning is connected." For example, there may be strokes of ink at the front and back, but there may be none in the middle, or there may be intermittent free spaces. There may be spaces without drawings or ink, or there may be dotted lines; this is where the ink is "broken," mirroring a rest in music. The painting is completed by imagination. This reflects the phrase "breaking the ink but the meaning is connected."

(3) Painting with intention

Chinese painting, especially ink painting, is about essence, air, and spirit, and there are high requirements for the feeling of a painting. The first method is the double-hook filling method, which only omits the double-hook ink lines and relies on the layers of coloring. The second method, where the painting is done in one go, involves using sparse and slightly more realistic brushwork and direct coloring. The third method involves working with the whole color first, and then adding more colors before it dries; its dabbing is similar to “breaking the ink” because it uses Xuan paper, so a semi-fusion effect or slightly mottled color changes can be appreciated.

(4) Chinese calligraphy and painting have the same origin

“Chinese calligraphy and painting have the same origin” refers to the fact that the brush and ink used in calligraphy and painting are both from the same source. Chinese characters are pictographs, in which pictographs are pictures. Chinese painting and calligraphy are all about some kind of rational layout with different points and lines to depict a certain kind of shape. Chinese painting is also about finding some kind of moderate form, considering the variations of brush and ink, in order to express a certain kind of feeling or idea.

(5) Poetry, calligraphy, painting, and seal

Chinese painting consists of poetry, calligraphy, painting, and seal. Poetry does not necessarily mean inscribing poems, while calligraphy does not necessarily mean writing calligraphy, but rather the shape should be poetic. The shape requires endless variations, yet it should be just right and natural. Painting is the shape of the picture, which requires both similarity and dissimilarity. The main role of a seal is not independent of the mark, but to balance the picture, to fill in the white, to add color, and to match the size, shape, and style of the seal with the painter’s temperament, as well as with the style of the painting. These show that Chinese painting requires a high level of comprehensive ability, in which the ability to shape a single painting is only a basic skill, but more than that, it is something other than the shape of the painting. Chinese paintings must have a multitude of comprehensive feats, such as calligraphy, literature, philosophy, ethics, nature, and society.

(6) Use of brush and ink

The use of brush and ink refers to the form and method of the painter’s brush and ink. The painter expresses his or her unique emotions and ideas through the form of brush and ink. There is an ancient saying that goes, “A painting is like a person.” In calligraphy, there are “hidden sharpness,” “exposed sharpness,” and “reverse sharpness.” Hidden sharpness refers to hiding the sharpness; exposed sharpness involves the use of the brush directly; reverse sharpness involves the use of the brush in the opposite direction.

(7) The principle of “three”

In Yijing, “three” is the source of all things. There is a saying that goes, “One produced two, two produced three, and three produced all things.” Therefore, in Chinese painting, “three” is the basic principle. For example, three dots are used for moss, three petals are used for painting leaves, three petals are used for painting bamboo leaves, three sides are used for painting stones, and three sides are used for painting flowers, plants, trees, and so on.

## **5.2. Watercolor painting is realistic, while boneless painting is meaningful**

Watercolor painting is more realistic in terms of its color, the expressions of light and shadow, the contrast between brightness and darkness, as well as the structure and proportion. However, in boneless painting, coloring is about one’s own feelings, not about the expressions of light and shadow or the relationship between brightness and darkness.

### **5.2.1. Technique of coloring in boneless painting**

The color filling method is borrowed from the coloring method of traditional Chinese realistic painting, in which two brushes are used – one with color, and the other with water to halo the color. Subjectively, two colors can also be used, with the same method. Boneless painting integrates brushwork and coloring in an organic way, without outlining, underdrawings, or placing bottom samples on the top. When painting, the painter is required to already have a good idea of what he or she is going to do and to complete it in one sitting.

### **5.2.2. The “water feeling” of watercolor painting**

Watercolor painting uses water as a medium to mix transparent water-based pigments for painting. The mutual fusion of water and color produces fresh, ethereal, bright, wet, and other fascinating visual effects. It is easy and can be used as a sketching material. Compared with other paintings, watercolor painting pays considerable attention to expressive techniques and has irreplaceable qualities.

#### **5.2.2.1. Water**

The “water feeling” is the soul of watercolor painting. The success or failure of a work depends on the painter’s skill in using water. The key to mastering water is to grasp the time of painting and the water content at the end of the brush.

#### **5.2.2.2. Color**

Watercolor painting should not only have the “water feeling,” but also the feeling of color. It should convey the feeling of timelessness with bright colors and splendor. The colors in watercolor painting can differ from the aspects of hue, brightness, purity, warm, and cold to categorize, generalize, and refine. The colors should be colorful but not hot and fresh but not raw; it should be calm and varied, with unity and harmony of tones, while reflecting contrasting, differentiating, and interconnecting color relationships.

#### **5.2.2.3. Brush**

The brush is very important in the process of watercolor painting. It should be used for conveying the texture and decent relationship of the subject. With varying speeds of the brush, the effect is different. A fast brush produces a floating and lively effect, whereas a slow brush produces a thick and heavy effect.

#### **5.2.2.4. Rhyme**

The picture expressed by watercolor material will convey a certain meaning; this is what we term as rhyme.

#### **5.2.2.5. Transparency**

Watercolor painting has two basic characteristics: first, the picture itself usually has a transparent visual feeling; the second is the fluidity of water during the painting process. This makes watercolor painting different from other types of paintings in terms of appearance and creative techniques. The transparency of pigments gives watercolor painting a clear surface effect, while the fluidity of water creates a dripping, natural, and spontaneous interest. Watercolor painting has the characteristics of lightness and transparency; therefore, watercolor painting generally requires the colors and images to be as transparent as possible to reflect its unique charm. In order to retain its sense of transparency, it is necessary to pay attention to the following suggestions: colors with strong transparency, such as deep red, lemon yellow, and blue, should be used; the colors should be thin, not thick; do not repeatedly paint, and keep it simple with general stroke traces. Repeated painting will easily gray the painting, making it look dirty and opaque.

#### **5.2.2.6. Paint from nature**

Watercolor landscape painting is a very important subject in watercolor painting, and it also best represents the painting style of watercolor painting. Through the painter's subjective construction of light, color, air, and scenery, it constitutes a landscape work with novelty and dexterity, bright colors, fresh tone, and smooth brushwork.

#### **5.2.2.7. Multiple materials**

Watercolor painting in the 20th century is no longer restricted to two categories: transparent watercolor and opaque watercolor. The common materials on the market that can be diluted with water for painting, such as gesso, acrylic, transparent watercolor liquid, watercolor pencil, etc., all belong to the field of watercolor painting.

#### **5.2.2.8. Subject matter**

Sunlight, ocean, flowers, trees, clouds, and anything that can evoke the artist's inner desire for expression can be the source of creation. Painters who love nature never tire of expressing their colorful world through landscape painting. Still life is also a common subject in watercolor painting. There are many different kinds of still life, with various forms and rich colors. The artist can intentionally arrange the required content and composition according to his or her own intention, thus creating a meaningful still life painting. In addition to the above, some auxiliary tools should be prepared, such as a water jar for brushing, a small bottle with a spray mouth, or paper towels. In addition, a sponge is also a common tool used to clean and modify the picture.

#### **5.2.2.9. Dry painting**

Dry painting is a multilayer painting method. It is easy to master and is suitable for beginners to practice. It is the specialty of dry painting to show the definite and clear structure of the form and the rich color layers. However, the work derived from this method should not convey "dryness"; rather, it must still carry a sense of "moisture." Therefore, water stains and wet marks can be used to avoid "dryness" and dullness. Dry painting can be divided into specific methods, such as layer coating, cover color, color joining, and dry brush.

##### **(1) Layer coating**

Layer coating involves dry overlap. After the coloring has dried, continue painting layer by layer. The number of layers of color in a picture vary, some can be once, some require two or three times or a little more; however, it should not be done too many times, so as to not lose the sense of transparency. If there is a base color underneath, anticipate the mix effect of the base color in advance. This should not be neglected.

##### **(2) Cover color**

In fact, cover color is also a dry overlap method; however, the area of cover color is larger. For example, several colors in a picture are not uniform, thereby cover color is used all over to make them uniform. A color may be too warm, so use a layer of cold color to change its nature. The cover color should be a more vivid color with thin coating. Once it is laid over, we generally do not return to a pen or bring up the base color as it will dirty the color. In the process of coloring and the final adjustment of the painting, this method is often used.

##### **(3) Color joining**

Color joining involves painting a color from the side after the neighboring color dries, without bleeding between the color blocks. Each color can be painted wet to increase the variation. This method is characterized by clear outlines and bright colors of the expressed subjects.

#### (4) Dry brush

A dry brush has less water content but has more color, and the brush is prone to “flying white”; a fast brush on coarse-grained paper with fuller water will also produce a “flying white” effect. The dry brush method is often used to show the effect of flash or softness.

### **5.2.2.10. Wet painting**

Wet painting can be divided into two types: wet overlap and wet color joint.

#### (1) Wet overlap

In wet overlap, the painting paper or brush should be wet or partially wet, and coloring or overlapping should be done when it is not dry. The time of painting needs to be mastered properly, to achieve a natural and round effect. In expressing rain and fog, the watercolor effect is better.

#### (2) Wet color joint

In wet color joint, coloring is done when the neighboring color has not dried, causing watercolor seepage, blurring of junction, and the transition of soft color gradient. The water content should be even when combining the color, otherwise, the water will flow from one side to the other, thus forming unnecessary water stains. Most of the watercolor paintings are a combination of dry painting and wet painting, in which the main part of the picture can be the wet painting or the dry painting.

### **5.2.2.11. Use of water**

The use and mastery of water is one of the main points of watercolor technique. Water has the characteristics of percolation, flow, and evaporation, so it is important to be familiar with “watery” watercolor. Giving full play to the role of water is an important approach for good watercolor painting. To master water, time is of essence; the dryness and humidity of the surrounding air as well as the degree of water absorption of the paper are also key points that should be considered.

#### (1) Time

If the overlapping color is painted too early or it is too wet, it is easy to lose the shape; if it is too late, the base color will dry, and the watercolor will not easily permeate it. Generally, for overlapping colors, the brush tip should contain less water and more color, so that it is easy to grasp the shape and make it bleed. If the overlapping colors are light, wait for the base color to dry a little before painting.

#### (2) Humidity of the surrounding air

Water dries slowly indoors, but it evaporates even more slowly when outdoors in humid rain and fog. In this case, it is advisable to use less water for painting. In a dry climate, water evaporates quickly, so more water must be used, and the speed of color mixing and painting should be accelerated.

#### (3) The degree of water absorption of the paper

Considering the degree of water absorption of the paper, the amount of water used should be controlled accordingly. When its water absorption is slow, less water should be used; when a soft paper with fast water absorption is used, more water should be used. In addition, it is appropriate to use more water for rendering halo colors in large areas, such as the sky, the ground, and the background of still life as well as people with large color blocks; meanwhile, it is appropriate to use less water for depicting details.

### **5.2.2.12. Leaving space**

Some light, bright colors and white highlights need to be “left blank” when painting darker colors. The transparent nature of watercolor pigment determines this painting technique; light colors cannot cover dark colors, unlike gouache and oil painting, which is possible. If we pay attention to watercolor works, we will find that almost every work uses the technique of “leaving space.” If an artist does not leave space appropriately, the artwork will look trivial and messy. The key details, even the smallest dots and surfaces,

should be cleverly left out when coloring. In addition, where contrasting colors are adjacent to each other, leaving space will help maintain the sharpness of each color. A “white liquid” can also be used to leave space. This “white liquid” should be dry prior to painting and should be wiped off after painting.

#### **5.2.2.13. Opaque watercolor painting**

Transparent watercolor painting involves mixing the pigments with water and painting a thin layer, so that the colors are clear and bright, leaving a sense of transparency. In addition to water, opaque painting method can also be used with gum to make the colors more subtle and soft.

#### **5.2.2.14. Special painting methods**

##### **(1) Knife scraping**

This method involves the use of a pencil knife to destroy the surface of a paper and create a special effect upon coloring. Before coloring the paper, the knife is used to scrape the paper lightly, heavily, broadly, or narrowly to destroy a part of the surface. The color will be a little heavier at the affected part compared with the surrounding color; this is due to the strong ability of color absorption where the paper is scraped. Fuzzy images or vaguely discernible details are better shown with this method. In the coloring process with the use of knife scraping, more water used will produce heavy knife marks, whereas less water used when the floating color is scraped off will produce a brighter knife mark, processing the details more accurately. After the color has completely dried up, the white paper can be lightly and intermittently scraped to show the backlight of bright lines, bright spots, or smaller bright surfaces <sup>[1]</sup>.

##### **(2) Using crayons**

Using crayons or oil pastels before coloring would leave the waxed area naturally empty even after bold coloring. It is effective in depicting sparse leaves, night lights, busy crowd, etc.

##### **(3) Absorbent washing**

Absorbent washing involves the use of absorbent paper (filter paper or raw rice paper) to absorb the color while it is still wet. Based on the desired effect, the amount and size of the suction can be flexible. It can absorb colors, and light colors can then be applied to that area. Using a sponge or a brush to absorb or wash some parts of the painting has a different taste but the same wonderful effect.

##### **(4) Water spraying**

When painting a landscape of a drizzly weather, the color of the picture should be drenched by the drizzle to produce a kind of heavenly effect. Spraying water before coloring or after the colors dry will create this kind of effect. In choosing the type of bottle used to spray, the type that produces mist spray will be better because if the water point is too large, it will easily destroy the picture.

##### **(5) Salting**

Salting involves the sprinkling of fine salt grains when the color is not dry. After drying, it will produce a snowflake-like texture. When sprinkling salt, the degree of dryness should be considered; sprinkling too late will cause it to lose its effect. These salt grains should be consciously scattered; with random scattering, all previous efforts will be wasted.

##### **(6) Printing**

On a glass plate or a smooth paper with plastic coating, draw out the general color first, and then cover the paper with it (e.g., woodcut printing). The picture will be printed with a beautiful texture, which is quite interesting. This effect can be easily appreciated with fine-grain watercolor paper, and it can become an intriguing watercolor painting with a little processing, mainly by pair printing. Some paintings will partially include the printing method, but most paintings still rely on the brush entirely <sup>[2]</sup>.



(7) Oil stain

Water and oil do not dissolve easily. Using this characteristic, dipping a little turpentine when coloring will give a mottled oil stain effect, which expands the variation of ordinary color blocks. Other than that, white-out solution and acrylic blending solution can be used.

**6. Conclusion**

From all these, it is natural to think that watercolor painting is broader and more far-reaching as its concepts are being renewed and its subject matter and techniques are broadened. By combing the techniques of watercolor painting, it can be appreciated that boneless painting should learn and borrow from watercolor painting as it can expand the painting methods of boneless painting. They both pursue the feelings of paintings as beauty.

**Disclosure statement**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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