

# ANALYSIS OF THE CREATIVE METHODS OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE LITHOGRAPHS: THE USE OF THEMES, TECHNIQUES AND VISUAL LANGUAGE

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## Abstract

In artistic creation, artists transform abstract emotions, thoughts, vision, hearing or other sensory forms into concrete works of art by mastering and applying creative methods. Lithography, as an indirect creative medium, has evolved from printing technology into an art form with its own unique creative methods. This study adopts qualitative methods, mainly content analysis and visual analysis, to explore the application of key factors such as themes, technical means and visual language in contemporary lithograph creation methods, how these characteristics support the artistic expression of lithograph creation, and pay attention to its role in creating visual and emotional depth. Through the analysis of lithograph works by representative contemporary artists. This study found that: in terms of themes, artists focus on in-depth exploration of individual experience, social reality and cultural reflection, showing diversity; the renewal and exploration of technical means promotes diversified breakthroughs in artistic expression; in terms of visual language, the works have distinct individual visual language characteristics, and the language expression becomes freer and richer. These findings help to better broaden new methods and new ideas for lithograph creation, and provide new theoretical support and practical paths.

**Keywords:** Contemporary Lithograph; Creative Method; Artistic Expression

## **Introduction**

Contemporary Chinese lithographs have evolved significantly over recent decades, reflecting broader changes in the social and artistic landscape. Lithography, as a traditional printmaking technique, has transcended its historical role to become a versatile and expressive art form (Qi & Luo, 2011).

Despite its rich tradition, lithograph art faces new challenges and opportunities in a rapidly evolving artistic environment. Contemporary Chinese lithograph artists are not only revitalizing traditional techniques but are also introducing diverse themes and innovative approaches to visual language. This transformation underscores the significance of exploring creative methods that align with contemporary artistic needs and social issues (Song, 2009). However, the existing body of research largely focuses on technical procedures and individual cases, leaving a gap in understanding the systematic creative methods and their implications for lithograph art.

This study is significant as it addresses this gap by systematically analyzing the creative themes, technical innovations, and visual language employed in contemporary Chinese lithograph art. By examining these key factors, this research aims to shed light on the creative logic and practices underpinning lithograph creation in the modern era. It not only provides valuable insights into the artistic characteristics and development trajectories of contemporary lithographs but also serves as a reference for art education and future artistic innovations. This comprehensive exploration contributes to the broader discourse on how traditional art forms can adapt and thrive in a dynamic cultural landscape.

## **Research Objectives**

1. To analyze how the creative themes of contemporary lithographs affect the visual and emotional expressions of lithographs.
2. To explore how the updating and exploration of lithograph techniques affect visual and emotional expression.

3. To explore how the richness of lithograph visual language gives lithograph creation unique visual and emotional expression.

## Literature Reviews

Through literature review, the existing lithograph literature mainly focuses on the history, technical production procedures and practical theoretical research of lithographs. There are fewer discussions on creative methods. Generally speaking, these studies can be divided into three aspects:

**In terms of themes:** Qi Fengge (2006) "Transcendence and Fission--A Review of Chinese Printmaking in the 20th Century" partially involves the discussion of the themes of lithograph creation in different stages, and analyzes the evolution and characteristics of the themes of lithograph creation presented by different artists. There are discussions on themes in case art self-narration and review articles, Song Guangzhi (2023) "What is Painting--The Creation Dimension and Method Generation Beyond Time", etc.

**In terms of techniques:** Kou Jianghui (2021) "Basic Course of Lithograph", Guo Zhaoming and Li Xiaolin (2015) "Research on Lithograph", Fu Bin (2023) "Lithograph Production" mainly focus on the discussion of technical aspects, involving specific operations such as plate making, printing, material selection and equipment use of lithographs. However, there is less in-depth discussion on the application of technical means in the creative process. Shang Changrong (2013) "Rational Expression of Lithograph Materials and Exploration of Techniques" focuses on individual art self-narration.

**In terms of visual language:** most of them are articles describing the artists' own practices, such as Liang Rui's (2012) "On the Essential Potential of Lithographic Materials and the Discourse of Lithographic Language", Xu Haoyu's (2018) "A Brief Analysis of the Rich and Variety of Textures in Lithographic Creation", and Xie Ran's (2018) "An Analysis of Creative Lithographs", which explore visual language from the perspective of the artists' personal practices.

Overall, these studies show that there is a lack of comprehensive analysis of contemporary lithograph creation methods. Research often stays at the level of technical introduction and case discussion, and fails to conduct in-depth analysis of lithograph creation as a relatively complete object.

This study aims to fill this gap and focus on the use of creative themes, technical means and visual language in lithograph creation. By analyzing the creation methods of lithographs, this study attempts to understand how they interact in the creation process and present innovative artistic expressions.

## Research Methodology

This study employs qualitative research methods, specifically content analysis and visual analysis, to examine the creative methods of contemporary Chinese lithographs. Content analysis involves systematically interpreting textual and visual data to uncover patterns, themes, and meanings embedded in artistic works. Visual analysis, on the other hand, focuses on understanding the formal and conceptual elements of artworks, such as composition, texture, symbolism, and their interplay with thematic and emotional expressions.

**Case analysis:** By examining their creative processes, the study delved into how these artists integrate themes, technical methods, and visual language to articulate their artistic visions. The selected artists were chosen for their significant contributions to the field, and their works served as exemplars of innovative practices within contemporary lithograph art. The analysis paid close attention to the thematic diversity in their creations, the application of advanced and experimental techniques, and the richness of their visual language, uncovering the multifaceted ways these factors enhance artistic expression.

**Literature analysis:** Relevant literature on the history and development of Chinese printmaking, as well as contemporary theoretical discussions, was systematically reviewed. This included research on lithograph techniques, thematic exploration, and visual language development. The insights gained from this review contextualized the creative methods observed in the case studies, offering a comprehensive understanding of how traditional lithography is evolving in contemporary artistic practices. Together, these methods allowed

the study to comprehensively explore the interplay between creative themes, technical innovations, and visual language in shaping the artistic characteristics of modern Chinese lithographs.

## Results

**The advantage of the diversity of creative themes in contemporary lithographs.** The results show that the creative themes have shifted from the concrete reproduction of social reality to the psychological exploration and philosophical thinking of the individual's inner heart. The works are no longer a simple record of the external world, but a deep excavation of the current state of life. Through abstract visual language and multiple symbols, artists show complex thinking about the conflict and integration of the individual and the collective, tradition and modernity, forming more diverse and ideological creative themes. These themes express thinking and criticism of current issues through symbolic and metaphorical language in lithographs. Emphasize the profound expression of individual emotions and personal experience. The works are not only a portrayal of social reality, but also an extension of individual vision and emotion. The following examples from different artists explore the use of creative themes in expression.

Zheng Feng's lithographs are based on individual emotional experience as the creative theme. The works involve multi-level symbolic language and metaphorical expressions to reflect social changes and contradictions. Symbols not only depict elements of the external world, but also metaphor internal emotions and social problems. For example, "Walking with Candles" contains symbolic elements such as branches, candlelight, and figure outlines, which express metaphorical thinking about the individual's situation in the rapid development of society through these symbols.

Qiu Bei's "Dürer's Rabbit Growth "Report" 2017 No. 4" presents and reflects on issues such as drug safety and genetically modified experiments in contemporary society through lithographs. The rabbits in the picture are presented in different postures, symbolizing the role of experimental animals in modern medicine and biotechnology. It implies the universality of biological experiments and possible ethical disputes. It symbolically expresses doubts

about the ethical and humanistic issues brought about by scientific and technological progress, especially its potential impact on human values and living conditions.

Zhang Hui's "Looking to the Light / Group Painting" takes three characters of different professions as the theme, revealing individuals of different professions and identities in society, implying the diversity of social classes and the psychological characteristics behind them. Each character is presented in the form of a frontal portrait, with eyes looking forward, conveying a firm and calm power. This direct gaze symbolizes expectations for the future and the pursuit of ideals. The choice of the theme of the creation is not only a depiction of social reality, but also a deep exploration of the inner world of the individual.

The common feature of the lithographs created by Zeng Qianzhi, Liao Junli, Shang Changrong and Wang Yan is to explore the themes of social issues and individual identity through abstract and symbolic expression language. The works use a variety of symbolic elements to convey deep social and psychological meanings. For example, Zeng Qian's "Swimming" uses the image of a swimmer to symbolize escape or struggle, while Liao Junli's "City Reading Series-Red Wall Memory" reflects the sense of history in urban changes through the memory symbol of the red wall. The artists introduced a multi-perspective deconstruction technique in their works, allowing the audience to interpret the theme of the work from different levels. This technique gives the work ambiguity and a wider social interpretation space. For example, Shang Changrong's "Empty Direction" expresses loss and lack of sense of direction through the contrast of scattered red dots and black background. Artists try to deconstruct and reflect on cultural conflicts and individual identity issues in society. For example, Wang Yan's "Reflection in the Fleeting" shows the fluidity of time and memory, symbolizing the changes and impermanence in society.

In works such as Guo Zhaoming's "Wings", Zhang Minjie's "Dance on the Square No. 2", Kou Jianghui's "All Things Grow I", and Liang Rui's "A Page of Scenery No. 1", artists use cross-cultural symbols, historical metaphors, and multiple image elements in their works to express their thoughts on themes such as globalization, cultural identity, and coexistence of multiple cultures. The

choice of this cross-cultural theme not only reflects a deep understanding of local culture, but also shows a deep reflection on cultural integration and conflict in the context of globalization.

Conclusions, the diversity of creative themes is crucial in the expression of lithograph art. Diverse themes promote diverse means of artistic expression, thereby causing the richness of lithograph art. The emergence of new themes will often promote the emergence of new creative means and forms of expression, bringing breakthroughs to lithograph art.

**The application of technical means is crucial in the process of lithograph creation. Different techniques will directly affect the artistic language and visual effects of the work.** The results of the study show that mastering the techniques can give artists greater freedom in the creative process, so that they can flexibly switch between different techniques, materials and tools, fully express their artistic ideas and emotions, and enhance the quality and expression of the artwork. Through international exchanges, artists explore new materials and new techniques, and focus on the innovation of the artistic language of lithographs. Contemporary lithograph creation has formed a new trend of diversified development.

In 2008, Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts hosted the "China-Europe Printmaking Forum" and Rudolf Broulim Lithography Technique Training Course, which greatly promoted the development of Chinese lithograph creation techniques. Rudolf Broulim is the host of the Hulk Printmaking Studio in Brussels, Belgium. As a famous contemporary European printmaker, his superb skills have an important influence in the field of lithographs. He has long been committed to the research of lithograph technology and has rich practical experience in various techniques. Rudolf Broulim systematically taught the production process of color lithographs, oil-base techniques, ink techniques, glue-base techniques, oil pencil techniques, black-and-white conversion techniques and related techniques, as well as the material preparation methods in this course. He taught new lithograph techniques and introduced and promoted them to the lithograph teaching of important art colleges across the country. He enabled advanced lithograph techniques to be applied in the field of printmaking teaching and creation in China. He played a great role in promoting the development of contemporary Chinese lithograph art.

In the innovation and development of lithograph oil-base techniques: Taking Fan Min's "Opposite-1" as an example, he used oil-base scraping to paint on a black base, and the production method based on the "subtraction" method was a method of depicting from part to part, and then advancing as a whole. He used lithograph oil-base scraping to express his contemplation and artistic thoughts, with rigorous modeling, full of expressiveness and drama. The works have both the beauty of mezzotint prints and the unique graininess of lithographs.

Kou Jianghui's "Object No. 4" uses the special nature of the oil-based technique to create a random and repetitive effect on the picture. It can be seen that the controllability of the material has stimulated the author's creative freedom. Kou Jianghui's pursuit of the artistic language of lithographs reflects the combination of lithograph art and technical practice by printmakers. He pursues casual and relaxed visual effects, uses abstract lithograph language to express his works, and conveys a natural and subtle feeling. It also reflects his understanding of the oil-based technique and his wonderful control of "accidentality".

Xu Haoyu's "Natural Marks" and Zhao Shuhong's "Door God Series" use the lithograph oil-based scraping technique. This technique uses lithograph grinding, copperplate dry engraving tool scraping and gum arabic corrosion to make the work visually present rich texture and subtle gradient effects. This is a technique that forms different levels of texture effects by scraping and grinding the stone with varying coarseness and fineness. Using copperplate dry engraving tools or other sharp tools to scrape the stone can produce unique lines and image details, making the picture have a delicate gradient effect and rich texture. This effect makes the picture present a natural transition. This technique not only enhances the visual layering of the work, but also brings new possibilities for the language expression of lithographs. The overall effect of the work shows the charm of the rich technical language of lithographs in the contrast between delicate and rough, light and dark, yin and yang.

The widespread application of digital technology has become an important driving force for the innovation of lithographs. This technology



enables artists to perform image composition, color adjustment and texture simulation on digital platforms, greatly improving the efficiency and accuracy of lithograph creation. It allows artists to accurately control the details, tones and composition of images through computer software, avoiding the uncertainty in traditional hand-painted drafts. It also enables artists to express complex concepts and delicate emotions more accurately. The application of digital techniques makes the visual language of lithographs more advantageous in modern expression.

Based on digital techniques, artists began to explore the application of new material technologies. It enriched the visual expression of lithographs and promoted the deepening of conceptual expression. Through the fusion of techniques and the superposition of visual elements, the richness of visual experience is presented. In Wei Jia's work "Mountains and Rivers", the application of acrylic painting lithograph technology in lithograph creation is explored. The immediate emotions of creation are expressed through fast and powerful brushstrokes. The quick-drying characteristics of acrylic allow each trace to be quickly fixed, thereby retaining the instant impulse and emotional fluctuations of creation on the stone. This kind of brushstroke is not only a visual impression, but also carries the creator's mental and physical reaction when creating, which is a continuation of "action painting". Through continuous brushstrokes and the superposition of colors, he presents different levels of emotions and thoughts at the same time, forming a multi-dimensional emotional narrative.

Artists have updated the coloring technique and combined the coloring technique with other techniques. In works such as Li Chuan's "Falling Cherry Blossoms in March", Yao Yuanlu's "Psychological Series No. 8", Xu Haoyu's "Insect Notes-2", and Kou Jianghui's "Gradually Fading Landscapes One", the coloring is combined with oil-bottom scraping techniques, oil-release techniques, ink techniques, spray techniques, etc., and different tools and materials are used to create a picture effect with both color layers and line textures. This combination of multiple techniques breaks the monotony of traditional lithographs, making the works more diverse and experimental in expression. On the basis of the coloring technique, artists enhance the texture and layering of the picture by combining the comprehensive use of multiple techniques. Color overprinting is no longer just a flat color superposition, but

through the combination of different techniques, a three-dimensional effect of color, line and texture is formed. The improvement of this technique makes lithographs not only more visually impactful, but also able to convey more delicate emotions and complex connotations. The update of color overprinting techniques is not only reflected in the technical level, but also has been comprehensively improved in the enrichment of visual language and the diversity of artistic expression.

The oil pencil technique of lithographs has been significantly improved in drawing accuracy. Artists can use oil pencils to draw more delicate works on lithographs, with delicate brushstrokes and subtle and rich light and dark gradients. This technical improvement is due to the introduction of materials, tools and printing equipment, as well as a deep understanding of advanced foreign lithograph technology. Including through precise control of plate making and printing, artists can create delicate texture effects on lithographs, which greatly enhances the layering and expressiveness of the works. Zheng Feng's "Ode to the Moon", Chang Bowen's "Derivative Series One", Liu Qiangguang's "Watching I" and other works. Whether it is filling a large area of color blocks or drawing fine lines, artists can use this technique with ease. The smoothness and operability of oil pencils on lithographs allow artists to better control details during the creation process and accurately express the desired images and textures. At the same time, the improvement of techniques also allows artists to flexibly use different brushstrokes and line forms in the same work, thereby enhancing the visual tension and performance of the picture.

At present, lithographs have broken through the limitations of traditional single techniques and have comprehensively used a variety of technical means such as ink, spray, and glue painting, greatly enriching the expression of lithographs. This fusion of multiple techniques has enabled lithographs to show more diverse styles and languages in contemporary art creation, expanded the creative space of lithographs, and provided artists with more creative freedom.

**The richness of the visual language expression of lithographs gives lithographs the freedom of visual expression and emotional expression.** The research results show that the visual language of lithographs is rich and varied. The oil pencil technique can create delicate lines and rich tonal levels, presenting complex details and precise language characteristics; the ink

technique can express the natural water patterns and changes in ink color, creating a relaxed and flowing visual effect; the spray technique brings a gradual and hazy visual language effect, enhancing the three-dimensional sense and depth of the picture; the oil bottom technique gives the picture a unique texture through operations such as scraping and polishing, enhancing the visual impact. Artists need to flexibly choose the use of lithograph art language according to the theme, emotion and expression needs of the work to achieve the best visual expression.

Song Guangzhi has brought the traditional lithograph expression method to a new height through the use of oil pencils, giving the picture a rich sense of grain and texture, and enhancing the visual expression of the work. The work "Seeker Series" is achieved through the diversity of lines, the shaping of light and dark levels, the processing of details, and the rendering of shadows. It presents the visual characteristics of the language of lithograph itself. In addition to the delicate depiction form, lithograph works of different expressions continue to appear. It presents a diversified appearance.

Li Xiaolin's "Farmer" uses oily materials to create directly on the stone slab, and the texture of the lithograph is also fully reflected in the work, especially the details of the characters' clothes and tools, highlighting the unique graininess and texture visual language effect of lithographs.

In terms of the visual language of lithograph ink, Xinping's "White Horse in the Wind" shows the artist's skillful use of ink language. Through the treatment of different shades of ink, the water texture and the level of ink color change, the background of the picture is drawn with ink technique, the ink texture is accidental and random, and the white horse is depicted with oil pencils. This technique gives lithographs a free and flowing charm, increases the randomness and dynamics of the work, and significantly improves the artistic expression of the picture. It expands the expressiveness of the visual language of lithographs and forms a personalized lithograph ink language with distinctive artistic characteristics.

Wei Jia's "Birdsong" is a representative work in the creation of color lithographs. It makes full use of the techniques of oil pencils and the granular texture language characteristics of lithographs, as well as the superposition and

plate processing of multiple layers of color. The work uses the color technique to show multi-level color gradients and delicate light and shadow visual effects, creating a quiet and dreamy atmosphere. Through the clever use of visual language, the colors in the picture are both full and varied. In particular, the application of oil pencil techniques gives the work more hand-painted feel and texture, highlighting the unique granular characteristics of lithographs, making the picture more real and tactile.

Artists show distinct personalized visual language characteristics in lithograph creation. Some artists use rich color superposition and texture effects to emphasize the complexity and visual impact of the picture; while some artists use simple lines and blank spaces to highlight the inner emotions and poetic expressions of the works. Personalized language makes the creation of lithographs no longer static, but shows great flexibility and innovation space, so the visual language of lithographs becomes freer and richer.

## Discussions

The findings of this study highlight how contemporary Chinese lithograph artists have transformed traditional practices by innovating across themes, techniques, and visual language, yielding new insights into the evolution of lithograph art. These insights reflect both a continuation of established artistic principles and the introduction of novel approaches that distinguish contemporary lithographs from their predecessors.

The study revealed that the thematic diversity in contemporary lithographs has shifted from purely documenting social realities to exploring more abstract and introspective dimensions, such as individual psychology, philosophical reflections, and cultural critiques. This aligns with Tan Tian's (2016) observation that contemporary art increasingly prioritizes conceptual and emotional depth over representational accuracy. Artists like Zheng Feng and Qiu Bei exemplify this trend, using symbolic and metaphorical language to address social, ethical, and personal issues. Such thematic innovation enriches lithograph art by making it more responsive to contemporary cultural and societal challenges, demonstrating an expansion of its expressive scope.

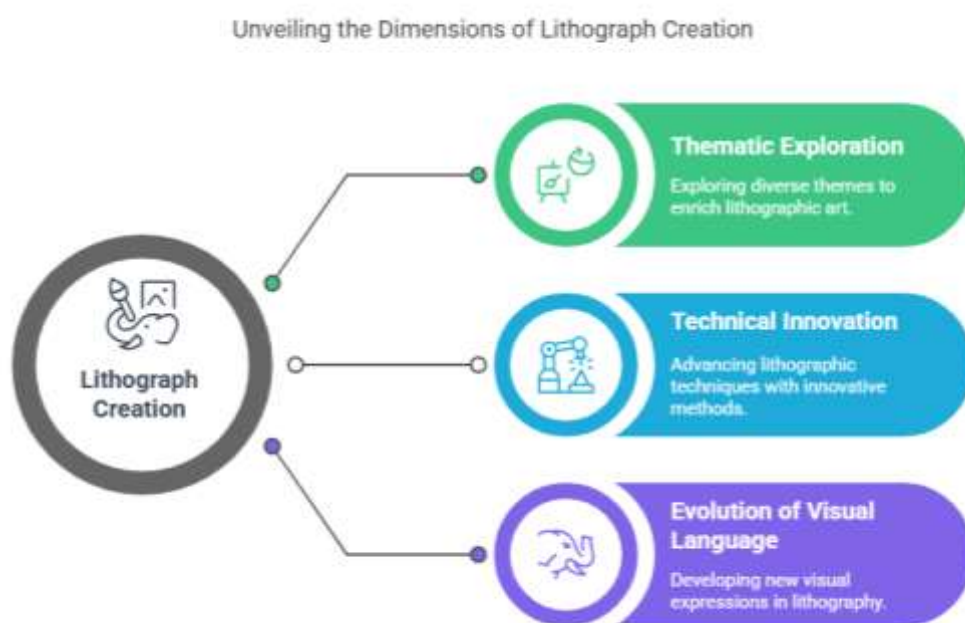
In terms of techniques, the findings emphasize the pivotal role of technical innovation in enhancing visual and emotional expression. The integration of traditional methods, such as oil-base scraping and oil pencil drawing, with new technologies like digital composition, has significantly broadened the creative possibilities of lithography. These advancements resonate with Wang Hongjian's (1986) assertion that technical mastery is foundational to artistic innovation, allowing artists to more effectively convey complex ideas and nuanced emotions. However, the blending of digital and traditional methods introduces a point of divergence: while some artists, such as Wei Jia, embrace digital tools to achieve precision and layered effects, others, like Xu Haoyu, prefer traditional techniques to preserve the tactile and organic qualities of lithograph art. This divergence highlights an ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity within the medium.

The richness of visual language in contemporary lithographs further demonstrates how artists utilize diverse elements such as texture, composition, and color to achieve distinct emotional and visual impacts. This supports Zhou Xiaofeng's (2006) argument that artistic methods and skills must work synergistically to achieve expressive depth. The study's analysis of works like Wei Jia's "Birdsong" and Song Guangzhi's "Seeker Series" illustrates how the interplay of different visual techniques, including overprinting, oil pencils, and ink effects, creates a multi-dimensional narrative space. However, the study also identified variability in how artists prioritize these elements, with some favoring complexity and visual density, while others opt for minimalism and subtlety. This variability underscores the flexibility and adaptability of lithograph art as a medium for personal and cultural expression.

A key contribution of this study lies in its comprehensive analysis of how thematic exploration, technical innovation, and visual language interact to shape contemporary lithograph creation. By integrating these elements, contemporary artists not only expand the boundaries of lithograph art but also contribute to its ongoing relevance in a rapidly changing artistic landscape.

Conclusions, this study demonstrates that contemporary Chinese lithograph art is marked by a dynamic interplay of innovation and tradition. While it aligns with prior research in highlighting the importance of creative methods, it also uncovers new dimensions of thematic and technical diversity, contributing to a richer understanding of this evolving art form. This balance of consistency with established theories and the introduction of novel insights provides a valuable foundation for future research and practice in lithograph art.

## New Knowledges



**Figure 1:** Exploration of Themes and Techniques in Lithograph Creation.

## Conclusions

The findings reveal several critical insights into the creative methods of lithograph art in a contemporary context: 1) The thematic exploration of contemporary lithographs demonstrates a shift from traditional depictions of social reality to more introspective and symbolic approaches. Artists now delve into individual emotions, cultural reflections, and societal critiques, utilizing abstract and metaphorical language to create works that resonate deeply with

current cultural and ethical issues. 2) The integration of traditional techniques with modern innovations highlights the transformative impact of technological advancements on lithograph art. Techniques such as oil-base scraping, oil-pencil drawing, and digital image processing allow artists to achieve greater precision, richer textures, and complex visual effects. 3) The richness of visual language in contemporary lithographs underscores the medium's capacity for emotional and conceptual expression. Artists employ diverse compositional strategies, textures, and color layering to evoke depth and narrative complexity.

## **Recommendations and Suggestions**

**1) General Recommendations:** To enhance the development of contemporary Chinese lithograph art, efforts should focus on integrating cross-cultural elements to expand the thematic depth and emotional resonance of the medium.

By drawing inspiration from diverse cultural traditions and global issues, artists can create works that are both locally rooted and universally relevant. Furthermore, the preservation and innovation of lithograph techniques are essential.

Traditional methods should be retained while integrating new materials, tools, and technologies to push the boundaries of artistic expression.

Art education institutions should adopt comprehensive approaches, balancing traditional skills with modern practices to cultivate a new generation of lithograph artists.

**2) Further Research Recommendations:** Future studies should investigate the creative practices of emerging artists, as their works often reflect innovative approaches and responses to contemporary challenges.

Exploring how digital technologies are reshaping lithograph art is another critical area, particularly in understanding how these tools can coexist with and enhance traditional techniques.

Additionally, research into cross-media and cross-cultural influences can uncover how lithographs interact with other art forms and cultural narratives, providing insights into their adaptability and relevance.

These areas of inquiry will ensure that lithograph art continues to evolve and thrive in an increasingly interconnected and technologically advanced world.



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