



ART FRONTIER

An International Art Journal/Vol. 3, No. 4 (Total Issue No. 12) Published: 2025-12-30

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To cite this article: Xu Sihan "Chen Zizhuang's Originary Realm and His Aesthetic Thought of Resonant Integration", Art Frontier 3, no.4 (Dec. 2025): 61-68, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64212/90qywk94>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64212/90qywk94>

ISSN: 2835-5490

EISSN: 2836-841X

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This article has undergone double-blind peer review.

Website: <https://www.cafontierpress.org/>

Email: editorial2023@artfrontier.org

Publishing Frequency: Quarterly (March, June, September, December)



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Abstract

Chen Zizhuang was a distinctive artist in the history of modern and contemporary Chinese painting. His artistic thought takes “plainness and innocent naturalness” as its spiritual core, “simplicity, rusticity, and striking ruggedness” as its formal language, and “the warmth of everyday life” as its emotional tone. Together, these elements form a complete and profound aesthetic system. In the content, emotion, and many other dimensions of painting, he emphasized “truth,” thereby embodying an exploration of the originary realm and resonant-integration aesthetics. His art is not merely an expression of personal style; it is also a vivid interpretation of the spirit of traditional Chinese culture in a modern and contemporary context. At the same time, against the background of the encounter and collision between Chinese and Western civilizations in the twentieth century, his thought differed from mainstream trends and pointed to a path of inward exploration for Chinese painting. It continues to possess significant value even today.

Key Words

Chen Zizhuang, artistic aesthetics, originary realm, resonant integration

1. The Core of Chen Zizhuang's Artistic Aesthetic Thought

First, Chen Zizhuang believed that the fundamental pursuit of art is the unity of “truth, goodness, and beauty.” “Truth” means observing nature with a scientific attitude and pursuing the essence of things. “Goodness” emphasizes the ethical value of art, holding that art should benefit people's minds, society, and the transmission of national culture. “Beauty” means refining nature through an artistic vision and creating an aesthetic realm higher than reality. These three are inseparable and organically unified. Chen Zizhuang directly pointed out the relationship between fame,

profit, and the quality of painting. He believed that artists should not aim to please others or ingratiate themselves with the powerful; otherwise, their works would inevitably sink to a low level of taste.

Chen Zizhuang's theory of creation is rooted in Daoist and Confucian philosophy. He advocated integrating one's own life with heaven, earth, and all things, so that only when both object and self are forgotten (物我兩忘)¹ and empathy arises between the two can the character of things be revealed. To paint objects and scenes is not simply to depict them, but to achieve a communication of vital breath. To reach this realm, one must go deeply into nature to sketch from life and, through the understanding of a large body of literary and

historical writings, elevate one's intellectual realm. Only in this way can one fully cultivate one's temperament and spirit, internalizing technique as a natural manifestation of vitality. The forward-looking and critical character of Chen Zizhuang's thought is reflected in his opposition to rigidly clinging to antiquity. He believed that creation is the life of art. He criticized the "Four Wangs" of the Ming and Qing periods and even the "Four Yuan Masters," sharply noting that they lacked vitality and freshness. He proposed the concept of "generation and transformation"², arguing that artists should, like all things in nature, constantly grow and change, and should embody both the spirit of the depicted object and their own personal sensibility in their works. This artistic view of "generation and transformation" is not only a transcendence of traditional painting but also an active exploration of a path for the modernization of Chinese painting.

In addition, he encouraged artists to break through established methods inherited from predecessors and open up their own paths. He especially admired artists such as Zhu Da, Shi Tao, and Wu Changshuo, whose work showed "free personal conception," and he believed that inheritance should consist of understanding principles and then creating methods.³

"Plainness and innocent naturalness" was the highest aesthetic ideal Chen Zizhuang pursued. He believed that the highest realm of art is to return to simplicity and authenticity. The stylistic pursuit of being "simple, plain, solitary, and pure" refers to "few strokes with full meaning" after a high degree of condensation: plain yet rich in implication, marked by a distinctive personal style, and characterized by a spotless and noble quality. He esteemed the archaic, rustic beauty that contains inexhaustible inner meaning. He elevated his personal artistic creation to the level of an artistic and cultural mission, and behind his intellectual pursuit lay a vast and profound cultural concern.

Chen Zizhuang's aesthetic thought forms a coherent system: it takes lofty self-cultivation of mind and nature as its foundation, bold artistic creation as its path, and the aesthetic realm of plainness and innocent naturalness as

its goal. In this process, he accomplished both personal artistic innovation and the shaping of personality.

2. The Originary Realm and Truth-Creating Resonant Integration

Chen Zizhuang's system of artistic aesthetic thought is grounded in the "originary realm," emphasizing that art should return to the essential relations between human beings and nature and between human beings and culture. He believed that painting should both "come from nature and the people, and also rise beyond nature and the people"⁴. Its essence lies in the artist's temperament, spirit, and cultivation, through which a deep contemplation of nature and human nature and a spiritual elevation can be realized. The theory of aesthetic resonance runs through the history of Chinese artistic thought and stands as a core concept in national aesthetics. This is precisely because it arises from the understanding and practice of the primordial realm of the "unity of Heaven and humanity".

In artistic creation, Chen Zizhuang's ideas and practice also embody an aesthetics of truth-creation and resonant integration. That is, artistic creation does not merely pursue external resemblance; more importantly, it seeks to "depict the spirit" rather than "depict the material form." Through subjective refinement and artistic abstraction, it aims to reach a state that is "seemingly unlike yet essentially true." This is an inner truth that transcends outward appearances, and it is also the highest embodiment of the artistic process of "generation and transformation." "Some scholars have pointed out that Liu Haisu's theory of artistic expression essentially emphasizes the ecological aesthetics of creating truth and feeling in harmony. Creativity originates from the true self of the aesthetician who "breaks away from dust" and "removes vulgarity", and the induction and construction of the physical properties of mountains, rivers, and all things, forming a "demasking" super temporal and spatial image. This image is the embodiment of the new true whole life."⁵

In Chen Zizhuang's view, aesthetic reson-

ance does not refer simply to formal beauty. Rather, it covers the holistic resonance of morality, personality, and spiritual realm. He stated that “low moral character leads to low painting quality” and that “painting is the expression of the soul, vitality, and personality.” He emphasized the artist’s moral cultivation and believed that good works of art should possess the infectious power to “inspire people’s aspiration for achievement, goodness, and benevolence,” thereby realizing a deep spiritual interaction and resonance among creator, work, and viewer.

In *The Spirit of Chinese Art*, Xu Fuguan discusses the originary spirit of Chinese art through Zhuangzi’s ideas of “emptiness and stillness,” “fasting of the mind,” and “sitting in forgetfulness.” He emphasizes that the root of artistic creation lies in the subject’s contemplation of all things with an open, clear, and tranquil mind, ultimately achieving the unity of the realm of personality and the realm of art. When Chen Zizhuang’s artistic aesthetic thought is viewed through this theoretical lens, it becomes evident that his creative realm and spiritual core are precisely a modern continuation of this tradition. Chen Zizhuang’s lifelong state of indifference to fame and self-sufficient plainness and natural innocence accords with the “emptiness and stillness” explained by Xu Fuguan. His art does not seek formal likeness or superficial splendor, but values inner spirit. His brush and ink flow spontaneously, and his works directly express his temperament; in this respect, they inherit the spirit of Zhuangzi. Chen Zizhuang used simple brush and ink to embody an idea of authenticity and pursued artistic creation through truth-creating resonant integration, showing both his understanding of the core of the Chinese artistic spirit and a new interpretation of it.

Chen Zizhuang created many flower-and-bird paintings and landscape paintings. His brushwork is strikingly rugged and distinctive; it reveals variation within concision and unexpected delight within plainness. In his landscape painting *North Ridge of Shigu Mountain* (figure 1), for example, the forms of the rocks appear casual, yet the structure is actually rigorous. The layers of brush and ink are rich; “skill” is seen within “rusticity” and

“complexity” is concealed within “simplicity,” transforming the abstract beauty and structural quality of calligraphy into the visual language of painting. With brush and ink that are simple, plain, solitary, and pure, Chen Zizhuang unites the authentic atmosphere of natural landscape with his own originary artistic realm. The picture lays out the mountains through interwoven shades of ink, abandoning the complex texture strokes of traditional landscape painting. With spontaneous brushwork, it outlines the textures of rocks and transforms the charm of nature into an authentic revelation of brush and ink. The houses on the mountaintop and the herdsman and ox at the foot of the mountain are embedded in the picture through simple lines, allowing the vitality of ordinary countryside life to become the spiritual core of the image. This expression is precisely Chen Zizhuang’s practice of “plainness and innocent naturalness.” He internalizes the contemplation of nature as an expression of temperament and, through the free movement of brush and ink, reaches the authenticity of art. The work is not only a sketch from life of the North Ridge of Shigu Mountain; it is also a concretization of his artistic aesthetic thought. From a folk standpoint, it returns to the life-source of art, stresses the function of “resonant integration,” and, through careful observation and deep understanding of natural things and human life, fuses his own emotions with them and achieves spiritual transcendence.

Tracing the sources of Chen Zizhuang’s thought, one can see that he was influenced by Daoism, Confucianism, and other traditions in many respects.

The highest realm of his artistic aesthetics lies in “plainness and innocent naturalness.”⁶ This realm derives not only from his profound understanding of nature and life, but also from the Daoist philosophical traditions of “the Dao follows what is natural” and “returning to simplicity.” Laozi states in the *Dao De Jing*: “Humans follow earth; earth follows heaven; heaven follows the Dao; the Dao follows what is natural.”⁷ This emphasizes that all things should follow their own nature. Zhuangzi further proposes that, “after being carved and polished, one should return to simplicity”⁸, advocating a return to the authentic state and

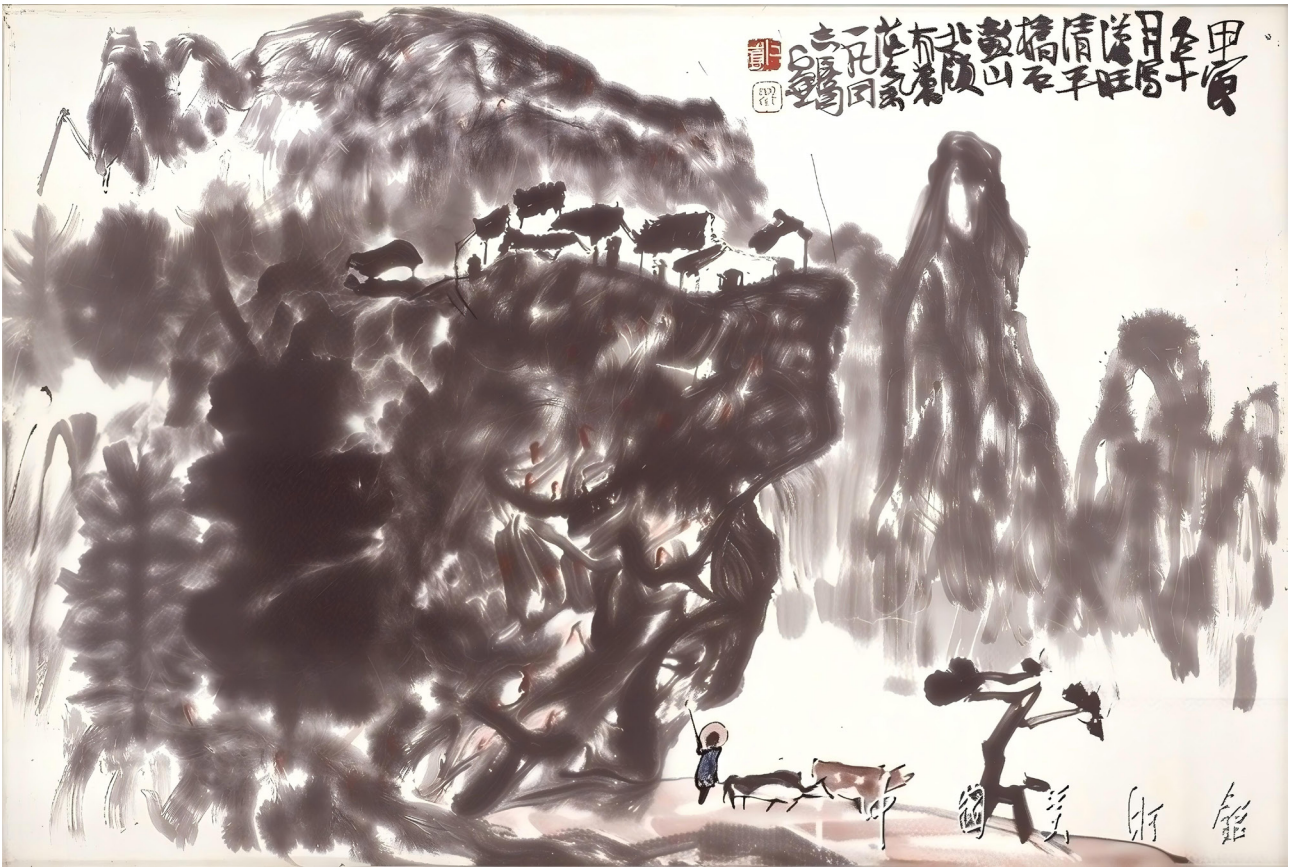


Figure 1. Chen Zizhuang, *North Ridge of Shigu Mountain*, ink and color on paper, 25 × 37.5 cm, National Art Museum of China.

opposing excessive artificial contrivance. Chen Zizhuang's painting theory and creative practice are a vivid embodiment of this thought. He pursued few strokes with full meaning, opposed affected brushwork and composition, and sought a realm that was "composed, unforced, and without any trace of laborious carving." The landscapes under his brush do not possess the magnificence of famous mountains and great rivers, yet they have their own inner rhythm and atmosphere. This is precisely the concrete manifestation in painting of the Daoist cosmology of the "unity of heaven and humanity." Moreover, Chen Zizhuang's pursuit of "natural innocence" also echoes the Daoist metaphors of the "infant" and the "newborn child." He often used immature and rustic brushwork to depict objects. The result is pure and natural, yet it does not lose the bone strength of brush and ink or the rigor of structure. This artistic handling, in which "skill is seen within rusti-

city," is precisely a practice of the idea in Laozi that "great skill appears clumsy."

The formal language of Chen Zizhuang's art may be summarized as "simplicity, rusticity, and striking ruggedness." Behind it lies a deep tradition of epigraphic calligraphy and the aesthetic idea of "incorporating calligraphy into painting." Chinese painting has emphasized since ancient times that "calligraphy and painting share the same source." Since the Qing dynasty, the rise of epigraphy made the archaic and vigorous qualities of stele inscriptions and bronze-and-stone scripts enter painting. Wu Changshuo, Qi Baishi, and others all incorporated epigraphic brushwork into painting, initiating a new style of the "epigraphic painting school." Chen Zizhuang absorbed nourishment from this tradition and formed his own distinctive style of brush and ink expression⁹. In his early years, he devoted himself to studying Qin and Han steles and Wei-Jin calligraphic models, paying

particular attention to works such as the *Stele for Sacrificing to the Three Lords of the Mountains* and the *Wu Tianfa Shenchen Stele*. He was skilled at using extremely concise, even childlike and rustic brushwork to shape solid and rugged objects. The lines in his landscape paintings have a strong epigraphic quality and the features of seal and clerical scripts: they are “simple” but not empty, “rustic” yet all the more skillful. In *Essentials of Shihu's Remarks on Painting*, Chen Zizhuang's view is recorded as follows: “A Chinese painting should be seen as one painting when viewed as a whole; when separated and viewed in parts, none of it is painting, but rather calligraphy.”¹⁰ This clearly expresses the idea that “calligraphy and painting share the same source.”

The power of Chen Zizhuang's art to move people lies not only in its spiritual realm and formal language, but also in the profound humanistic concern and emotional warmth behind it. This emotional core mainly derives from the Confucian benevolent idea that “all people are my siblings, and all things are my companions.” Confucianism emphasizes that “the benevolent love others” and treats daily life with warmth and respect. In Chen Zizhuang's paintings, one rarely sees famous mountains, great rivers, immortal mountains, or towered pavilions. Instead, he often takes farm courtyards, people, chickens and dogs, field ridges, and crops as subjects. What he depicts are mostly ordinary and trivial scenes of life, yet they are filled with intimacy and vitality. This choice of subject matter is Chen Zizhuang's conscious practice of the Confucian spirit of the “learning of benevolence.” He once said, “Whatever is different in my paintings was found in life. My poems and prose write my own feelings. What is rare is true feeling; only true feeling can move people.”¹¹ This affectionate gaze toward the things around him is precisely an embodiment of the Confucian ideas of “investigating things to extend knowledge” and “benevolence toward the people and love for all things.” In his paintings, everything is not merely a reproduction of objects but also a carrier of emotion, filled with love and respect for ordinary life. Although he experienced war and hardship throughout his life, he always maintained a love for life and warmth toward

the human world. Beyond the “Daoist realm” and the “epigraphic bone” of his art, this gives his work a still more moving power.

With regard to the relation between subject and object in artistic creation, Chen Zizhuang held that “painting reflects the subjective through the objective. To reflect only the objective is naturalism.” He emphasized that painters must use subjective spirit to govern objective images and realize the integration of self and things. He stated, “Sketching from life is transmitting spirit; it is writing oneself, not copying outward form. Any art obtained only through what the ears hear and the eyes see is not high; the highest art is what issues from one's own inner heart.”¹² This shows that in his artistic view, subjectivity occupies the leading position, while the object is only a medium that triggers and carries subjective emotion. Chen Zizhuang also valued the subject's cultivation as a capacity to transform the object. He believed that painters should “take the self as the master; if this point is forgotten, one will be led around by the scenery.” Only in this way can one ultimately reach the realm in which both self and object are forgotten. This reflects the intellectual tradition of the “unity of heaven and humanity” in Chinese philosophy of art.

By contrast, Western painting places greater emphasis on scientific thinking and often tends toward a subject-object opposition. It can therefore create the problem of severing the inner unity and relatedness between subject and object. Chen Zizhuang's ideas differ significantly from those of early modern Western thought, although later Western ideas such as phenomenology and Heidegger's “dwelling in being” have attempted to dissolve the subject-object dualism. For example, when Chen Zizhuang is compared with Kant, both value the central position of the subject in aesthetic activity, and in this respect there is a certain commonality. Yet they are not entirely the same, and their theoretical paths differ. In *the Critique of Judgment*, Kant emphasizes the “purposiveness without purpose” of aesthetic judgment, maintaining that beauty is subjective yet universally communicable. This purposeless and disinterested beauty seems able to connect with human aesthetic pleasure and presents a

kind of natural purposiveness. It embodies a combination of reason and sensibility and, on the original basis of subject-object dualism, to some extent bridges the division between subject and object. Although Chen Zizhuang also emphasizes the guiding role of the subject's mind and nature, he inclines more toward the integration of subject and object. He focuses on realizing a spiritual communion with all things through moral cultivation and the elevation of personality, giving his thought a distinct tendency toward the personalization of art. This comparison shows that the subjectivity Chen Zizhuang emphasizes is a concrete existence immersed in traditional culture, life experience, and everyday ethics. In other words, Kant's subject-object relation focuses on epistemology and the purity of aesthetic judgment, whereas Chen Zizhuang integrates it into the practical process of artistic creation and personal cultivation, embodying the distinctive characteristics of Chinese artistic thought.

3. The Cultural Significance and Contemporary Value of Chen Zizhuang's Aesthetic Thought

Twentieth-century China stood amid “the greatest transformation in three thousand years,” and the fields of culture and art likewise experienced unprecedented upheaval and reconstruction. In the field of art, Chinese painting, an art form that had continued for a millennium, faced severe challenges from many sides. The eastward spread of Western learning, national crisis, cultural self-consciousness... Against this complex historical background, intellectual revolution was inevitable. Chen Zizhuang's aesthetic thought long remained on the margins of mainstream ideas and also possessed a certain uniqueness. Through his deep study of traditional painting theory and his quiet contemplation and realization of natural life, he developed his own distinctive understanding, which could also provide valuable directions for thinking about the self-positioning of Chinese culture at that time.

Twentieth-century changes in thought

concerning Chinese painting presented a complex picture in which multiple paths coexisted. The main viewpoints may be summarized in the following respects. First, figures represented by Pan Tianshou, Wu Changshuo, Qi Baishi, and Huang Binhong adhered to a traditional painting standpoint. At a time when the survival of Chinese national painting faced pressure from imported Western culture, they maintained a neither humble nor arrogant attitude in upholding the inheritance of tradition, hoping to find a path of development for China that differed from the West by accepting excellent traditions and making innovative developments appropriate to the times. As can be seen in *Pan Tianshou's Remarks on Painting*, Pan Tianshou once stated: “The art of a nation is the crystallization of the spirit of that nation.” The vitality of Chinese painting should arise from within itself, and the modern development of Chinese painting should be built on the basis of understanding and inheriting fine traditions. Another major mainstream viewpoint advocated the integration of Chinese and Western art. Twentieth-century China stood amid “the greatest transformation in three thousand years,” and the fields of culture and art likewise experienced unprecedented upheaval and reconstruction. In the field of art, Chinese painting, an art form that had continued for a millennium, faced severe challenges from many sides. The eastward spread of Western learning, national crisis, cultural self-consciousness... Against this complex historical background, intellectual revolution was inevitable. Chen Zizhuang's aesthetic thought long remained on the margins of mainstream ideas and also possessed a certain uniqueness. Through his deep study of traditional painting theory and his quiet contemplation and realization of natural life, he developed his own distinctive understanding, which could also provide valuable directions for thinking about the self-positioning of Chinese culture at that time.

Its proponents recognized that cultural development should not, and could not, be isolated; rather, it should absorb positive elements from foreign cultures and make them serve China's own needs. They saw the deficiencies of tradition, yet did not agree

with wholesale Westernization. They hoped to combine Chinese and Western elements, showing an exploratory spirit in relation to the artistic concepts of Chinese painting. Representative painters of this “integrative” view include Xu Beihong, who used realism to reform Chinese painting; Lin Fengmian, who advocated “harmonizing Chinese and Western art”; and Liu Haisu, who made modern experiments in art education. In addition, a small number of people held one-sided, radical views.

Overall, Chen Zizhuang was similar to Pan Tianshou, Wu Changshuo, and others in adhering to a traditional painting standpoint, but he also had his own distinctive qualities. He both inherited the artistic laws found in the practical experience of the ancients and made discoveries of his own.¹³

As representative figures of the school that protected tradition, Pan Tianshou, Wu Changshuo, Qi Baishi, and Huang Binhong turned back to epigraphy, stele studies, folk art, and related resources, hoping to find within a deep tradition a spiritual force that could contend with, and even lead, the times. Their stance carried a strong sense of cultural responsibility and historical mission. Compared with this group, Chen Zizhuang's return to tradition displayed a different orientation. He pursued the concordance between the individual mind and heaven, earth, and nature. His goal was not “reshaping” but “digestion”: he hoped to internalize these traditional elements and ultimately form his own artistic language of plainness and innocent naturalness. His thought thus manifests a kind of detached lightness. Although the two paths are similar in that both look back to tradition, the former aims to give tradition new vitality and a sense of mission, while the latter penetrates the essence of tradition and fuses it with personal life experience. Together, they constitute rich perspectives on the twentieth-century return to tradition in Chinese painting.¹⁴ In addition, it is worth noting that Chen Zizhuang especially admired artists such as Shi Tao and Zhu Da. Shi Tao advocated “searching all strange peaks to make drafts,” believing that artists should learn from nature and gain inspiration from real mountains and real waters. He also emphasized “I use my

own method,” showing strong subjectivity. Chen Zizhuang inherited Shitao's ideas and spirit, and in creation he attached importance to sketching from nature and to independent innovation. Chen Zizhuang's artistic aesthetic thought still has important value in the field of contemporary art.

In the development of contemporary art, there are tendencies toward the alienation of technique, empty conceptualization, and market dominance. A creative path that returns to the experience of the original mind and to observation of life therefore provides an internally mediating perspective for addressing these problems. Chen Zizhuang advocated painting what one has seen and maintained that artistic creation should be rooted in the individual's true feelings about the world. This helps artists reexamine their creative perspectives. At the same time, his aesthetic idea of entering deeply into tradition and fusing it with his own life experience offers inspiration for overcoming the homogenization of artistic creation in the context of globalization and for promoting the modern transformation of local experience. More importantly, the detached character and independent spirit reflected in his life and artistic works provide a model of personality that can transcend the times, guiding contemporary artists to uphold spiritual autonomy and the purity of creation.

4. Conclusion

Chen Zizhuang's aesthetic thought is rooted in the depths of the spirit of traditional Chinese culture. With the “originary realm” as its cornerstone and “truth-creating resonant integration” as its method, it constructs a complete system that runs through self-cultivation of mind and nature, artistic creation, and life experience. In the context of the twentieth-century convergence of Chinese and Western cultures and of cultural self-reflection, his thought displays a cultural steadiness and subjective self-consciousness that turn inward in search of foundations. His aesthetic thought provides a distinctive and profound reference for considering the modern developmental

path of Chinese painting. It reminds us that returning to the original mind of creation and to the roots of culture remains the key to preserving sincerity and power in art.

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