

The Visual Construction of an Ideal Dwelling in the Southern Song Dynasty through Four Seasons Landscape Painting

Qian Li *

School of Art and Design, Wuhan Textile University, Wuhan, Hubei, 430073, China

* Corresponding author Email: 847262991@qq.com

Abstract: Liu Songnian's Four Seasons Landscape Painting exemplifies the "poetic dwelling" theme in Southern Song court-style landscape painting. This paper breaks through previous research limitations focused solely on technique and scenery, proposing that this work constitutes a complete pictorial system of an "ideal life paradigm" meticulously constructed for the Southern Song literati class. The argument unfolds across three interconnected dimensions: First, in spatial construction, through a unified "flat-distant" composition and courtyard narrative, it transforms the vast cosmic landscapes of Northern Song painting into a human-scale "humanistic homeland" with clear pathways; Second, temporally, it elevates seasonal cycles into a ritualized script for living, employing cultural metaphors of plants like willow, plum, lotus, and pine to construct an environmental symbolism system blending moral and aesthetic dimensions. Finally, artistically, Liu Songnian employs meticulous, restrained brushwork and subtle, elegant coloring to achieve a refined and sophisticated visual aesthetic. This study argues that the Four Seasons Landscape is far from a mere reproduction of West Lake's scenery. Instead, it synthesizes the aesthetic sensibilities, life ideals, and ethical values of its era, serving as a visual manifesto for the ideal dwelling that reflected the spiritual aspirations of the Southern Song elite within their specific historical context.

Keywords: Liu Songnian; Four Seasons Landscape Painting; West Lake Painting; Distant-View Composition.

1. Introduction

The shift in Southern Song landscape painting from the grand, panoramic narratives of the Northern Song to in-depth depictions of poetic corners and daily dwellings marks a significant inward turn and refinement in the history of Chinese painting. As a pivotal figure among the "Four Masters of the Southern Song," Liu Songnian's handscroll Four Seasons Landscape Painting is a concentrated embodiment of this transition. With delicate brushwork and exquisite technique, it depicts the stunning scenery of aristocratic gardens around West Lake during the mid-Southern Song period across the transformations of spring, summer, autumn, and winter[1]. However, previous studies have largely focused on technical characteristics, landscape verification, or generalized interpretations of the West Lake sentiment, failing to fully reveal the intrinsic logic and profound cultural implications of this series as a complete pictorial system. This study proposes that the Four Seasons Landscape Paintings are not faithful records of West Lake's actual scenery. Instead, employing highly sophisticated court painting language, they serve as a visual template for an idealized lifestyle imagined by the Southern Song court and literati class. Through the temporal framework of the four seasons, they integrate natural landscapes, architectural spaces, human activities, and brushwork aesthetics into a self-contained world symbolizing perfect order.

2. The Construction of the Ideal Space

The Southern Song Dynasty was a golden age for West Lake, and also a rich source of inspiration for West Lake paintings[2]. Unlike Ma Yuan and Xia Gui, who excelled in "Landscapes in the Margins", Liu Songnian often focused his

perspective on courtyard landscapes where the artificial and natural intertwined. The Four Seasons Landscape Painting stands as the pinnacle of this artistic approach. Zhang Chou, in his Mingxin Collection, wrote: "West Lake's scenery, painted by Songnian, Its beauty still delights the eye today. Unlike the drunken old man's Huanhua landscape, Where peaks like eyebrows fall upon silk robes." [3] This rightly points out that his work is not a topographical map but an idealized scene refined aesthetically for "spiritual wandering" and "mental dwelling," highlighting, through contrast, his distinct style in depicting West Lake compared to other painters, vividly presenting the lake's elegant scenery and unique charm, making it a classic celebrated by later generations[4].

2.1. Flat and Distant Composition

Since ancient times, the birth of landscape painting has been accompanied by the pursuit and expression of the artistic conception of "distance" (yuan). Artists dedicated themselves to infinitely extending pictorial space on the two-dimensional surface of paper or silk through exquisite skill and boundless creativity, thereby revealing the grandeur and depth of nature. Discussions and depictions of "distance" are numerous and varied, but the most revered and remembered by later generations is the "Three Distances" theory—"high-distance" (gao yuan), "deep-distance" (shen yuan), and "flat-distance" (ping yuan)—proposed by the Northern Song theorist Guo Xi in his work Lin Quan Gao Zhi. As recorded in Lin Quan Gao Zhi: "Regarding mountains, there are three distances: Looking up from the foot of a mountain to its peak is called 'high-distance.' Looking from in front of a mountain to what is behind it is called 'deep-distance.' Looking from a nearby mountain toward distant mountains is called 'flat-distance.' The colors of high-distance are clear and bright; of deep-

distance, heavy and dusky; of flat-distance, both bright and dusky. The impression of high-distance is towering; the feeling of deep-distance is layered; the meaning of flat-distance is harmonious and ethereal, misty and vague [5]."

The four landscape scenes depicted in *Four Seasons Landscape Painting* (Figure 1) form a stark contrast to the majestic, panoramic styles of Northern landscape painting. They wholly abandon the loftiness of Northern Song's "high-distance" and the profundity of its "deep-distance," uniformly adopting the "flat-distance" composition. This choice is by no means merely a technical adaptation to West Lake's flat topography; it is also a conscious aesthetic and ideological selection. The flat-distant composition not only presents the scene before the eyes but also, through the arrangement of the picture and the use of brush and ink, creates a deep artistic conception, evoking boundless reverie in the viewer. The landscapes it depicts often impart a feeling of peace and tranquility, as if one is situated in a serene water village or plain [6]. This stands in sharp contrast to the open structure of Northern Song landscapes, which guided the viewer's gaze to roam freely between heaven and earth.



Figure 1. Liu Songnian Four Seasons Landscape
(Image source: artlib.cn)

2.2. Courtyard Narratives

Within the flat-distant method, scenic elements are clearly layered. Distant mountains, nearby water, trees, etc., are rendered with varying ink tones and degrees of solidity/void to create a vivid, three-dimensional image. In *Four Seasons Landscape Painting*, each segment of the painting skillfully arranges clear foreground, middle ground, and background, forming a rich sense of layering [7]. In spatial construction, it exhibits a high degree of stylization and orderliness. Although the scenes vary across the four seasons, they all follow the same rigorous logic of spatial narrative: the foreground acts as an "introduction," the middle ground as the "dwelling," and the background as the "setting." This three-part "near-middle-far" structure creates a stable, enclosed, and centripetal visual pattern across the four paintings. The viewer's gaze is gently guided and ultimately settled into the meticulously arranged courtyard buildings in the middle ground by this clear visual pathway. It evokes a psychological sense of security, tranquility, and self-sufficiency—a feeling of "territory." This stands in strong contrast to Guo Xi's Northern Song work *Early Spring* (Figure 2), where the visual path winds and twists, guiding the viewer on a spiritual "journey" and "exploration" through layered peaks, pursuing openness and transcendence through unity with vast nature. The highest ideal Guo Xi proposed for landscape painting—"traversable and inhabitable" (ke you ke ju)—is materialized and scenified by Liu Songnian in *Four Seasons Landscape Painting* with exquisite detail. The interpretation of "traversable" and "inhabitable" here is imbued with the Southern Song's characteristic garden mentality. Liu Songnian's space invites the viewer to "move in" and "settle down."

The "flat-distance" employed by Liu Songnian undergoes a fundamental transformation in meaning within *Four Seasons Landscape Painting*. It is no longer the desolate, ethereal expanse that evokes thoughts of reclusion in Guo Xi's writings. Instead, it becomes a "humanistic distance"—carefully measured, meticulously planned, and filled with

life's details and human warmth. This is a visual model of an ideal home with a comfortable scale, clear pathways, appreciable scenery, and a comfortable dwelling. Through this unique spatial construction, Liu Songnian not only depicts the scenery by West Lake but fundamentally defines and celebrates a highly artistic lifestyle and dwelling dream belonging to the Southern Song literati elite.

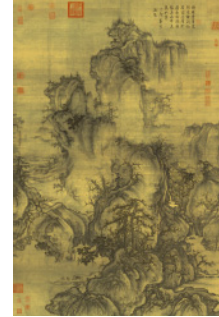


Figure 2. Guo Xi Early Spring (Image source: artlib.cn)

3. The Poetics of Time in Four Seasons Landscape Painting

3.1. The Ritual of Seasons

Liu Songnian, with masterful skill, vividly presents the characteristics of West Lake: gentle sloping banks, verdant accents, the spaciousness of pavilions amidst woods, and the meandering flow of streams. The scenes of spring, summer, autumn, and winter each ingeniously employ the progressive layering of pictorial space to construct lively and vivid landscape courtyard scrolls. In the foreground, gentle slopes are dotted with greenery; in the middle ground, pavilions and towers are arranged in picturesque disorder; in the background, mountain ranges undulate continuously. These layered scenes guide the viewer step by step into the breathtaking scenery of West Lake during the Southern Song period, as if one could personally experience its tranquility and elegance [8].



Figure 3. Spring Scene from Four Seasons Landscape
(Image source: artlib.cn)

Spring (Figure 3) in *Four Seasons Landscape Painting*, with its delicate brushwork and vivid scenes, showcases the graceful bearing and burgeoning vitality of West Lake gardens in spring. Spring depicts an outing amidst spring flowers in full bloom and lush green willows. A manor by the embankment is shown. A central path winds into the distance, flanked by tender grass and wildflowers. In the distance, a courtyard is nestled among peach and willow trees. The towers and pavilions within the courtyard are arranged harmoniously, blending with the surrounding natural landscape. In the scene, two attendants are leading horses and carrying gift boxes, approaching a small bridge, seemingly preparing for their master's springtime elegant gathering. The foreground is treated realistically, with willow trees well-composed and intertwined. Distant mountains depict the misty, rainy spring scenery of the Jiangnan water town, hazy

and indistinct. The varied trees and grasses are full of life, giving an aesthetic feeling of spring's exuberance and a relaxed mood. The artist employs a method of solid top and void bottom, echoing the "solidity" of the foreground [9].

Summer (Figure 4) presents us with the bright, spacious halls and exceptionally elegant scenery of a summer garden. Summer depicts enjoying the cool. With dense summer foliage and dotted lotus leaves, the painting centers on a grand, open hall. The master sits leisurely on an exquisite lounge chair, admiring the beautiful view of the lotus pond before him, while a young servant attends respectfully nearby. To the side of the hall, elm and willow trees form a dense canopy of shade. A cool breeze gently blows, bringing a hint of coolness, as if dispelling all worries and sorrows from the heart. Within the courtyard, various lake rocks are scattered picturesquely, like a natural painting. Summer flowers bloom competitively, adorning the garden with increasing color and charm, intoxicating to behold. A waterside pavilion extends ingeniously into the center of the lake, connected to the shore by a small bridge, resembling a fairyland floating on the water, somewhat reminiscent of "Autumn Moon over the Calm Lake" (Figure 5) on Bai Causeway among the Ten Scenes of West Lake. In the lake, early summer lotus leaves spread out sparsely. The tender green leaves and clear water complement each other, forming a picturesque and beautiful scene, making one linger forgetfully [9].



Figure 4. Summer Scene from Four Seasons Landscape
(Image source: artlib.cn)



Figure 5. Autumn Moon over a Calm Lake

Liu Songnian skillfully uses large rocks as a foreground to enhance the picture's sense of depth, subtly guiding the viewer's gaze toward the literati courtyard in the rear. He meticulously depicts the courtyard's unique structure, hinting at the literati's refinement and leisure. In treating the distant mountains, he makes a clever distinction from the technique used in Spring, creating a complete flat-distance and ethereality, making the entire picture visually more open and profound, leading the viewer's mind into a tranquil and distant summer world.

Autumn (Figure 6) centers on a courtyard, depicting scenery unique to the season. It portrays mountain viewing in crisp autumn air, with frost-touched leaves tinged with color. In the painting, distant mountains are misty and hazy, forming a sharp contrast with the nearby courtyard. Within the courtyard, old trees touched by frost display brilliant red leaves, adding a strong autumn atmosphere. The courtyard is enclosed by walls of trees and rocks, with small bridges and winding paths leading to secluded spots, isolating it from the external lake-and-mountain landscape. This serves both to block the autumn wind and to create a sense of detachment from the world. Inside, the windows are bright and the rooms

clean. An elderly man sits alone in contemplation, while a servant draws water to brew tea nearby. The entire picture is filled with leisurely charm.

The composition is exquisite, with elements like distant mountains, the courtyard, and figures arranged reasonably, forming a richly layered scene. Liu Songnian uses delicate brushwork and abundant color to vividly portray autumn's characteristic scenery. He skillfully employs ruled-line painting techniques (jiehua) to meticulously outline architectural structures like courtyard terraces and pavilions, making the picture more precise and refined. The entire scene not only showcases autumn's natural beauty but also, through human activity, expresses the leisurely life of the scholar-official class. The elder's serene demeanor and the servant's composed movements fill the picture with an atmosphere of peace and detachment [11].

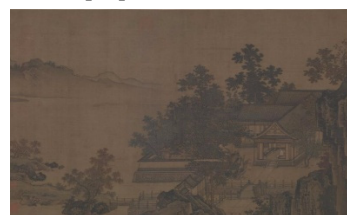


Figure 6. Autumn Scene from Four Seasons Landscape
(Image source: artlib.cn)

Winter (Figure 7) is the fourth section of Liu Songnian's Four Seasons Landscape Painting, depicting a snowy winter scene in Hangzhou. The entire picture is dominated by snow, with distant mountains, nearby rocks, the ground, and rooftops all covered in accumulated snow, creating a silvery, wintery atmosphere. Architectural elements, figures, and trees are carefully arranged to form a harmonious and rhythmic composition. At the center is a quadrangular courtyard. Inside, tall pines stand straight, and old bamboo wears a white "head" of snow. Snow blankets the paths and rooftops. In the distance, mountain ranges roll, white and vast, contrasting sharply with the nearby courtyard. Within the courtyard, an old gentleman rides a donkey under an umbrella, preceded by a guiding servant, seemingly searching for plum blossoms in the snow. The whole scene is filled with leisurely interest. Additionally, several evergreen trees remain lush in the winter wind, adding a touch of vitality to the scene [9].



Figure 7. Winter Scene from Four Seasons Landscape
(Image source: artlib.cn)

In Winter, Liu Songnian's brushwork is vigorous and untrammled, thoroughly expressing the cold and desolate quality of the snowy scene. The lines in the picture are strong and powerful, with ink tones balanced between light and dark, forming a unique artistic style. The composition is ingenious, with distant mountains, foreground, and figures echoing each other, rich in layers. At the same time, the use of blank space (liubai) is well-handled, highlighting the vast expanse of the snowscape while creating an ethereal, profound Artistic conception. Using ink wash as the main medium, the coloring is elegant and fresh. Although snow is the main subject,

excessive white is not used; instead, variations in ink darkness portray the layers and texture of the snow [11].

3.2. Symbols of Nature

3.2.1. Spring Willow and Plum

The plants that best interpret the season's charm in Spring are undoubtedly the willow and plum trees. The painter cleverly places a group of lush, vibrant willow trees on the left side of the picture (Figure 8), heralding the arrival of new life. The new willow buds are delicate, short, and dense yet sparse, showing spring's lushness while remaining fresh and elegant. Using the double-outline technique (*shuang gou*) in the foreground, the painter depicts the elegant forms of the willow trunks. The knots covering the tree bodies seem to tell stories of their growth and endurance over the years on this gentle slope. On the right side of the picture, the painter cleverly intersperses several clusters of plum blossoms (Figure 9), like messengers of winter's departure and spring's arrival. Their branches are strong and vigorous, stretching out like deer antlers in all directions, full of vitality. These plum blossoms punctuate the scene, symbolizing the tenacity and hope of life. Using a combination of outlining and dotting techniques, the plum blossoms' spirit is vividly rendered; each petal and branch seems imbued with the breath of spring [12].

Furthermore, the painter ingeniously dots the area around the courtyard with clusters of dot-foilage trees (*dian ye shu*) (Figure 10) and outlined-foilage trees (*jia ye shu*) (Figure 11). They complement the willows and plums, together forming a spring-filled scene. The depiction of these trees not only enriches the picture's layers but also infuses the entire scene with vitality, as if placing the viewer in a spring world full of life force [13].



Figure 8. Willow Tree Figure 9. Plum Blossom

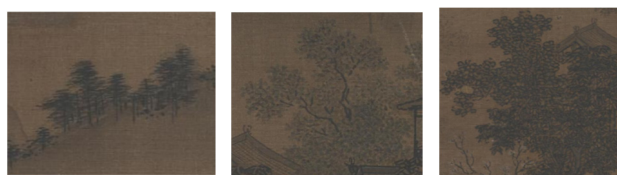


Figure 10. Pointed-leaf Tree Figure 11. Pinched-leaf Tree

(Image source: artlib.cn)

3.2.2. Summer Lotus and Purple Wisteria

In Summer, the painter again uses willow trees (Figure 12) to outline a splendid summer scene. Unlike the short, delicate leaves of spring willows, summer willow leaves become slender and flowing, as if swaying gently in the breeze. The painter cleverly reduces the number of ink-darkened willow leaves, focusing more on color application. Through the interplay of varying ink tones and colors, he outlines the thickness and texture of willow leaves under the summer sun. In the scene, dots of lotus leaves (Figure 13) are outlined with simple technique. Through sparse yet dense, light yet dark arrangements and clever overlapping, they vividly show the lush growth of summer plants. These lotus leaves not only add a touch of coolness to the picture but also demonstrate the painter's consummate skill [12].

Additionally, the painter meticulously depicts several crape myrtle trees (*ziwei hua*) (Figure 14) rooted by Taihu rocks, adding elegance and vitality to the courtyard. The crape myrtle branches are simple and sturdy. Pepper-dot shaped leaves are scattered along the branches, while the branch tips are dotted with white to represent petals, uniquely charming. More ingeniously, the painter dots numerous ferns (Figure 15) in the crevices of the rock wall, primarily using outlined and dot foliage methods, varied in form and full of life. Although these outlined leaves are all composed of five petals, their lines are divided into two types: soft and beautiful—flowing like arcs—and rigid and straight—upright like straight lines. Simultaneously, through the detailed depiction of moss-dot vegetation, the rock structure is cleverly distinguished, vividly portraying the lush, vibrant scene of summer vegetation, as if placing the viewer in a summer world filled with life force and energy [13].



Figure 12. Willow Tree Figure 13. lotus leaf



Figure 14. Crape Myrtle Figure 15. Ferns

3.2.3. Autumn Paulownia, Crimson Leaves, and Osmanthus

In Autumn, the painter, with unique brushstrokes, presents autumn plants like a brilliantly colorful scroll, perfectly interpreting the magnificent scene of "a thousand mountains crimsoned, layer upon layer of woods dyed" (Figure 16). Inside the courtyard, various outlined-foilage trees and full dot-foilage trees interweave. Compared to spring's vitality and summer's lushness, the most eye-catching in *Autumn* are the phoenix trees (*wutong*) (Figure 17) with straight trunks and broad leaves. The painter does not use the vertical texture strokes (*cun*) applied to willows but cleverly employs the double-outline method to sketch the phoenix tree trunks, while the bark is depicted with delicate horizontal texture strokes. The courtyard is also dotted with osmanthus trees (*guihua shu*) (Figure 18) unique to Hangzhou, using the plum-blossom dot technique for leaves, dense but not chaotic, irregular yet orderly. White dots are cleverly added to the center of each cluster to represent osmanthus flowers, making the whole picture more vivid and layered. Furthermore, there are two small banana trees (*bajiao shu*) (Figure 19) in the garden, employing the same double-hook technique, the painting masterfully captures the delicate lines of the banana tree. [12]. Every stroke seems to contain endless poetic charm, as if placing the viewer in an autumn world full of poetry and pictorial beauty. This Autumn is undoubtedly a deep ode to autumn plants and a perfect manifestation of the painter's exquisite skill and profound artistic cultivation.

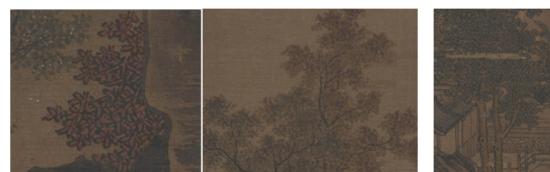


Figure 16. Red leaves, yellow leaves Figure 17. Paulownia Tree



Figure 18. Osmanthus Tree **Figure 19.** Banana Tree

3.2.4. Winter Pine and Bamboo

In Winter, the painter masterfully selects three ancient, vigorous pine trees (Figure 20) as the soul of the winter scene, placing them cleverly at the picture's center. With bold, square brushstrokes, he outlines the pines' unyielding posture in the harsh cold. After a light sweep of pale ink, he applies darker ink over it, making the pine contours sharper and their vitality leap off the paper. The pine needles are painted with brisk, forceful strokes, tightly clustered on the branches. He cleverly uses grass-green color over the strokes, adding a touch of life to the needles, making the whole picture more colorful and rich with natural charm.

Two varieties of double-outlined leaf bamboo (Fig. 21) capture the viewer's attention with their distinctive postures. One grows atop rocky cliffs, its rhizomes standing tall and sword-like, leaves short yet vigorous. Though seemingly sketched with loose brushstrokes, it exudes an ancient, naive simplicity. Dots of snow cover its form, highlighting a noble and unyielding character. The other grows in a courtyard, nestled beside rockeries. Its slender, sparse leaves are weighed down by snow, nearly bowing its head. This stark contrast to the cliff-dwelling bamboo seems to narrate life's resilience and indomitable spirit. In the distance, bare branches refuse to be outdone by winter's chill. With their stubborn, antler-like forms, they radiate a vibrant energy and vitality. Though stripped of summer's lushness, these branches interpret life's tenacity and resilience in a unique winter way, adding a distinctive charm to the entire scene.

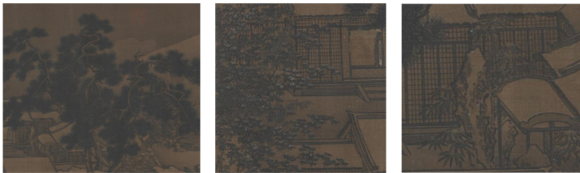


Figure 20. Ancient Pine **Figure 21.** Wild bamboo, garden bamboo

4. Ink and Color Composition with Elegant Formation

In Spring Landscape and Autumn Landscape, Liu Songnian depicted the gentle slopes by the lake with rich techniques. First, he outlined the overall contours of the slopes with dense ink and square brushstrokes, creating a natural and flowing form. Then, employing the small axe-chop technique, he meticulously rendered the sharp, angular features of the rocks, skillfully distinguishing their structures and enhancing the three-dimensionality of the composition. Finally, he skillfully employs negative space and light ink washes to trace a winding path through the slopes. This path extends deep into the estate, harmoniously complementing the gently rippling lake surface to create a harmonious and beautiful composition. Winter Scene is a captivating snow landscape centered around three towering boulders. Liu Songnian masterfully employed negative space to depict the rock surfaces while meticulously rendering their textural structure through the axe-chop brushwork applied to the sides.

This technique vividly captures the serene scene of snow-covered stones in winter, creating a profoundly poetic atmosphere that lingers in the mind [14]. (Table 1)

Table 1. Analysis of the Color Language as a Constructing Tool in “Yage”

Season	Primary Colors	Application Areas	Function and Imagery
Spring	Mineral Green, White Powder	Gentle Slopes, Moss Dots, Plum Blossoms	New Beginnings, Cultivating a Fresh and Refined Early Spring Atmosphere.
Summer	Mineral Green	Trees, Moss Dots	Represents the lush and vibrant vitality of midsummer vegetation.
Autumn	Mineral Green, Gamboge, Carmine	Banks, Tree Leaves	Evokes a warm autumnal mood, implying maturity and contemplation.
Winter	Predominantly ink wash, with touches of blue-green and white powder.	Rocks, Pine Needles, Accumulated Snow	The serene snowy landscape, where vibrant green highlights life amidst the winter chill.

In Spring Scene, Liu Songnian skillfully applied malachite green to the gentle slopes, distant trees, mossy patches, and horse saddles, imbuing the composition with an ancient yet vibrant atmosphere. He lightly dotted plum blossoms with white pigment, while the figures' garments shimmered with a rich tapestry of colors—white pigment, azurite, and wisteria yellow interwoven throughout. This masterful use of color quietly draws the viewer's spirit into the painting, immersing them in its moving narrative [10]. The coloring technique in the Summer Scroll closely resembles that of the Spring Scroll. In the Autumn Scene, the palette is artfully adjusted to reflect the changing seasons. A subtle flat wash of malachite green covers the earthen slopes, while gamboge and vermilion are added to color the leaves. Furthermore, gamboge is blended into the malachite green, delicately capturing and rendering the subtle transition from green to yellow in the foliage during late summer and early autumn—a truly remarkable achievement. In the Winter Scene, Liu Songnian employs masterful negative space to convey the vastness and desolation of snow-covered landscapes. By lightly dotting white pigment only at crucial points, he skillfully suggests the weight of accumulated snow and the biting cold of winter. For the pine trees in the snow, he first outlines the needles with dense ink, then deftly washes the surrounding areas to enhance their robust, powerful presence. The accents of blue-green further highlight the pine's tenacious vitality amidst the bitter cold, inspiring profound admiration (Table 2).

Table 2. Color Rendering Effect Diagram

Stone green coloration, lightly dotted with white pigment			
Tenghuang and Shuhong coloring, costume colors			

The Four Seasons Landscape Painting centers on the garden scenery along West Lake, meticulously depicting the exquisite vistas through the changing seasons. Each of the four paintings features a meticulously composed, richly detailed scene. The vivid depictions are both tightly structured and dynamically balanced, free from any sense of stiffness or tedium. The compositions extend seamlessly from the near shore embankments to distant mountain ranges, creating a layered progression that draws the viewer in, as if guiding the viewer into one poetic, picturesque realm after another. Profound emotion and dedication are poured into the conception and composition. Whether in the ingenious arrangement of the composition, the unique ingenuity of the narrative design, or the meticulous portrayal of the figures, the artist reveals his deep resonance with the characters and scenes within the painting. Beyond mere appreciation, the viewer can feel that emotion, resonating in unison with the landscapes and figures depicted [14].

5. Conclusion

Liu Songnian's Four Seasons Landscape Painting transcends mere depictions of seasonal scenery, constructing a comprehensive visual paradigm for the ideal dwelling. This article systematically interprets this paradigm across three dimensions: spatial, temporal, and linguistic. Spatially, it employs a “flat-distant” composition and courtyard narrative to enclose heaven and earth within the domestic realm, shaping a tranquil and self-sufficient humanistic order. Temporally, it transforms the seasons into a ritualistic script for the literati lifestyle, imbuing the environment with moral and aesthetic significance through botanical imagery; linguistically, it crystallizes into an elegant “courtly grace” through exquisite brushwork and subtle coloring. The Four Seasons Landscape became the visual crystallization of the collective mindset of Southern Song literati. Amidst the historical circumstances of a fragmented realm, it transformed the pursuit of “cultivating one's own virtue” into the ultimate cultivation of artistic and ritualized daily life. As the pinnacle of Southern Song court painting that fused imperial techniques with literati sensibilities, it provided posterity with an eternal pictorial paradigm of the literati's ideal home.

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