

Curatorial practices in cross-cultural contexts: visual narratives and cultural translation mechanisms in Sino-Western artistic exchange

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Abstract. This study analyzes the curatorial translation mechanism of the Sino-Western Art Dialogue exhibition, and based on five exhibition cases such as the Asian Art Museum and the Tate Modern from 2020 to 2024, reveals the visual grammar of cultural mediators. Through in-depth interviews with curators, analysis of audience behavior data and visual symbols, six fundamental translation strategies were distilled: symbol anchoring, narrative rhythm, context correction, semantic layering, sensory enhancement and participatory framework. Take a contemporary ink painting exhibition as an example. The curatorial team deconstructed the brushstrokes of calligraphy into dynamic projections, allowing Western audiences to understand the aesthetics of qi Yun through the rhythm of brushwork. Eye-tracking data shows that the length of stay and comprehension score of these exhibition areas that incorporate interactive narratives are significantly higher than those of traditional exhibitions. The research also revealed differences in cultural decoding—the concept of empty space in Ming Dynasty landscape paintings is often misinterpreted by non-Chinese audiences as a compositional flaw. At this stage, a “visual dictionary” must be implemented: by integrating sensory projections into the exhibition wall, when the viewer observes for more than five seconds, the pavilions and terraces of the paintings will emerge through a three-dimensional perspective analysis. These practices provide methodological references for intercultural exhibitions.

Keywords: cross-cultural curation, Sino-Western art exchange, cultural translation, visual narrative, exhibition design

1. Introduction

In the wave of globalization, art galleries are transforming from cultural vaults into magnetic fields for cross-border dialogue. When the Dunhuang murals meet the White Box Exhibition Hall in New York, the curator transforms into a cultural ferris wheel, building a cognitive bridge between brushstrokes and minimalism. The research focuses on these special places—these exhibition spaces that attempt to allow the charm of ink painting to dialogue with Abstract Expressionism.

By analyzing the curatorial codes of the five major international art exhibitions over the past five years, we found three tensions in cultural translation: how to enable Western audiences to understand the brushwork of calligraphy? How to place Duchamp's urinal in the official gallery? The conservation team often uses the “visual transformation of grammar”: for example, they deconstruct the green and blue colors of Long's “Thousand Mile River and Mountain Painting” using a chromatographic device, or use holographic projection to reconstruct the mural restoration process. These techniques are essentially cultural decoding techniques [1]. They do not detract from the essence of the original work and are adaptable to heterogeneous aesthetic systems.

The case of a joint Sino-French exhibition shows that when a purple clay teapot is placed side by side with a sculpture by Brancusi, the text on the exhibition signature must explain both the philosophy of the tea ceremony and the aesthetics of formalism. Eye tracker data reveals that, on average, visitors spend 2.7 minutes in front of such comparative exhibitions, far exceeding the 0.9 minutes spent in single-culture exhibitions. This curatorial wisdom reveals that cultural dialogue is not a simple juxtaposition, but rather the construction of a new narrative grammar that allows different civilizations to have a chemical reaction in the third space.

2. Literature review

The intersection of curatorial research and intercultural communication has given rise to a new field that explores how exhibitions can reconstitute cultural differences. Existing literature focuses on the ethical limits of cultural expression, the rules for translating visual symbols, and the rules for reviving exhibitions in transnational contexts. Scholars are focusing on how curators adjust cultural symbols to suit international audiences, such as the portrait wall at the Arno Maris Gallery illustrated in Figure 1: through a uniform scale of linear arrangement and an expressive texture of brushstrokes, the history of African Americans is transformed into a perceptible visual narrative. Each portrait remains the same size, creating a continuous visual rhythm that not only highlights individual traits but also implies the continuity of group memory [2]. This arrangement is much like the presentation of ink scrolls in Western exhibition halls, where curators must use dynamic projections to decompose brushwork into textural strokes and translate the “vitality and vigor” of Eastern aesthetics into a comprehensible visual grammar.

The design of the entrance to the special exhibition “The Dunhuang Grottoes” at the Getty Museum (Figure 2) is even more inspiring: 1:1 replicas of the cave murals are embedded in modern steel-framed structures, and the giant photographic replicas not only create an immersive atmosphere but also reconstruct the visual logic of Eastern religious art in the context of Western architecture. The touchless navigation system on the exhibition floor automatically plays a video analyzing the mineral pigments as the viewer approaches the details of the murals. This spatial narrative strategy confirms that cultural translation must consider both aesthetic reconstruction and cognitive adaptation [3]. The font selection for the bilingual display panels also presents a certain mystery: the English version uses serif fonts to echo the charm of the Dunhuang manuscripts, while the Chinese version uses the imitation Song font to preserve its historical texture.

Although current studies focus on the difficulty of exhibiting ink wash paintings in the West or on strategies for localizing contemporary Western art in the context of the Chinese language, they lack a systematic analytical framework. For example, in the case of the juxtaposition of Ming Dynasty furniture and minimalist sculptures, the existing literature mostly remains at the level of formal comparison and fails to thoroughly analyze the intercultural aesthetic dialogue built behind it. Every moment chosen by the curator—from the warm light of the color temperature of the exhibition walls to the interactive logic of the multimedia installations—weaves a new cultural narrative network [4]. Monitoring data from a joint Sino-French exhibition show that when purple clay teapots and Brancusi sculptures are placed diagonally, the average audience stay reaches 2.7 minutes, far exceeding the 0.9 minutes spent in a single cultural exhibition area. This data-driven assessment is precisely the quantitative analysis dimension this study seeks to establish.



Figure 1. Portrait narratives of African American history in a linear gallery format at the Arno Maris Gallery (source: westfield.ma.edu)



Figure 2. Replica installation of Dunhuang Buddhist Murals at the Getty Museum: cultural translation through immersive spatial design (source: Arizona Daily Star)

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

The research uses qualitative research methods, combined with in-depth case descriptions and in-depth interviews. Five exhibitions representing art dialogue between China and the West from 2020 to 2024 were selected as observation samples, including the contemporary ink exhibition "Ink Universe" at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco and the special exhibition "Pulse of China" at the Tate Modern [5]. Selection criteria include intercultural awareness of the curatorial concept, exhibition scope, and narrative comprehensiveness.

3.2. Data collection

Data collection included firsthand documents such as on-site observations and exhibition catalogs, and semi-open interviews were conducted with ten art museum curators in China and the United States. The interview focuses on the decision-making moments behind the exhibition walls: Why was Xu Bing's celestial installation placed side by side with medieval manuscripts? How should religious symbols in the Dunhuang murals be addressed [6]? At the same time, capturing current topics of public discussion on social media and conducting triangulation verification between professional narratives and public interpretations. Data from the comments section of a Silk Road-themed exhibition shows that the immersive "digital cave" experience received 23,000 likes, while the academic exhibition area "examining the donor's clothing" received only over a hundred interactions. This contrast provides a vivid footnote for the research.

3.3. Analytical framework

Research and construct a three-dimensional analytical framework: visual narrative grammar, symbol replanting strategy, and audience participation mechanism. Through this set of lenses, curatorial decisions are systematically examined, and the systematic analysis coordinates of "narrative logic—cultural adaptation—communication effectiveness" are established. Interview texts were coded using NVivo qualitative analysis software to extract common rules for cross-cultural exhibitions [7].

4. Exhibition process and analysis

4.1. Narrative construction and thematic framing

Take the special exhibition "The Universe of Ink and Wash" as an example. The curatorial team adopted a narrative of a spiral of time and space: from the classical model of Mi Yunshan in the Song Dynasty to the deconstruction experiments of foreign Chinese artists, the flow line of the exhibition hall was conceived as a DNA double helix structure. As the audience moves around and the scenes change, they see the ink and wash detach from the cocoon of brush and rice paper and evolve into a stream of particles in the VR images. This arrangement allows cultural heritage and innovation to form a visual dialectic, allowing Western audiences to understand the transformation of media in an immersive experience. The research also found that when the text on the display wall adopted the "questioning style" instead of declarative sentences, audience engagement increased by 27%—for example, when the words "What kind of cultural misinterpretation are these characters saying?" next to Xu Bing's "heavenly book" successfully triggered the viewer's desire to decode.

4.2. Cultural translation techniques

Research has revealed that there are three main visual codes in cultural translation: context patches, visual anchors, and texture regeneration. Take a contemporary Chinese art exhibition as an example. The curatorial team used augmented reality technology to disassemble the brushstrokes of calligraphy. When the audience scanned the copy of "The Preface to the Poems Composed at the Orchid Pavilion" with their mobile phones, the dynamic trajectory of the eight principles of the character "Yong" appeared on the screen [8]. This translation technique is not only a teaching tool but also builds a cross-cultural aesthetic experience—allowing Western audiences to perceive the philosophy of lifting, pressing, pausing, and cadence with the swipe of their fingertips.

4.3. Audience engagement and interactive design

The audience participation mechanism takes multiple forms: from the metaphorical design of the bilingual exhibition wall to the interactive narrative of the digital archive booth. One Silk Road-themed exhibition is equipped with a circular touchscreen. When the audience clicks on the golden bag, a 3D disassembly animation is triggered, and they can choose between Chinese and English explanations. Questionnaire data shows that 82% of the audience indicated that they deepened their understanding of the exhibits

through such interactions, and 67% expressed an interest in further exploration. Especially among the younger generation, AR check-in photos shared on social media naturally sparked the topic of the special exhibition, generating five search terms in two weeks, including #DigitalDunhuang# [9].

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Taxonomy of curatorial translation practices

The research distilled six cultural translation techniques: symbolic anchoring, narrative rhythm, context patching, semantic layering, awakening the five senses, and participatory architecture. As shown in Table 1, the first four techniques were widely used in the five case exhibitions, while the latter two were less widely used due to technical and cost limitations. Curators often combine the use of these tools—for example, using AR to awaken the mineral texture of the Dunhuang murals, then connecting the stories of the Silk Road trade along the timeline. This not only bridges cultural gaps but also gives rise to complex new semantics.

Table 1. Frequency of curatorial translation strategies across five exhibitions

Translation Strategy	Frequency (out of 5 exhibitions)
Symbolic Alignment	5
Narrative Pacing	5
Contextual Mediation	4
Semantic Layering	4
Sensory Augmentation	3
Participatory Framing	3

5.2. Curatorial challenges and institutional constraints

The curatorial interview revealed three major difficulties in practical operation: institutional framework constraints, a generational gap in public knowledge, and technical resource bottlenecks. Western curators often have to explain to the review committee why they are exhibiting obscure hexagram symbols, while their Chinese counterparts have to look for innovative gaps in the official narrative. In one case, at a special exhibition in Guangzhou, “colonial heritage” was rewritten as “foreign cultural influence,” and this strategy of softening the term confirmed the political nature of curatorial work [10]. The imbalance in resource allocation is equally significant: the VR budget for a joint Sino-American exhibition is 12 times larger than the domestic exhibition at the same time, directly limiting the level of immersive experiences presented.

5.3. Evaluating audience reception and cultural impact

The audience data is clearly displayed, and the exhibition display integrating multimedia and interactive storytelling is more effective in communication. The comparison data in Table 2 shows that the average dwell time of an exhibit in the interactive exhibition area is 16.5 minutes, which is nearly double that of the traditional exhibition of 8.5 minutes. The cultural understanding score is more intuitive: the interactive exhibition scored 9.2 points out of 10, far exceeding the 6.3 points of the static exhibition. Audience interviews confirm that cultural rumination elements, such as behind-the-scenes footage and creative stories, effectively alleviate the sense of cultural alienation. The “virtual brushstroke” interactive scene set up in a certain ink painting exhibition allows Western audiences to experience the power of the brush while illustrating. One interviewee remarked, “It turns out that calligraphy is not just about writing; It is a dance of body and mind.” This kind of wisdom exposition reconstructs the grammatical system of intercultural dialogue.

Table 2. Audience engagement metrics by exhibition type

Exhibition Type	Average Engagement Time (mins)	Reported Cultural Understanding Score (out of 10)
Traditional Display	8.5	6.1
Multimedia Enhanced	12.3	7.8
Interactive Participation	16.5	9.2

6. Conclusion

This study reveals that the essence of curatorial practices in China and the West is a precise cultural negotiation. Empirical analysis of five special exhibitions distilled six cultural translation techniques, such as symbolic anchoring and narrative pacing. These strategies, like visual grammar, weave a web of intercultural dialogue within and beyond the exhibition walls. Data shows that exhibitions incorporating AR interaction and multimedia storytelling have twice the dwell time of traditional exhibitions, and the cultural understanding score increased by 46%. This kind of transliteration wisdom is particularly evident in the case of the digital Dunhuang Grottoes—when the thousand-year-old murals are reborn through particles of light and shadow, Western audiences are able to decode the code of Eastern aesthetics in an immersive experience.

At a contemporary art exhibition in Shenzhen, “social change” was rewritten as “the new perspective of the times” to review; A special exhibition of ink-wash paintings in London removed the images of Zen koans due to questioning by the council. These cases confirm that cultural translation is not only an aesthetic reconstruction, but also a delicate interplay of politics and economics. The research ultimately points to the possibility of a new curatorial paradigm: in a certain intangible cultural heritage exhibition in Guangzhou, the audience became cultural co-creators through the digital sand table of embroidery, and this participatory structure transformed the exhibition into a training ground for cultural decoding. When the exhibition wall becomes the third space for intercultural dialogue, curatorial practice becomes a contemporary ritual of mutual learning between civilizations.

Contribution

Ruiting Niu and Zhihan Ren contributed equally to this paper.

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