

A Study on the Formalist Aesthetic Analysis of *New Carved Gold Beach*, a Republican-Era New Year Poster from Yangjiabu

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doi:10.63593/AS.2709-9830.2025.10.004

Abstract

This study employs Roger Fry's formalist theory as its analytical framework to examine the formal aesthetic characteristics and modern relevance of *New Carved Gold Beach* — a seminal woodblock New Year painting from Yangjiabu created during China's Republican era (1912-1949). The formalist doctrine posits that artistic essence resides not in narrative content, but in the meaningful order established through formal composition. Through systematic analysis of five key elements — line, color, volume, spatial relationships, and light and shadow — the paper reveals how this artwork achieves visual rhythm and emotional resonance through its structural organization. The study reveals that *New Carved Gold Beach* creates a visual hierarchy combining flatness and depth through its flowing rhythms, striking color contrasts, layered spatial composition, and dynamic interplay of light and shadow. While rooted in folk themes, the artwork transcends narrative constraints at its formal level, demonstrating artistic autonomy. The social transformations of the Republican era and advancements in printing technology provided conditions for this innovation, enabling New Year Posters to transition from religious symbolism to conscious formal expression in visual language. This paper argues that *New Carved Gold Beach* not only marks the maturity of Yangjiabu New Year painting art, but also represents a significant milestone in the evolution of Chinese folk art towards modern aesthetics. The independence of its formal language and structural beauty demonstrate the spiritual resonance between folk art and modernist aesthetics. Through the intervention of formalism, this paper redefines the research paradigm of folk art, emphasizes the contemporary value of traditional art in form innovation, and provides theoretical insights for the contemporary expression and digital transformation of Yangjiabu New Year painting as an intangible cultural heritage art.

Keywords: formalism, Yangjiabu New Year Posters, New Carved Gold Beach, digital transformation

1. Introduction

The development of art history has always been a history of interaction between form and meaning, where tension and integration coexist. Form is not only the external expression of art but also the core carrier of artistic spirit and aesthetic experience. As an important component of China's folk art, Yangjiabu New Year paintings not only carry folk beliefs and social sentiments but also demonstrate the formal wisdom of folk visual thinking (Zhang Jie, 2013). Since the Ming and Qing dynasties, Yangjiabu New Year paintings have established a complete folk visual system through their vibrant colors, planar compositions, and symbolic visual language (Wang Shucun, 2000). However, during the Republican era, with the influx of foreign ideologies, advancements in printing technology, and transformations in social and cultural trends, Yangjiabu New Year paintings gradually shed their singular religious and functional attributes, evolving into an art form characterized by aesthetic

autonomy and independent expression. This transformation marks the transition of Yangjiabu New Year paintings from practicality to formal aesthetic value as a form of folk art.

Roger Fry is one of the important representatives of Western formal aesthetics. He made significant contributions to the artistic criticism method of formal analysis (Zhao Lichang, 2021). Roger Fry's reception and interpretation of Chinese art serve as a crucial case in early 20th-century Sino-Western cultural exchange. His research on the relationship between Chinese artistic perspectives and formalist aesthetics further epitomizes the mutual penetration and influence between Chinese culture and Western modernism. (Bai Weizhen, 2022) Inspired by China's "scattered perspective" creative technique, Roger Fry deepened his understanding and elaboration of two-dimensional spatial composition. He pointed out that abandoning the illusion of three-dimensional space helps awaken viewers' imagination, guiding them to focus on the painting's schematic patterns, contours, colors, and lines while experiencing the emotions conveyed by the artist. (Roger Fry, 1910) He regards formal creation as the highest achievement in art. He believes that formal creation is the core of art, advocating that form creates art. Aesthetic reflection depends on the artist's arrangement of formal elements — lines, colors, space, volume, and light and shadow, rather than on the subject matter.

In his seminal work *Vision and Design*, Roger Fry posits that the true value of art lies not in its narrative content or moral themes, but in the organic composition and rhythmic relationships of its form. He emphasizes that lines, colors, volumes, spatial arrangements, and light and shadow constitute the essential elements of visual composition (Roger Fry, 1920). Fry's formalism extends beyond structural aesthetics to recognize form as a symbolic medium for emotional and spiritual expression. This study employs Fry's formalist theory to conduct an in-depth formal analysis of Yangjiabu New Year paintings, moving beyond conventional approaches focused on subject matter and symbolic meanings. The aim is to reveal the emotional resonance and cultural consciousness embedded in these artworks through their formal dimensions.

Within this theoretical framework, Yang Jiabu's *New Carved Gold Beach* from the Republican era emerges as a landmark case study. This work emerged at a pivotal historical juncture where tradition met modernity, while being profoundly influenced by foreign cultural elements. While preserving the symbolic characteristics of festive imagery and auspicious themes, it actively incorporated new ideological concepts and formal elements of print aesthetics, creating a unique visual structure that harmonizes planar decoration with spatial order. The artwork features fluid, rhythmic lines, vividly layered colors, and rationalized spatial relationships, fully demonstrating the remarkable achievements of Yang Jiabu's folk artists in form exploration and visual innovation during the Republican era.

This paper takes Fry's formalist theory as the analytical foundation and combines it with the socio-cultural background of the Republican era to conduct a systematic formal analysis and aesthetic interpretation of *New Carved Gold Beach*. The study will delve into the formal expression of the work from five dimensions: lines, colors, volume, space, and light and shadow. Meanwhile, it further contemplates and explores the possibilities of inheritance and innovative transformation in contemporary visual culture, aiming to provide new theoretical support for academic research on Yangjiabu New Year paintings and even Chinese folk art, as well as for contemporary artistic expression.

2. Research Objective

2.1 Deconstructive Analysis of the Form in the Artwork *New Carved Gold Beach*

This study begins with formal analysis of the artwork, systematically deconstructing the visual structure of *New Carved Gold Beach* and focusing on the expressive principles of five formal elements: lines, colors, volumes, space, and light. Through in-depth exploration of their interrelationships, rhythmic patterns, and compositional order, it reveals how Yangjiabu New Year paintings construct an organic visual whole within the flat medium, thereby evoking aesthetic experiences through their formal expressions.

2.2 Interpret the Relationship Between Form and Emotion in the Work *New Carved Gold Beach*

This study explores how form serves as an externalized means of emotional expression in the artwork, revealing the correspondence between formal structures and psychological perceptions in *New Carved Gold Beach*. Grounded in Frye's theory that "form is emotion", the research focuses on how Yangjiabu artisans unconsciously convey festival joy, solemnity, and vibrant folk vitality through fluid lines, striking color contrasts, and rhythmic compositions during their creative process. By contrasting formal analysis with psychological perception, the study examines the emotional transmission mechanism of formal language in folk art, ultimately demonstrating that form is not merely a technique for shaping images, but also an artistic expression of public sentiment and social consciousness.

2.3 Propose an Innovative Transformation Path for the Inheritance of Yangjiabu New Year Posters

This study proposes innovative approaches for preserving and revitalizing traditional Yangjiabu New Year

paintings in the digital age through formal analysis. By systematically examining the artistic characteristics of Yangjiabu New Year paintings, the research explores how to enhance their aesthetic appeal through digital illustration, dynamic visual effects, and virtual reality technologies. The study aims to innovate the visual language of Yangjiabu New Year paintings through multiple pathways, providing theoretical foundations and methodological insights for their modern transformation. Ultimately, it seeks to breathe new life into traditional art forms by infusing them with contemporary aesthetic sensibilities.

3. Research Method

This study comprehensively uses three methods: literature research, field investigation and case analysis to ensure the combination of theory and empirical research, and reveal the formal characteristics and aesthetic value of *New Carved Gold Beach* New Year painting in Yangjiabu during the Republic of China period from multiple perspectives.

3.1 Literature Research Method

Through systematic analysis of documents such as *The Illustrated Album of New Year Pictures*, *A History of Folk Images in China* and *Formalism and Visual Order*, this study traces the formal evolution of Yangjiabu New Year paintings and their socio-cultural context during the Republican era. Simultaneously, by delving into formalist theories proposed by scholars including Roger Fry, Clement Greenberg, and Gombrich, we establish the theoretical framework for this research. Furthermore, through comparative analysis of domestic and international studies on New Year paintings and formal aesthetics, this study further clarifies the unique position and research value of Yangjiabu New Year paintings within China's folk art system.

3.2 Fieldwork Method

The author conducted a seven-day field study in Yangjiabu Village, Weifang, interviewing artisans from various positions involved in New Year painting production. They collected firsthand materials documenting the carving techniques, printing colors, and compositional processes of Yangjiabu New Year paintings. This research reveals how artists during the Republican era integrated stage-oriented compositions and chiaroscuro techniques into traditional woodcut methods, reflecting the parallel development of aesthetic awakening and technical innovation in the craft. In addition, field observation also helps researchers to deeply understand the social ecology of Yangjiabu New Year painting production, including workshop division of labor, market circulation and festival function, and provides a solid empirical support for the analysis of the cultural context of the works.

3.3 Case Analysis Method

This study systematically analyzes the representative *New Carved Gold Beach* New Year painting from the Republican era through five dimensions: line, color, volume, space, and light. It examines both the formal structure and emotional rhythm of the artwork, while also exploring its aesthetic psychological effects. By comparing formal elements in related works, the research identifies distinctive characteristics of this piece, paving the way for exploring new development paths in the modernization of Yangjiabu New Year paintings.

4. Research Results



Figure 1. A *New Carved Gold Beach* Yangjiabu New Year poster from the Republic of China era

Source: *An Appreciation of The Selected Works of Yangjiabu New Year Pictures*, Weifang, Shandong

Description of the work:

New Carved Gold Beach stands as a seminal masterpiece of Yangjiabu New Year paintings from the Republican era. The narrative unfolds around the Jinsha Beach Twin Dragons Festival, where Song and Liao dynasties host a diplomatic banquet to resolve disputes. However, this ostensibly peaceful gathering harbors hidden dangers, ultimately sparking a brutal war. The Yang family warriors demonstrate extraordinary valor and navigate complex political intrigues, embodying chivalrous loyalty and martial spirit. Through traditional Chinese opera artistry, the work vividly portrays theatrical performances. This analysis will examine the artwork through Roger Fry's formalist lens, focusing on five key elements: line, color, volume, space, and light.

4.1 *The Rhythm and Order of Lines*

In this artwork, lines serve as both the fundamental formal element and the essential visual language. The meticulous depiction of lines reveals a progression from static forms to dynamic storytelling. The composition is built upon intricate linear arrangements, where rhythmic variations and structural order form the core elements sustaining the entire framework. Despite the multitude of figures with diverse movements, the visual harmony remains intact. Through layered rhythmic patterns, the work achieves organic unity that transcends chaotic complexity.

From a rhythmic perspective, the composition's density and direction of lines create a visual cadence. The central figure's posture, woven from fluid curves and continuous zigzags, demonstrates dynamic movement. The foreground floor and background features straight, orderly lines that establish stable visual support. This striking contrast between dynamic and static lines creates a layered rhythmic structure. Particularly notable are the actors' sleeves and ribbons—long, supple spirals that echo the short, crisp folds of surrounding garments, producing a wave-like rhythmic effect across the scene. This rhythmic line arrangement fully showcases the exceptional skill of Yangjiabu artists in using linear composition to convey dramatic scenarios and emotional intensity.

Secondly, from an order perspective, the composition's linear system follows a center-to-periphery organizational logic. The stage area's radiating lines create visual focal points, naturally guiding viewers' attention to the central performer's movements. This linear arrangement isn't rigid symmetry but achieves visual balance through rhythmic variations, harmonizing partial irregularities with overall symmetry. Parallel lines from the table's verticals, carpet patterns, and backdrop curtains reinforce the horizontal and vertical axes, establishing geometric spatial order that stabilizes the dynamic composition filled with moving figures.

Furthermore, variations in line thickness play a vital role in establishing rhythm and order. Thick lines accentuate the main contours of figures and action lines, while thin lines focus on detailing facial features and clothing. These complementary elements not only ensure structural stability but also imbue the composition with dynamic beauty. The distribution of lines—both dense and sparse—creates visual breathing rhythms: figures at the center display bold, concentrated lines with strong force, whereas peripheral characters feature relatively sparse lines that soften the rhythm. This gradual diminishment from the center to the edges skillfully constructs a hierarchical structure of compositional order.

In essence, the lines in this artwork not only serve as structural elements but also create formal beauty through rhythmic arrangement and orderly distribution. While inheriting the tradition of Yangjiabu woodblock New Year paintings that use lines to define shapes and convey meaning, it also demonstrates the conscious pursuit of meaningful forms by artists during the Republican era. The fluidity and organization of these lines not only recreate the rhythmic cadence of traditional opera performances but also achieve formal balance and harmony across the composition. This vividly illustrates the visual order transformation from tradition to modernity.

4.2 *The Structure and Symbolism of Color*

The color application in this work marks a pivotal turning point in the evolution of Yangjiabu New Year paintings. During the Republican era, Yangjiabu artists moved beyond traditional symbolic colors like crimson, gold, blue, purple, and green from the Ming and Qing dynasties. Instead, they boldly employed softer pink hues in structural composition and narrative expression, using them as the core element to establish visual rhythm and convey emotional resonance. This chromatic shift vividly demonstrates the innovative exploration of formal aesthetics by Yangjiabu New Year paintings as a distinctive regional folk art form.

Analyzing the color composition, the artwork demonstrates a structural logic of central emphasis and balanced periphery. The central stage area features the most saturated costumes in vibrant pink, yellow, and purple, creating striking contrasts. The surrounding decorative elements employ neutral shades of gray-green and light blue to soften the intense chromatic tension. This strategic color zoning maintains visual harmony amidst high contrast, forming a layered color hierarchy. The combination of red and yellow symbolizes prosperity and glory, while blue and green create spatial depth and visual breathing. Through precise control of color block areas and positioning, the performers naturally draw viewers' attention to the core performance zone.

Secondly, from the perspective of color symbolism, the color scheme in this work continues the tradition of Yangjiabu New Year paintings, predominantly using highly saturated, vividly contrasting hues. These colors symbolize the Republican-era people's yearning for a new life and optimistic spirit. Red occupies a significant portion of the composition, extensively applied to key elements like decorative motifs, carpets, and tablecloths depicting main characters. Symbolically, red represents loyalty and valor, aligning with the spiritual essence of heroic figures like The Generals of the Yang Family in this work, highlighting their sincerity and bravery. Additionally, red carries auspicious connotations in folk culture. As New Year paintings are closely tied to traditional festivals, the color conveys wishes for a prosperous life. Simultaneously, red also symbolizes conflict and war. The story revolves around the war triggered by the "*Shuanglong Meeting*" at *Jinsha Beach*, where the intense red tones suggest the ferocity and tension of the conflict.

Yellow is primarily used in this work for characters' costumes, tables, nameplates, and carpets, symbolizing radiance and nobility. In traditional Chinese culture, yellow is closely associated with imperial authority and supreme dignity. The use of yellow in the painting highlights the status of characters such as emperors and nobles in the story, adding a sense of authority and sanctity to scenes like the "*Shuanglong Meeting*" involving power struggles between two nations, hinting at the political machinations and hierarchical order behind these events.

The use of blue and green primarily conveys a sense of balance and serenity, achieving aesthetic harmony between intensity and tranquility in the composition. These colors function as supporting tones, used to depict backgrounds, secondary characters' attire, or decorative patterns. Blue symbolizes justice and composure, serving to highlight characters and elements upholding righteousness throughout the narrative—except for the central loyal hero. Green, associated with vitality and hope, subtly embodies aspirations for peace and renewal within the war-themed context. It complements primary colors like red and yellow while enriching the chromatic layers, preventing visual monotony caused by the intense hues of these primary colors through balanced color coordination.

In this artwork, black is primarily used to outline contours, depict facial hair and beard details, and accentuate specific costume decorations. Symbolically representing solemnity and reverence, the color deepens the historical gravity and seriousness of the narrative. The application of black enhances the three-dimensional presence and authority of human figures. Within the vibrant saturation of the composition, the bold lines and solid blocks of black create a stabilizing hue that effectively elevates the solemn atmosphere surrounding the *Shuanglong Meeting at Jinsha Beach* and subsequent war narratives.

Furthermore, it is particularly noteworthy that in this work, color not only carries symbolic significance but also functions as a rhythmic organizer within the compositional structure. The artwork achieves visual rhythm through deliberate repetition of color contrasts in specific areas, where variations in chromatic brightness harmonize with the rhythmic flow of lines. The interplay between these elements creates a cohesive aesthetic. The upper background and lower panel establish a visual loop through complementary color relationships, forming symmetrical structural balance across the entire composition. This layered repetition and variation of color gradations exemplifies the formal rhythm emphasized by Formalism.

Overall, this artwork masterfully employs color symbolism that not only accurately conveys the symbolic meanings of traditional New Year paintings, but also seamlessly integrates with specific folk culture and narrative contexts. Through meticulous color composition and symbolic techniques, the visual narrative vividly reconstructs storylines while profoundly conveying the cultural essence and spiritual values embedded in folk art.

4.3 The Construction and Tension of Volume

While Yangjiabu New Year paintings are two-dimensional artworks, their ingenious composition density and layered color blocks create a virtual sense of three-dimensionality. As a quintessential example of Yangjiabu woodblock New Year paintings from the Republican era, this work demonstrates rich volumetric illusions within flat media. Although primarily produced through planar printing techniques, the artist achieves unique psychological volume and intense visual tension through meticulous color gradation, skillful line layering, and striking structural contrasts. This embodies the expressive power derived from form itself, as emphasized by formalism.

From a compositional perspective, the work's volumetric structure relies on layered character distribution and rhythmic control of decorative density. The central figure at the stage's focal point features exaggerated proportions and full-bodied form, with tightly interwoven garment lines and intricate decorative patterns that create a strong visual weight. In contrast, the characters and background elements on both sides appear more simplified. Through the contrast between negative space and fine lines, the three-dimensional effect of the central subject is further emphasized. This rhythmic transition from dense to sparse not only gives the planar

space a sense of volumetric depth but also serves as one of the key sources of visual tension in the composition.

Secondly, in terms of visual composition, the artwork does not employ perspective principles to construct three-dimensional space. Instead, it creates symbolic volume structures through layered color blocks and variations in brightness. The garments of the figures predominantly feature red, yellow, blue, and purple hues in alternating patterns. Yellow, red, and purple colors are typically concentrated on central figures, while blue and green are used for the receding areas of peripheral characters, creating a visual perspective shift. This hierarchical effect achieved through variations in brightness and saturation allows viewers to perceive dynamic spatial relationships within the flat surface. This demonstrates that Yangjiabu New Year paintings had already established highly stylized volumetric expressions during the Republican era, aligning with the expressive characteristics of woodblock New Year prints.

Furthermore, in the structural design of characters, the construction of volume is closely intertwined with the rhythm of movement. The figures in the frame exude dynamic energy—whether it's a warrior swinging his arm or characters locked in confrontation—all conveyed through exaggerated body language that creates intense tension. These postures are not mere naturalistic reproductions but rather enhanced and dramatized expressions. For instance, the warrior's raised weapon-bearing arm is elongated with an arched line, as if poised to suddenly drop. This exaggerated dynamic technique fills the scene with a palpable sense of impending power, perfectly aligning with the war-torn atmosphere in *Jinsha Beach* where conflict is on the verge of erupting. Audiences can profoundly sense the tension and intensity through the characters' postures.

From a formalist perspective, this volumetric illusion exists not as a realistic representation, but as a pure formal visual experience. Here, the expression of volume relies not on light and shadow perspective, but rather on the contrast of forms and the rhythm of colors. It is not the actual mass in natural space, but rather the structural sensibility unique to artistic space. This structural sensibility precisely embodies Roger Fry's concept of meaningful form—the aesthetic emotion evoked by formal elements through proportion, direction, weight, and balance relationships.

The visual mass tension in the composition ultimately arises from the contrast between decorative elements and negative space. The dense patterns on the central figure's attire clash with the surrounding blank paper, creating a striking visual leap that makes the figure appear to rise from the flat surface. This formal foreground-background relationship not only suggests three-dimensional depth but also continues the traditional Yangjiabu New Year painting logic of juxtaposing solid forms with voids. Through meticulous control of line thickness, color block proportions, and geometric balance, the artwork allows viewers to perceive tangible weight, dynamic energy, and a palpable sense of presence within the flat plane.

In conclusion, the volumetric expression in this artwork is not intended to replicate reality, but rather to construct formal tension. Through the structural organization of planar language, the composition achieves a harmonious interplay between color, lines, and spatial relationships, creating a distinctive visual volume effect. This formalized volumetric expression not only demonstrates the mature compositional consciousness of Yangjiabu woodblock New Year paintings during the Republican era, but also marks a significant transition from narrative to structural expressiveness within the formalist aesthetic context of Yangjiabu New Year paintings.

4.4 Space Structure and Hierarchy

Unlike Western painting's use of perspective to create three-dimensional space, this New Year painting employs a flat spatial composition. The artwork lacks conventional realistic spatial logic such as perspective-based depth or focal points, with all elements seemingly arranged on a single plane. Figures, objects, and scenes are systematically arranged according to narrative and decorative needs, resembling a stage-like flat space. Different plot elements and scenes in the story are combined through this planar layout, allowing viewers to comprehensively understand the narrative of *Jinsha Beach* while maintaining the traditional function of New Year paintings as folk storytelling art. This approach enables diverse temporal and spatial narratives to coexist within a single visual composition.

The spatial composition radiates a profound sense of ritual order, with figures arranged along the horizontal axis to create symmetrical framing. This planar spatial configuration heightens the ceremonial atmosphere of the artwork. Deliberately angled objects like the flowing mustache on a hat and the curved flower spear in hand subtly employ perspective, infusing the space with fluidity rather than rigidity. Roger Fry observed that the significance of space in art lies not in replicating reality, but in organizing visual relationships to guide viewers' emotional responses.

This artwork preserves the traditional flat composition of Yangjiabu woodblock New Year paintings while reinterpreting spatial hierarchy through layered compositions and visual flow characteristic of Republican-era artists. Although eschewing Western linear perspective, it constructs a multidimensional spatial framework through scattered layouts, layered arrangements, and rhythmic composition control. The spatial progression

mirrors narrative development: distinct areas correspond to different story segments—from the banquet scene at the *Shuanglong Meeting* to the tense atmosphere of impending conflict, culminating in character movements—all arranged in sequential spatial layers that create dynamic rhythmic patterns.

In this work, from the overall layout of spatial composition, the painting adopts a typical layered design. The figures in the foreground are relatively large and complex, while the stage and figure depictions in the midground are the most intricate and detailed. The background employs simple lines and text to convey a sense of space. Through this striking contrast in composition, the spatial hierarchy between the foreground and background is further emphasized, allowing the painting to effectively convey a sense of depth even on a two-dimensional plane. This construction of spatial hierarchy does not rely on a single vanishing point but is achieved through the overlapping of multiple visual relationships. This form of spatial expression fully embodies the continuity of multi-point perspective in traditional Chinese painting.

Secondly, color plays a vital role in the spatial composition of the flat surface. The central figure area features high brightness and strong saturation, creating visual prominence. In contrast, the figures on both sides and the upper banner employ darker or neutral tones for transitional layers, forming compressed space. The gradual reduction in color brightness guides the viewer's perception through psychological expansion from light to dark and near to far. This color-controlled spatial rhythm not only reinforces the overall visual coherence but also enables natural, fluid transitions of the viewer's gaze between different compositional levels.

From a formalist perspective, the spatial expansion of this artwork perfectly embodies Roger Fry's concept of "diversity within formal unity." While all elements occupy the same plane, the composition achieves layered visual depth through skillful variations in lines, colors, and rhythmic arrangements. This dynamic interplay guides the viewer's gaze naturally across foreground, midground, and background, creating a cohesive visual rhythm. Such fluid planar composition ultimately endows the work with distinctive spatial aesthetic qualities.

In essence, this artwork constructs a psychological space governed by formal order. Rooted in planar composition, it creates visual depth through layered color gradations, interwoven elements, and dynamic line structures. While preserving traditional flat aesthetic principles, the work introduces rhythmic spatial logic that infuses static forms with a sense of dynamic movement.

4.5 Light and Shadow Symbolism and Rhythm

Frei posits that light and shadow function as rhythmic orchestrators in formal composition, guiding viewers' gaze and emotional engagement. In this work, the depiction of light and shadow eschews literal representation of physical illumination, instead employing a formalized visual organization technique. Through chromatic contrasts and localized accentuations, the piece constructs symbolic luminous sensations. The rhythmic interplay of light and shadow creates an internal sense of order and symbolic atmosphere within the composition. Distinct from the dense, flat color palettes characteristic of Ming-Qing dynasty door god motifs, this work demonstrates more dynamic tonal relationships. By contrasting layered gradations with localized highlights, it showcases the modern reinterpretation of light and shadow forms by Yangjiabu artists during the Republican era.

Structurally, the composition strictly follows the visual principle of "central brightness with gradual dimming at the edges." The stage center radiates maximum luminosity, where performers' costumes, headpieces, and props predominantly feature high-brightness yellow hues, creating a striking focal point that symbolizes the concentrated light source. The characters and backgrounds on both sides of the stage employ low-brightness blues, gray greens, and purples to establish a natural gradient of light and shadow. This visual hierarchy from bright to dark not only effectively guides the audience's gaze to the performance center but also metaphorically reveals the stage's deeper cultural significance as a spiritual focal point in society.

Secondly, the interplay of light and shadow in the composition is achieved through rhythmic color contrasts. The artwork skillfully employs complementary pairings of red with green, and yellow with purple, creating rich tonal gradations through variations in brightness. For instance, the crimson garments of actors are often accentuated by high-brightness yellow trimmings, enhancing the visual clarity of their contours. Meanwhile, the blue-green areas in the ground and background serve as effective focal points for balance. This interplay of light and shadow not only adds depth to the flat surface but also establishes a dynamic rhythm of light movement, allowing the work to convey spatial depth and dynamic beauty within its two-dimensional form.

Symbolically, this artwork transcends mere natural light representation through its luminous composition, elevating it into a profound cultural and emotional symbol. The radiant central stage area functions as a spiritual beacon in folk life, embodying celebration, prosperity, and hope. Meanwhile, the muted colors in peripheral zones create a visually harmonious atmosphere, symbolizing the balance and order of folk culture. This symbolic treatment of light and shadow not only showcases Yangjiabu New Year paintings' unique ability to distill natural phenomena into formal symbols, but also resonates with the formalist theory's core concept of "form as expression".

Overall, the lighting and shadow effects in this artwork do not rely on real-world illumination. Instead, they create a distinctive visual system through the ingenious combination of brightness gradations and symbolic colors. The composition achieves rhythmic form, structural order, and emotional harmony through chiaroscuro contrasts and organized light arrangements. In Yangjiabu New Year paintings, light and shadow transcend mere natural phenomena—they become essential tools for organizing compositions, modulating spatial relationships, and conveying profound meanings. As Fry emphasized, the formal order of these luminous patterns itself constitutes the fundamental source of aesthetic value.

5. Discussion

5.1 Reinterpretation of Folk Art from the Perspective of Formalism

Roger Fry's formalist theory posits that the true value of art resides in the sophisticated organization of formal relationships, rather than narrative content or symbolic meaning. From this theoretical perspective, the artistic charm of this work lies not merely in depicting folkloric themes, but more importantly in the organic integration of its formal elements. The rhythm of lines, contrast of colors, spatial hierarchy, and interplay of light and shadow collectively create visual harmony, endowing the artwork with aesthetic value that transcends its subject matter. The relationships between elements within the composition are not bound by specific narrative logic, but achieve visual coherence through orderly arrangement and dynamic balance of lines. The direction of lines, rhythmic coloration, and structural symmetry collectively form what Fry termed "significant form" —where form itself becomes a vital medium for emotional expression.

In the creative tradition of Yangjiabu New Year paintings, formal elements often stem from the inherent logic of craftsmanship rather than theoretical consciousness. However, this work demonstrates an unconscious formal awareness during the Republican era. Although the creator lacked professional artistic training, through prolonged practice in carving and color printing, he naturally transitioned from symbolic storytelling to formal expression (Du Pengfei, 2021). This formal shift signifies that folk art no longer solely serves religious purposes but begins to emphasize the expressive power of visual language itself (Rahah bt. Hasan, 2017). Through formal analysis of this work, we can observe that Yangjiabu New Year paintings retain their cultural roots while sharing a spiritual core that resonates with modern formalist aesthetics.

5.2 Cultural Transformation and the Generation of Visual Modernity

This work reveals the distinct visual characteristics of Yangjiabu New Year paintings during the Republican era compared to their Ming and Qing dynasty counterparts. More than just an artistic innovation, it profoundly reflects the deep-seated transformations in social and cultural structures during this period. With the rapid development of printing technology and the rise of urban consumer culture, the function of New Year paintings shifted from traditional rituals and blessings to decorative appreciation. Their dissemination channels expanded from village-based handmade circulation to urban commercial systems. The evolving audience directly shaped the works' formal features—images no longer relied solely on symbolic religious meanings but adopted more complex, visually dynamic expressions (Zhou Lijiao, 2023). To meet new aesthetic demands, Republican-era New Year painting artisans enhanced color layering and compositional order in craftsmanship, creating works with richer visual layers and dynamic interplay.

From a formalist perspective, this cultural transformation has powerfully propelled the modernization of folk art. The straightforward narrative structure of traditional New Year paintings has been replaced by rhythmic compositional relationships, while pictorial spaces have evolved from symbolic flatness to multi-layered, three-dimensional visual structures. In this work, symmetrical compositions and striking color contrasts achieve harmonious balance, reflecting a rationalized aesthetic consciousness where form itself becomes the carrier of meaning. Simultaneously, the flourishing urban culture during the Republican era inspired artists to skillfully integrate theatrical elements and social realities into New Year paintings. This resulted in works that retained traditional decorative qualities while possessing modern visual impact. The emergence of this visual modernity was not a simple imitation of Western artistic models, but rather the natural evolution within local folk art itself, achieving organic integration between tradition and modernity, folklore and aesthetics. Through continuous formal evolution, the artwork *New Carved Gold Beach* stands as a significant visual testament to the modernization process of folk art during the Republican era.

5.3 Form and Emotion Interaction Mechanism

Fry observed that art's power stems from the emotional resonance evoked by its formal organization. The formal language in this work exemplifies such externalization of emotion. Through the contrast between curves and straight lines, as well as cool and warm tones, the piece not only creates visual rhythmic variations but also generates psychological cadence. As viewers' gaze dances between light and shadow, curved and angular forms, they experience the harmonious coexistence of festive fervor and solemnity—a sensory experience that transcends narrative themes to touch upon the pure emotional realm of form. The flowing lines hint at musical

melodies, while layered color palettes evoke visual resonance, allowing viewers to feel the exuberance of festivals and the vibrant vitality of folk culture through their visual rhythm.

From a formalist perspective, this work's emotional expression does not rely on facial expressions or narrative plots, but rather achieves through the inherent rhythm and harmony of its structural form. The rhythmic cadence of form serves as the driving force for emotional transmission, while the visual order becomes the catalyst for psychological resonance. The high saturation in warm-toned areas and the localized balance in cool tones allow viewers to experience aesthetic satisfaction through the interplay of visual tension and relaxation. As Fry observed, the essence of art lies in non-narrative emotional communication—stimulating viewers' sensibilities through the organic composition of formal elements. Through its rhythmic structural framework, this work successfully achieves such non-narrative emotional resonance, elevating folk art to a realm of self-sufficient aesthetic fulfillment. Form transcends mere technical expression, transforming into an intrinsic logic of emotional experience, thereby revealing the modern spirit and aesthetic depth embedded in Yangjiabu New Year paintings during the Republican era within the context of formalist aesthetics.

6. Research on Innovation Transformation Paths

In the context of contemporary digital culture, Yangjiabu New Year paintings still harbor regenerative potential in their formal language. The visual elements such as lines, colors, spatial composition, volume, and light and shadow provide abundant material resources for promoting these artworks in the digital age. Through a formal aesthetic study of the Republican-era work *New Carved Gold Beach*, we will further explore new pathways for inheriting and innovatively transforming the aesthetic forms of Yangjiabu New Year paintings:

6.1 Digital Reconstruction Design and Dynamic Visual Communication

To advance the innovative preservation of Yangjiabu New Year paintings, digital reconstruction design can be employed to create a dynamic visual communication system. First, using image recognition and vector technology, core elements like figures, objects, and patterns in the paintings are extracted and digitized layer by layer, establishing an editable dynamic element library that preserves original local characteristics and cultural symbols. Next, techniques such as skeletal animation and particle effects are integrated to achieve dynamic transformations. For instance, in *New Carving of Jinsha Beach*, banquet characters gradually transition into combat-ready postures, with clothing fluttering in motion, weapons simulating swinging trajectories, and background cloud patterns flowing programmatically, thereby reconstructing the narrative rhythm from peaceful scenes to intense battles. Meanwhile, colors and lighting dynamically adjust according to plot developments: war scenes emphasize red-orange tones and fiery lighting, while banquet scenes maintain stable warm tones to enhance atmospheric tension. Additionally, interactive design elements are incorporated, where viewers clicking on figures triggers exclusive dynamic clips and sound effects, transforming static paintings into immersive digital content suitable for modern platforms like digital exhibitions and cultural apps. This approach not only preserves the artistic essence and cultural depth of Yangjiabu New Year paintings but also attracts younger audiences through contemporary dynamic formats, expanding inheritance boundaries and achieving harmonious coexistence between tradition and modernity.

6.2 Reshaping Classic Colors and Enhancing Emotional Appeal

The color system of Yangjiabu New Year paintings holds remarkable potential for contemporary expression. Their high-saturation hues not only carry symbolic meanings of festivals, auspiciousness, and vitality, but also possess profound artistic value. By applying theories from modern color psychology, we can skillfully transform these traditional colors into visual symbols that resonate with modern aesthetic sensibilities. Through careful redesign of the most commonly used and representative colors from Yangjiabu New Year paintings, combined with current aesthetic trends, these works retain their cultural essence while precisely meeting contemporary aesthetic demands. Such designs evoke emotional resonance in viewers, enhancing artistic appeal and cultural identity. This approach not only preserves the cultural heritage of Yangjiabu New Year paintings as traditional folk art, but also improves their adaptability in modern society, achieving innovative revitalization of traditional color language.

6.3 Immerse Yourself in Virtual Reality

In today's digital age, the aesthetic innovation and transformation of Yangjiabu New Year paintings can be achieved through digital technologies like virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR). This enables immersive reconstruction of their spatial structures. VR technology simulates the flat composition and layered figures of these paintings, allowing viewers to experience the internal formal order through first-person perspective. This digital restoration not only showcases technological capabilities but also represents a profound shift in cultural perception, elevating viewers from passive observation to immersive engagement. Through 3D reconstruction, traditional flat compositions transform into dynamic visual scenes. Viewers can now experience in real-time the interplay of colors, lines, spatial relationships, and volumes within Yangjiabu New Year

paintings within virtual environments, gaining a unique cultural experience that transcends time and medium.

In conclusion, these innovative approaches not only preserve the vitality of traditional forms but also successfully achieve contemporary transformation of folk art. The modern expression of Yangjiabu New Year paintings lies in their reproduction through form and medium, rather than mere retro replication. By employing innovative methods such as digital design, color extraction, and immersive experiences, the formal vitality of traditional Yangjiabu New Year paintings has been sustained and reimagined. These initiatives not only integrate traditional art into modern visual cultural systems but also facilitate the cultural repositioning and dissemination of folk art within global digital contexts. This demonstrates an artistic transformation direction where tradition gains new life through form and modernity gains greater depth through inheritance.

7. Conclusion

This study employs Roger Fry's formalist theory as a framework to systematically analyze Yangjiabu New Year painting's representative work *New Carved Gold Beach* from the Republican era. The research reveals that the artwork constructs a self-sufficient formal system through rhythmic line organization, structural color balance, visual tension in volume, hierarchical spatial distribution, and the gradation of light and shadow. This system endows the composition with independent visual vitality, fully embodying Fry's concept of "significant form" — the emotional and spiritual expression inherently carried by the form itself.

Therefore, through the formal study of this work, we find that the beauty of Yangjiabu New Year paintings lies in the formal organization of the images. Form plays a very important role in Yangjiabu New Year paintings, serving as both the foundation of visual order and a medium for emotional expression. Through the rational reconstruction and emotional conveyance of the image form, Yangjiabu New Year paintings successfully achieve the transformation from traditional folk customs to modern art, demonstrating the modern value and academic significance of China's folk visual culture in the context of formalism.

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