



# Harmony in Art: Sun Yinchang's Journey from Rural Realism to Contemporary Symbolism

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**Abstract:** The abstract explores the multifaceted artistic journey of Sun Yinchang, a self-taught "peasant painter" from rural northern China, whose fusion of realism and symbolism in oil paintings forms a captivating narrative. The study delves into his unconventional artistic development, emphasizing his departure from academic paths and the attainment of professional competence through personal perception. Operating as an outsider within the artistic system, Sun's career as a freelance artist without a fixed income serves as a valuable case study for contemporary youth aspiring to become oil painters outside established institutional frameworks. His unwavering commitment to rural life, thematic continuity in his work, and symbolic representations of memory, such as corn and agricultural tools, distinguish him from stereotypical portrayals of "peasants" and secure recognition within the domestic art industry. The comprehensive exploration employs qualitative inquiry and visual analysis, drawing insights from interviews with Sun and meticulous examination of his celebrated series. The abstract further analyzes Sun Yinchang's distinctive realistic style, the interplay of compositional form, the "top-down" perspective, and the symbolic implications of his chosen motifs, providing sociological insights into art and offering inspiration for contemporary artists aligning their work with personal concepts.

**Keywords:** "Homeland" series, "top-down" perspective, symbolic memory

## I. Introduction:

In the context of contemporary art, the fusion of realism and symbolism emerges as a compelling narrative, weaving the intricate tapestry of Sun Yinchang's artistic journey. Hailing from the rural landscapes of northern China, Sun, often dubbed a "peasant painter" due to his agrarian background, transcends the confines of this label through his oil paintings that resonate with a sophisticated expression of national art. In particular, his renowned "Homeland" series serves as a poignant testament to the artist's profound realism, encapsulating the essence of life experiences with a subdued yet powerful technique and a unique aesthetic sensibility.

The selection of Sun Yinchang as the focal point for study is substantiated by the unique and compelling facets of his artistic journey. Notably, his deviation from traditional academic paths, choosing instead a self-directed route marked by exposure to exhibitions and dialogues with peers, underscores the unconventional nature of his artistic development. Sun's ability to attain a professional level of artistic competence through personal perception adds an intriguing layer to his narrative, challenging conventional notions of formal art education. As an outsider in the artistic system, operating as a freelance artist without a fixed income, Sun represents a valuable case study for understanding the challenges and inspirations faced by contemporary youth aspiring to become oil painters outside established institutional frameworks. Furthermore, his unwavering commitment to rural life and the thematic continuity in his work, rooted in authentic experiences and symbolized by elements like corn and agricultural tools, not only distinguishes him from stereotypical portrayals of "peasants" but also secures recognition within the domestic art industry. Sun Yinchang's artistic odyssey, encapsulating elements of self-discovery, non-traditional professionalism, and a profound connection to rural life, offers a nuanced exploration of broader themes related to the democratization of art and the enduring power of authentic expression in the contemporary artistic landscape.

This paper embarks on a comprehensive exploration of Sun Yinchang's multifaceted artistic approach, exploring the intricate interplay of realism and symbolism that characterizes his oeuvre. From the personal experiences that marked pivotal moments in his career to the meticulous analysis of his painting language and style, we unravel the layers of Sun's artistic tapestry. Furthermore, the comparison with photorealistic oil paintings provides a nuanced understanding of his commitment to realism, while the examination of compositional form and the interplay of picture space and psychological space underscore the unique elements that set his work apart.

## II. Literature Review

Sun Yinchang's artistic journey, seamlessly blending realism and symbolism, finds resonance within the broader discourse on contemporary Chinese art, where traditional motifs coalesce with modern expressions. Chinese contemporary art has witnessed a transformative evolution, reflecting both cultural heritage and responses to the rapidly changing sociopolitical

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landscape. Scholars such as Chang Ningsheng highlight the cyclical nature of artistic development, positing that extremes in art forms often instigate intense reversals. This perspective becomes particularly pertinent in understanding Sun Yinchang's departure from conventional portrayals of rural life, as seen in his "Homeland" series<sup>[1]</sup>. The fusion of realism and symbolism in Sun Yinchang's works aligns with broader debates on the relevance and evolution of artistic forms. In exploring the trajectory of Chinese art post-cultural revolution, Lu Wenchao underscores the sociological turn in contemporary art creation. Sun Yinchang's immersive approach, rooted in rural life and community engagement, resonates with this sociological perspective, reflecting an authentic connection to societal concerns. The juxtaposition of Sun Yinchang's hyper-realistic paintings with the tradition of Western photorealism prompts contemplation on the significance of realistic reproduction<sup>[2]</sup>. Yunesco's assertion that painting aims to express an impossible truth finds relevance in Yinchang's meticulous techniques, where the sensorial realm he constructs transcends the physical, echoing the sentiments of Chinese literature and art history<sup>[3]</sup>.

Moreover, Sun Yinchang's top-down compositional perspective introduces a unique vantage point in Chinese art, departing from the traditional overhead view. This perspective aligns with the philosophical underpinnings of Chinese art, where the profound and immediate coalesce. The utilization of vertical and horizontal abstract structures, as discussed by Arnheim, adds further complexity to the analysis, underscoring the foundational role of abstract shapes in painting<sup>[4]</sup>. Semiotic analysis of Sun Yinchang's works, drawing from Greimas, provides insights into the symbolic memory embedded in his depictions of rural life. Symbols like corn and farming tools assume deeper significance, resonating with the evolving semiotic process as cultural contexts shift, as proposed by Wang Yichuan and Ma Lianjing<sup>[5]</sup>.

## **II. Research Methodology:**

This study unfolds as a comprehensive exploration shaped by a multifaceted research methodology, intricately woven with insights gleaned from interviews with Sun Yinchang and a meticulous observation of his artistry. At its core, the research methodology intertwines qualitative inquiry and visual analysis to decipher the nuanced layers of Sun Yinchang's artistic journey. Direct engagement with the artist himself through interviews provided invaluable firsthand perspectives, allowing for an intimate understanding of his motivations, inspirations, and the intricacies embedded within his creative process. These dialogues, rich in contextual information, serve as a foundation for interpreting the symbolism and realism inherent in his works.

The interviews with Sun Yinchang are a pivotal component of the research methodology, providing invaluable firsthand perspectives that contribute to an intimate understanding of the artist's motivations, inspirations, and the nuances embedded within his creative process. The content of the interviews focused on aspects such as Sun's motivations for choosing a non-academic path, the challenges and inspirations encountered in his journey as a freelance artist, and the thematic choices and symbolism present in his artwork.

The interviews touched upon Sun's personal experiences, the evolution of his artistic vision, and the influences that shaped his unique style. The content of the interviews showed his reflections on the recognition he received for specific works, such as the "Homeland" series, and how these accolades impacted his confidence and dedication to his craft. Additionally, the author likely sought insights into Sun's perspective on the role of realistic painting in contemporary art, particularly in the face of evolving societal needs and preferences.

Complementing the interviews, an extensive visual analysis of Sun Yinchang's art collection, notably his celebrated "Homeland" series, "Old Corn" series, and "Autumn Realities" series, forms a pivotal component of the research methodology. This involved a meticulous examination of compositional elements, color palettes, and the overall stylistic nuances present in each piece. The comparison with photorealistic oil paintings, exploration of the top-down perspective, and scrutiny of the interplay between picture space and psychological space contribute to a holistic understanding of his unique artistic language.

## **III. Sun Yinchang's Personal Experience**

In November 2007, Sun Yinchang's oil painting, "Homeland," received the Outstanding Work Award in the Second China-ASEAN Youth Artwork Creation Competition (Oil Painting Year), organized by the China Artists Association. The recognition of this work being collected by the state provided him with tremendous encouragement and confidence. It marked a breakthrough in his lifelong dedication to painting and his struggle to make a living. Since then, he has garnered numerous national awards and attained membership in the China Artists Association, establishing himself as a prominent figure in Shandong Province. His works have been featured in renowned publications such as the Artist Newsletter, Art Newspaper, Painting Journal, and Art Investment. Some of his pieces have been acquired by the National Art Museum of China and private collectors. Notably, his oil painting, "Old Corn," was included in the Guardian auction and sold successfully. Following this achievement, Sun embraced his status as a professional painter without severing his connection to his spiritual roots. He established his own private museum in the countryside.

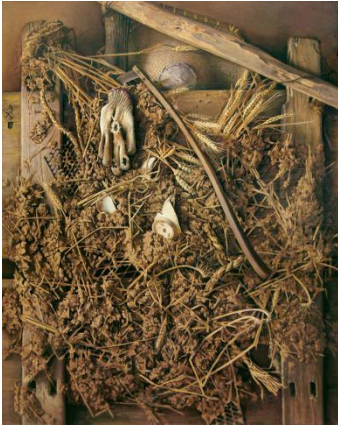


Figure 1, Homeland(Source: from the Sun.)



Figure2. Old Corn (Source: from the Sun.)

Sun Yinchang's oil paintings embody a realist style, utilizing purely realistic techniques to evoke a visual impact that surpasses the mere representation of reality. For instance, his series of works, including "Home" (Figure 1) and "Old Corn" (Figure 2), incorporate elements such as soil, corn, farming tools, and everyday objects, provoking contemplation in viewers. Through these elements, Sun develops his unique artistic language, depicting his personal spiritual home intertwined with his life experiences and the profound connection to the "soil."

Born in 1970 in Chiping County, Liaocheng City, Shandong Province, Sun Yinchang, initially a farmer, developed a passion for drawing during his formative years, often replicating images from children's books. At the age of 17, after completing junior high school, his father, recognizing his son's artistic inclination, enlisted the guidance of a professional teacher to impart sketching skills. Although Sun contemplated pursuing art school, the complexities of societal pressures compelled him to return to rural life, get married, and start a family. Despite these challenges, the flame of artistic expression continued to burn within him, becoming a recurring theme throughout his life.

Between 1990 and 2006, Sun Yinchang navigated various occupations, including roles in an oil factory, towel factory, advertising, farming, and photography. When asked about his job transitions, he explained that the demands of work left him with little time for painting. This period reflects his perpetual struggle to balance his artistic aspirations with the necessities of survival. However, his unwavering desire for painting and the continuous demands of farm life remained constants. His close connection to the soil, from his early experiences observing his father's farming to actively engaging in the labor, instigated an internal transformation<sup>[6]</sup>. Elements such as bricks, soil, farming tools, fruits, and weathered artifacts began to infiltrate his subconscious, contributing to the formation of a unique artistic language.

In the early stages of his creative journey, Sun Yinchang quietly produced works that bore traces of academic still-life sketching. Examples such as "Deep Love in the Past" and "Autumn Words" demonstrate his pursuit of classicism's elegance and timelessness(Figure 3, 4). These pieces employ solemn and simple forms, accentuate meticulous sketching, and embody a balanced and complete compositional style.



Figure 3, Deep Love in the Past (Source: from the Sun.)



Figure 4 Autumn Words (Source: from the Sun.)

Since 2006, Sun Yinchang's artistic vision has been consistently centered on the concept of "soil" as his spiritual anchor. This idea, stemming from his years of labor in the rural landscape, reflects a deep connection to the earth. He expressed, "Plowing is an interesting thing, and I can turn over a lot of things from the soil!" Incorporating "dirt" into his paintings, he infuses common objects from life, such as corn, broken vessels, agricultural tools, and torn gloves, with symbolic significance<sup>[7]</sup>. Sun Yinchang believes that even ordinary objects, once elevated to the status of art, acquire human nature—a nature derived from the artist's analysis, understanding, and expression following a nuanced engagement with

the subject. Sun's paintings skillfully arrange scythes, baskets, worn-out sacks, and other objects in realistic detail, offering viewers a glimpse into his keen sensibility and revealing his resilience in the face of life's challenges. After years of collecting these aging artifacts, he formally established his rural museum in 2019, marking a significant milestone in presenting his artistic journey.

#### **IV. Sun Yinchang's Oil Painting and Realistic Painting**

Realistic painting, originating in the West, necessitates a scientific handling of space and light. The Renaissance marked the emergence of anatomy and perspective, laying a solid foundation for realistic painting as artists sought to depict objective objects through meticulous techniques to achieve visual reality. In the early 20th century, Chinese intellectuals introduced Western painting principles, intertwining them with Chinese cultural elements to establish a national oil painting style. This fusion birthed Chinese realistic painting.

##### **4.1. Realistic Style Outside the Academy System**

The academy system, rooted in the West with its origins in Florence, involved apprentices learning perspective, progressing from imitation to sketching, eventually mastering the real through what Vasari termed "sketching." Sun Yinchang's artistic journey traces back to self-practice in still life and plaster sketching after school, seeking occasional guidance from a teacher. Despite lacking a strict academic education, he chose to employ realistic techniques and realism in his depictions of the forgotten land, showcasing a distinctive realistic style.

The Chinese School of Realistic Painting, embodying various realistic styles, is categorized by several teachers, each representing a fundamental outlook within the academy's realistic style. Sun Yinchang's realism differs in subject matter and style. Firstly, he focuses on still life, rural farming tools, corn, fruits, bricks, and soil, deviating from China's realistic school, primarily centered around figures. Secondly, his picture style diverges from academic shadows, rooted in his unique farming experience, wherein his tools become both subjects of expression and objects of collection. His art is a reflection of his lived conditions. A comparison with Leng Jun's works, characterized by extreme realism and a modern, sacred sense, reveals distinctions. Sun Yinchang, in contrast, adopts a realistic approach, emphasizing sensibility, delicately portraying subjects beyond their surface, conveying profound humanistic concern.

##### **4.2 Comparison with Photorealistic Oil Paintings**

Upon initial examination of Sun Yinchang's paintings, the viewer is immediately captivated by the artist's commitment to realism, prompting an inquiry into the creative methodology underpinning this striking authenticity. Highly realistic works, such as those of Sun Yinchang, often draw inspiration from photographs, aligning with the tradition of Western photorealism. Photorealism, also referred to as hyper-realism, emerged in the United States during the 1970s. This artistic style utilizes photographs as a primary reference, objectively reproducing them on canvas. Its objective is to circumvent personal subjective sentiments, epitomizing an indifferent stance towards the objective world. While Sun Yinchang's paintings are academically classified as hyper-realistic, it is noteworthy that he executes his art entirely within the realm of sketching. This seemingly paradoxical approach prompts contemplation on the significance of realistic reproduction. As stated by Yunesco, "The art of painting is to express an impossible truth, sometimes even expressed. This is its plausibility, its truth" [8]. Sun Yinchang adeptly constructs his own sensorial realm through meticulous and intensely realistic techniques, conveying a spiritual existence that transcends the physical realm.

#### **V. Analysis of Painting Language and Style**

Sun Yinchang's oil paintings consistently evoke a sense of innocence and nostalgia, serving as visual records documenting the evolution of time and civilization. These works provoke contemplation on the concept of living space and, in doing so, create an intimately familiar spiritual home for each individual life. Fundamentally, Yinchang employs a blend of traditional realistic techniques, natural lighting, and an unconventional perspective distinct from the traditional overhead view. Furthermore, his color palette diverges from the more conventional tones of classical Western realism. Beneath the seemingly commonplace visual language lies distinctive features that set his work apart.

##### **5.1 Compositional Form under the "Top-Down" Perspective**

From the inception of the "Home" series, Sun Yinchang has consistently employed a top-down compositional perspective, a natural inclination rooted in his experiences. Amidst the bustling farming season, he perpetually confronts the yellow soil, and this simple act profoundly influences the visual impact of his paintings, deviating from the traditional compositional norms of the academy. Yinchang's "top view" diverges from Bruegel's distant panorama, manifesting as a flat space beneath the top view that imparts a sense of imminent fading. The "top-down" perspective, derived from the Chinese term for perspective, "profound," as defined by Guo Xi in *Linquan Gaozhi*, offers a unique vantage point – "peering from the front of the mountain to the back of the mountain is called profound," suggesting endless rivers and mountains. Yinchang's paintings, unlike those with a sense of spatial depth, convey immediacy with objects on the same plane at a glance. This technique instills a profound respect for life, emphasizing the piety of life in the artist's coined term, "Home."

##### **5.2 Picture Space and Psychological Space**

In addition to the "Homeland" series, Sun Yinchang's artistic repertoire encompasses the "Old Corn" series and the "Autumn Fruit" series (Figure 5, 6). In these collections, certain works adopt a top-down composition, while others utilize

suspended vertical and horizontal abstract structures. This varied approach achieves an exquisite balance between subject matter complexity and picture structure simplicity, cultivating a sense of stability and solemnity for the observer. The utilization of vertical and horizontal abstract shapes is particularly noteworthy for their inherent qualities of stability, rationality, and regularity. Abstract shapes, in this context, serve as the foundational container, pattern, and conceptual framework of a painting, transcending mere surface elements such as color, image, light, and shadow<sup>[9]</sup>.



Figure 5, Autumn Fruit No.4  
(Source: from the Sun.)



Figure 6, Autumn Fruit No.6  
(Source: from the Sun.)

Sun Yinchang's oeuvre is a manifestation of figurative realism seamlessly integrated within this abstract framework. His compositions exhibit a remarkable simplicity, often reduced to three color blocks, beneath which meticulous depictions of concrete subjects unfold. Engaging with his works, one is prompted to overlook the subject matter and instead appreciate the understated richness of elegant and tranquil hues. This departure from the traditional earthy tones of Western classical oil paintings is exemplified by a vivid gray background, contributing to the distinctive stylistic identity of Sun Yinchang's creations. The finesse and impact of his works vividly articulate the aesthetic depth inherent in realistic reproduction.

### 5.3 Memory Symbols of Northern China's Countryside

Frequently recurring motifs in Sun Yinchang's paintings include dirt, farming tools, and air-dried corn, each assuming symbolic significance in his artistic lexicon. These elements become emblematic of the artist's subjective interpretation, transcending mere depiction of objective reality to encapsulate his thoughts and ideas.

Sun Yinchang often emphasizes the dynamic nature of corn, asserting that "the corn is different every year." This statement encapsulates his subjective engagement with objective elements, as he meticulously reconstructs these elements through his conceptual lens, infusing them with personal emotions that drive his creative impulse. A semiotic analysis of his paintings, drawing from Greimas, reveals two distinct levels of attributes: plastic and figurative. Sun Yinchang's works firmly belong to the former, where the highly realistic portrayal of objects captivates viewers. The compositions skillfully blend soil, countryside utensils, and cereals, presenting each element in a vividly figurative manner. The earth, corn, and farming tools, unique to the rural landscapes of northern China, symbolize both the nurturing of life and the artist's resilient character in the face of life's challenges.

The symbolic inclusion of old farming tools, fading away with the advent of mechanized production, serves to encapsulate a specific period in history and civilization. Sun Yinchang masterfully weaves these symbols into our collective memory, imbuing his works with timeless significance. This spiritual imagery evolves with time, forming new interpretative symbols as cultural contexts shift. The semiotic process is dynamic, as once a mental image solidifies, it transforms into a new symbol, perpetuating a cycle of evolving interpretations<sup>[10]</sup>.

## VI. Themes discussion

After analyzing the interview data with Sun Yinchang, several prominent themes emerge that contribute to a deeper understanding of his artistic journey and creative process:

### *Unconventional Artistic Development:*

Sun Yinchang's journey is characterized by an unconventional and self-directed approach to artistic development. His deviation from traditional academic paths is a recurring theme, emphasizing his reliance on personal experiences, exposure to exhibitions, and dialogues with peers for artistic growth. This theme highlights the unique trajectory of an artist who forged his own path outside established institutional frameworks.

### *Personal Perception and Professional Competence:*

A key theme revolves around Sun Yinchang's ability to attain a professional level of artistic competence through personal perception. The interview data suggests that Sun's proficiency in oil painting is not only a result of self-guided learning but also a testament to his intuitive understanding of the craft. This theme challenges conventional notions of formal art education and underscores the importance of personal insight in achieving artistic excellence.

### *Challenges of Freelance Artistry:*

Operating as an outsider in the artistic system, Sun Yinchang's experiences as a freelance artist without a fixed income emerge as a significant theme. The interview data likely delves into the challenges he faced, providing insights into the financial uncertainties, societal perceptions, and personal sacrifices associated with pursuing a career outside established institutions. This theme contributes to a nuanced exploration of the realities faced by contemporary youth aspiring to become artists on non-traditional paths.

## VII. Implications for Contemporary Creation

The analysis of Sun Yinchang's paintings prompts contemplation on the trajectory of contemporary creation and whether realistic paintings are becoming antiquated in response to evolving societal needs after fulfilling a specific developmental role in a distinct era. Reflecting on the history of Western painting, we observe a transition from periods of Classicism, Renaissance, and Rococo art to the emergence of modern art catalyzed by the advent of photography. The subsequent impact of "conceptual" art led to the waning prominence of easel painting, urging us to reevaluate the significance of this age-old form of artistic expression.

"The artistic development of human society necessarily has its own laws of existence and evolution. From the experience of art history, once any kind of art form and art phenomenon goes to the extreme, a strong and intense reversal will appear immediately afterward"<sup>[1]</sup>. In the 1980s, painting experienced a resurgence in public interest. After a century of presence in China, oil painting now confronts the impact of contemporary art and undergoes transformations. There is a prevailing bias favoring art expressed solely through graffiti lines, sidelining traditional plastic arts. It becomes imperative to reassess the profound significance of artistic image reproduction. Contemporary artists must attentively observe and transform the familiar elements around them into personal metaphors and symbols, demanding a critical reflection on culture and living spaces, as evidenced in Sun Yinchang's oeuvre.

Sun Yinchang's oil paintings offer sociological insights into art. Rooted in the countryside, he has maintained this connection throughout his artistic journey. Despite his adherence to a traditionally realistic creative language, his process holds contemporary artistic relevance, intertwining with societal concerns. Gathering materials for his creations during farm work, the content of his works originates from the unique elements of rural life. His immersive approach, where experience and creation are interwoven, aligns with art's role in participating in rural development, exemplifying the authentic role of the artist. As Bishop contends, "visual analysis is always overstretched" for this kind of art, and "any art closely tied to society and people must have a methodological interpretation, which is at least partly sociological"<sup>[12]</sup>. This concept provides valuable inspiration for the current direction of young artists' creations. By aligning their artwork with personal concepts, artists can assume diverse roles, fostering a range of artistic forms and deepening their understanding of the creative process.

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