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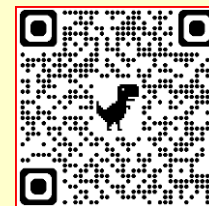
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The Formation Logic of the “Local Calling Card” of Inner Mongolia Watercolor

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ABSTRACT

The so-called “local calling card” is not the natural manifestation of a regional style, but rather a process through which regional art is refined into stable visual symbols under the combined influence of exhibitions, evaluation systems, academic training, media dissemination, and public cultural consumption. In the case of Inner Mongolia watercolor, its transformation into a “local calling card” is grounded not only in such material and cultural conditions as grassland landscapes, the climate of northern frontier regions, and multi-ethnic cultural memory, but also in the sustained promotion of specialized exhibitions, the institutional development of academic systems, the exemplary role of national-level achievements, and the repeated circulation of images within media and cultural-tourism contexts. From the perspective of art studies, this paper approaches the “local calling card” as a mechanism of visual production. It focuses on how public exhibitions conduct thematic selection, how evaluation standards shape artistic language, how academic platforms consolidate representational paradigms, and how media narratives expand symbolic visibility. While the “local calling card” of Inner Mongolia watercolor has enhanced the public visibility and academic recognizability of this regional genre, it has also given rise to such problems as thematic formulaization, stylistic conservatism, the flattening of local imagination, and the event-oriented shift of creative goals. The future development of Inner Mongolia watercolor should therefore move beyond the repetitive reproduction of established local imagery. On the basis of maintaining regional recognizability, it should further transform the “local calling card” into a mode of visual expression characterized by structural consciousness and contemporary interpretive capacity.

KEY WORDS: Inner Mongolia watercolor; local calling card; exhibition mechanism; regional art; visual communication

Introduction

In contemporary Chinese art studies, regional art is often examined within the analytical framework of “local landscape” and “cultural characteristics.” However, if such research remains confined to stylistic description, it is often insufficient to explain how a particular regional art form comes to be recognized, named, and continuously reinforced within a broader public sphere. Inner Mongolia watercolor provides a representative example. Its development has long exceeded the level of merely depicting

“grassland themes” or “pastoral life imagery,” and has gradually acquired a strong degree of public recognizability. Today, what is referred to as “Inner Mongolia watercolor” is no longer simply a geographical designation; rather, in many contexts of circulation and reception, it has in fact been constructed as a “local calling card” that is displayable and communicable.

In this paper, the term “local calling card-ization” refers to the process by which the artistic expression of a certain region is selectively distilled into a set of relatively stable visual elements and

cultural impressions through long-term exhibition and dissemination, and is repeatedly confirmed by exhibitions, media, academic institutions, and public cultural systems, eventually becoming a representative image for external communication. In the case of Inner Mongolia watercolor, this process is grounded in both concrete realities and explicit mechanisms. Inner Mongolia is characterized by expansive landforms, striking atmospheric light, multi-ethnic cultural memory, and a frontier spatial experience. These factors provide distinctive conditions for watercolor as a medium that emphasizes transparency, fluidity, and visual resonance. Yet such conditions do not automatically produce a “local calling card.” They must be filtered through exhibitions, shaped by professional evaluation, circulated through image dissemination, and sustained by institutional support before being consolidated into a recognizable representative image.

Therefore, the “local calling card-ization” of Inner Mongolia watercolor should not be understood merely as an aesthetic outcome, but rather as a comprehensive process of cultural production. Existing discussions have shown that the selective amplification generated through the interaction of exhibitions, evaluation, and media may label certain stylistic features as a “local calling card,” while at the same time compressing the space for linguistic experimentation and cross-media exploration. Meanwhile, market mechanisms and the preferences of cultural-tourism dissemination further magnify the reproducibility of certain themes and styles, causing some works to move toward “souvenirization” and “picture-postcard scenicization.” Against this background, the present paper proceeds from four dimensions: how specialized exhibitions accomplish public naming; how evaluation systems and academic platforms select and stabilize particular subjects and visual languages; how media and public cultural spaces transform such images into regional representations; and why this process, while enhancing visibility, also generates new constraints on artistic creation. This paper does not seek to deny the cultural function of the “local calling card”; rather, it aims to reveal the logic of its formation and to provide an interpretive path through which Inner Mongolia watercolor may move from being merely “recognized” to being more deeply “understood.”

I. From Regional Imagery to Public Naming: The Starting Point of the “Local Calling Card-ization” of Inner Mongolia Watercolor

The formation of the “local calling card” of Inner Mongolia watercolor did not initially take place within the studio; rather, it emerged at the level of public display. When a painting style remains scattered and unsystematic, it usually exists only as the individual practice of a limited number of artists. Only when it is named by exhibitions, presented collectively, and incorporated into systems of criticism and viewing does it begin to acquire the public identity of a “regional genre.” In the case of Inner Mongolia watercolor, this transformation can be traced through a relatively clear set of historical turning points.

In 1983, the Yela Watercolor Report Exhibition was held at the Inner Mongolia Art Museum, marking the first specialized watercolor exhibition in Inner Mongolia. In 1984, the Inner Mongolia Watercolor Research Association was established, and in the same year the First Inner Mongolia Watercolor Exhibition was organized. In 1990, the Second Inner Mongolia Watercolor Exhibition was held. The significance of these events lies not in the number of works exhibited, but in the fact that they first transformed “Inner Mongolia watercolor” from a loose aggregation of individual artistic practices into a public artistic object that was organized,

exhibited, viewed, and evaluated. In other words, the emergence of specialized exhibitions accomplished the first public naming of local watercolor art.

Such naming is productive in nature. It turns the question of “what kind of work can represent Inner Mongolia watercolor” into a concrete issue. In the past, artists were concerned primarily with the object depicted and their own individual judgment. Once their works entered specialized exhibitions, however, they had to respond to a more public mechanism of selection: which images could better embody regional characteristics, and which works were more readily identifiable as “Inner Mongolian.” In this process, works characterized by a strong sense of grassland space, an atmosphere of ethnic life, and the natural scenery of the northern frontier were more likely to occupy the center of exhibition narratives. Thus, the “local calling card-ization” of Inner Mongolia watercolor was not a meaning attached to works only after their completion; rather, it had already begun to shape creative orientation through the logic of exhibition selection and public viewing.

At the same time, the continuous holding of specialized exhibitions enabled regional imagery to accumulate. A single exhibition can only achieve a moment of public appearance; yet when such events occurred successively in 1983, 1984, and 1990, public understanding of Inner Mongolia watercolor gradually stabilized. It was no longer seen merely as local painters using watercolor to depict scenery, but as a regional artistic phenomenon possessing both group consciousness and genre consciousness. From this perspective, the true starting point of its “local calling card-ization” was not an isolated representative work, but a continuous chain of exhibitions. It was precisely through this chain that the regional imagery of Inner Mongolia watercolor accumulated and eventually sedimented into a public visual impression recognizable to society.

Therefore, the so-called local calling card did not grow directly and spontaneously out of regional nature; rather, it was concentrated, named, and externalized within the exhibition system. Without this level of public display, local experience could hardly have been elevated into a regional brand. Yet for precisely this reason, local experience, from the very beginning, carried the attributes of selection and construction.

II. From Exhibition Orientation to Linguistic Stabilization: How Evaluation Systems and Academic Institutions Select “Representative” Images of Inner Mongolia

If specialized exhibitions constituted the first step in naming the “local calling card” of Inner Mongolia watercolor, then evaluation mechanisms and academic platforms further completed its processes of selection and stabilization. Not all forms of local experience can enter the public sphere on equal terms. What is ultimately retained is often those images and visual languages that conform both to the logic of exhibition viewing and to the standards of professional evaluation.

From the perspective of exhibition review, if regional art is to gain recognition on a broader scale, it usually needs to possess both local recognizability at the level of subject matter and professional completeness at the level of form. The former determines whether a work can be immediately identified in terms of where it comes from, while the latter determines whether it can enter the system of professional evaluation. In the case of Inner Mongolia watercolor, this dual requirement has long placed such subjects as grasslands, herders, snowfields, frontier daily life, and northern landscapes in a privileged position, because these themes most readily function as

direct representations of the “Inner Mongolia experience.” At the same time, watercolor language itself is expected to demonstrate a high degree of integrity and completion. Composition, color layering, narration, and brushwork cannot rely solely on immediate sensation; they must also accord with the viewing order of the exhibition space. As a result, local subjects and stable visual language gradually come to reinforce one another.

Existing discussions have pointed out that the interaction among material conditions, climatic environment, academic training, and plein-air traditions tends to consolidate a relatively stable technical mode characterized by layered application, the combination of wet and dry methods, and a comparatively secure stylistic tendency. This point is particularly important. The “local calling card” does not operate only at the level of subject matter; it also exerts a profound effect on artistic language. Once a certain mode of painting is repeatedly proven to be effective in conveying the vastness of the grassland, in sustaining itself within the exhibition hall, and in meeting the expectations of professional reviewers, it gradually rises from individual experience to regional consensus. At that point, in order to satisfy the demand for an “effective language” required by viewing and evaluation, more uncertain and experimental forms of expression are continually compressed. The stabilization of the local calling card is therefore often accompanied by the stabilization of stylistic language; once language tends toward stability, it in turn further consolidates the outward form of the local calling card.

Academic institutions have played a decisive role in this process. The Fine Arts College of Inner Mongolia Normal University began offering watercolor courses in 1954, established a watercolor major at the end of 1994, and founded a watercolor teaching and research section in 2002, gradually forming a relatively complete curriculum system. After 2019, Inner Mongolia Arts University, relying on important creative achievements, further established a Watercolor Art Creation and Research Center and has continued to promote the development of watercolor research and creation through academic activities, faculty-and-student exhibitions, and platform construction. Academic institutions are not merely sites of instruction; in fact, they are crucial links through which local imagery and local visual language are systematized and institutionalized.

More specifically, academic training internalizes the question of “what kind of watercolor looks more like Inner Mongolia watercolor” into an everyday standard. Curriculum design, plein-air routes, model instructors, graduation project orientation, and exhibition-oriented guidance all subtly reinforce preferences for particular images and particular visual languages. In this way, the local calling card ceases to be merely the result of external recognition and instead enters the front end of artistic production. During their training, younger artists gradually come to understand which subjects are more likely to gain recognition, which methods are more likely to secure exhibition opportunities, and which regional images are more easily regarded as representative of Inner Mongolian culture. As a consequence, the local calling card shifts from an externally imposed naming to an internally conscious orientation, and eventually forms a mechanism of self-production.

Therefore, the combined effect of evaluation systems and academic institutions is to gradually filter originally fluid local experience into relatively stable regional imagery, while also narrowing originally open watercolor language into forms of expression that are more readily recognizable and transmissible. The formation of the “local calling card” of Inner Mongolia watercolor is thus not an accidental generalization; rather, it is something continuously confirmed by an

entire professional system.

III. From Representative Works to Regional Branding: How National-Level Achievements Reinforce the Public Image of “Inner Mongolia Watercolor”

For a local calling card to become fully established, local exhibitions and academic platforms alone are not sufficient. It also requires higher-level public events to complete a form of “representational certification.” In the case of Inner Mongolia watercolor, national-level exhibition awards and the demonstrative effects they generate constitute a crucial turning point in the accelerated formation of its “local calling card.”

In 2019, Jie Yuanfang’s watercolor work *Far Away* received the Gold Award of the Third China Fine Arts Award and the Gold Award of the 13th National Art Exhibition. Relevant sources regarded this achievement as a major national-level artistic breakthrough. More importantly, *Far Away* was not treated merely as an instance of individual success. It was quickly transformed into an exemplary event for regional watercolor. The work’s handling of subject matter, narrative structure, figure construction, and regional atmosphere were all interpreted within the framework of the “Inner Mongolia experience.” At the same time, the artist’s multiple roles—as professor, academic leader, and head of a research platform—enabled this achievement to be translated naturally from personal honor into symbolic capital for the regional genre as a whole.

The importance of such national-level achievements lies not only in the enhancement of visibility, but also in their capacity to recalibrate internal standards of evaluation within the region. Once a work is regarded as a landmark case of “Inner Mongolia watercolor entering the national stage,” its treatment of subject matter, pictorial scale, narrative intensity, and visual style readily become models for subsequent practitioners. A local calling card is not established solely through quantitative accumulation; it also depends upon concentrated recognition generated by high-level public events. Once a regional art form possesses a “representative work” that can be validated within the national evaluation system, its local image is rapidly compressed into a small number of successful paradigms. Thereafter, academic training, the imitation of younger artists, and media representation all tend to revolve more heavily around these already validated visual models.

It is equally noteworthy that platform construction often follows major achievements in close succession. After the 2019 award, Inner Mongolia Arts University established a Watercolor Art Creation and Research Center and related studios in 2020, and subsequently organized a series of academic activities involving watercolor artists and specialists from both within and beyond the region. What emerges here is a typical mechanism: national-level achievements do not function merely as publicity resources; they also stimulate local institutional development, which in turn expands the stylistic influence of those achievements across a broader range of artistic production. As a result, a representative work may eventually become more than a single artwork; it may come to function as a template for the production of the local calling card itself.

From the perspective of branding logic, this process signifies that “Inner Mongolia watercolor” begins to acquire a more explicit form of external recognizability. In earlier stages, local art was named primarily through geographic affiliation. After the emergence of national-level awards and representative works, however, it came to possess a more definite mode of “being seen.” External audiences no

longer approached Inner Mongolia watercolor from a position of complete unfamiliarity; rather, through a small number of highly visible works, they quickly formed judgments about what “Inner Mongolia watercolor” ought to look like. Although such judgments undoubtedly strengthen the visibility of the regional brand, they also introduce a new problem: once the local calling card becomes overly dependent on a limited number of successful paradigms, it may gradually move toward homogenization.

IV. From Academic Exhibition to Public Viewing: How Media and Cultural-Tourism Contexts Complete the Social Dissemination of the “Local Calling Card”

The establishment of a local calling card must ultimately pass through the process of social dissemination. It must not only be confirmed within the professional system, but also enter a broader public cultural space where it can be accepted by general audiences, media narratives, and cultural consumption. In recent years, the dissemination trajectory of Inner Mongolia watercolor has shown a gradual shift from academic display to public viewing.

In 2023, the First Biennale of Watercolor Painting of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region was held at the Inner Mongolia Art Museum. Public reports indicate that the exhibition emphasized both “academic value” and the recording of the spirit of the age as well as the shaping of images of the people in the new era. In related media narratives, it was also incorporated into broader regional cases of watercolor development across China. This suggests that the biennale is not merely a platform for internal regional exchange, but also functions as a mechanism for constructing a regional image for external audiences.

The significance of the biennale mechanism lies in the fact that, compared with a single exhibition, it is more capable of producing sustained brand memory. On the one hand, the biennale possesses periodicity and institutional continuity, enabling local watercolor to develop a relatively stable rhythm of presentation. On the other hand, it reinforces the impression that a certain regional genre has matured to the point where it can organize itself through the biennale format. For external audiences, the very title First Biennale of Watercolor Painting of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region is already engaged in the construction of a regional artistic brand. What it communicates is not merely that “there are many watercolor works here,” but rather that “a watercolor art system has already taken shape here—one that can be independently named and continuously operated.” This marks an important step in the transformation of the local calling card from an internal professional construct into a socially recognizable brand.

At the same time, media and public cultural spaces further translate this branded visibility into forms of touristic and everyday viewing experience. Relevant reports show that the first watercolor biennale, together with other thematic exhibitions, became one of the more widely attended exhibitions at the Inner Mongolia Art Museum, attracting both local audiences and visitors from outside the region. In this way, the exhibition entered a public setting that combined artistic appreciation with cultural experience. It is worth noting that acts of viewing at this stage were no longer confined to professional circles, but became connected with broader forms of cultural consumption, such as “understanding the artistic atmosphere of Inner Mongolia” and “experiencing the cultural depth of the region.” In other words, Inner Mongolia watercolor no longer exists only as an academic object; it has also begun to enter everyday public life as part of a regional cultural image.

Such social dissemination is, of course, productive in many respects. It expands the audience base of Inner Mongolia watercolor, increases the social visibility of the name “Inner Mongolia watercolor,” and helps regional art gain broader public attention and policy support. Yet once the local calling card enters media and cultural-tourism contexts, its logic of circulation also changes accordingly. Media tend to prefer highly recognizable and narratively accessible visual symbols, while the public is more likely to accept local imagery that is direct, vivid, and emotionally legible. As a result, those images that most readily stand for Inner Mongolia—such as vast grasslands, ethnic figures, northern frontier tonalities, and the spirit of the Mongolian horse—are repeatedly reproduced, whereas works that are less immediate, more complex, or more conceptually oriented often struggle to become central content in mass dissemination. In this sense, while the local calling card gains wider social circulation, it also tends increasingly to be simplified into a limited set of stable images.

Therefore, in the process of local calling card formation, media and cultural-tourism contexts do not function merely as simple “amplifiers”; rather, they operate as mechanisms of re-encoding. They compress the local images initially formed within professional exhibitions into cultural symbols that are more readily accessible to the public, thereby transforming Inner Mongolia watercolor from a regional artistic phenomenon into a broader sociocultural representation.

From the perspective of actual effects, the local calling card-ization of Inner Mongolia watercolor has undoubtedly generated positive outcomes. It has gradually enabled watercolor creation in the region to move beyond the condition of being “local yet invisible,” forming a relatively strong degree of public recognizability. It has promoted the construction of academic and institutional platforms, the holding of regional biennales, and the outward circulation of representative works, and has also enhanced the presence of this regional genre within the national map of watercolor art. For frontier art that has long existed outside dominant artistic narratives, this condition of “being seen” is itself an important achievement.

It must be noted, however, that local calling card-ization is not merely a mechanism of gain; it is also a mechanism of restriction. Existing discussions have already made clear that market dynamics and cultural-tourism preferences amplify the reproducibility of subjects and styles, causing artistic production to move toward “souvenirization” and “picture-postcard scenicization.” At the same time, the selective amplification generated by exhibitions, evaluation, and media can label certain stylistic features as a “local calling card,” thereby further compressing the space for linguistic experimentation and cross-media exploration. In other words, once the local calling card is formed, it may shift from being a resource for regional recognition to becoming a preset framework for artistic creation.

Thus, for Inner Mongolia watercolor, what truly deserves vigilance is not “local calling card-ization” itself, but the tendency for the local calling card to be overly naturalized, or even mistaken for the entirety of regional art. The local calling card may serve as an entry point into public space, but it should not become the final horizon of regional artistic development. It can help regional art achieve rapid recognizability, but it cannot substitute for deeper observation of reality, further exploration of the medium, or richer forms of spiritual expression.

Conclusion

The formation of the “local calling card” of Inner Mongolia

watercolor is not a process that grows naturally and spontaneously out of regional culture. Rather, it is a process of visual production jointly shaped by exhibition naming, evaluation-based selection, academic training, representative-work certification, media dissemination, and public viewing. The Yela Watercolor Report Exhibition in 1983, the first watercolor exhibition and the establishment of the research association in 1984, and the second watercolor exhibition in 1990 enabled Inner Mongolia watercolor to move from scattered artistic practice toward public naming. The professional structures and research platforms established by Inner Mongolia Normal University and Inner Mongolia Arts University further institutionalized this naming process. The emergence of nationally recognized representative works and the biennale mechanism subsequently reinforced the public image of “Inner Mongolia watercolor” as a regional brand.

From a positive perspective, this process has enhanced both the academic recognizability and the social visibility of Inner Mongolia watercolor, giving it a clearer place within the broader landscape of contemporary Chinese watercolor. From a critical perspective, however, it has also carried the risk of thematic labeling, stylistic conservatism, and the flattening of local imagination. This suggests that the local calling card is not the ultimate goal of regional artistic development, but rather a provisional form through which regional art enters public cultural space. A mature regional art should not be satisfied merely with enabling viewers to “recognize it at a glance as Inner Mongolia.” More importantly, it must continue to ask how it can renew this local visual image through more complex lived experience, a more open understanding of the medium, and a stronger sense of artistic subjectivity.

For the future of Inner Mongolia watercolor, the more meaningful task may not be to abandon the local calling card, but to increase its internal density. That is to say, “Inner Mongolia watercolor” should no longer remain a surface combination of grassland scenery, ethnic customs, and northern frontier tonalities; instead, it should become a regional visual language capable of carrying composite landforms, contemporary life, historical memory, and spiritual structure. Only when the local calling card no longer remains merely a symbol for external display, but is transformed into an artistic method capable of sustained growth, can Inner Mongolia watercolor truly move from being merely “recognized” to being more deeply “understood.”

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