

The spirituality of Rothko's paintings and its extension

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Abstract: After World War II, the center of world art shifted from Europe to the United States. As an important modern art school in the United States, Abstract Expressionism is divided into "action painting" and "color field painting". Mark Rothko is one of the representatives of "color field painting". This article explores the evolution and characteristics of Rothko's paintings. He emphasized that artists should express the most basic human emotions, tragic fate and transcendent experiences. These are the core ideas of color field painting. Abstract forms best convey these spiritual meanings, and the works convey spiritual and religious experiences to the viewer. Rothko believed that the participation of the viewer completes the meaning of the work. This article is divided into four parts: first, sorting out the connection and distinction between color field painting and abstract expressionism; second, analyzing the characteristics of Rothko's transformation period; third, analyzing the characteristic elements and concepts of Rothko's color field painting; fourth, exploring its influence in China development and application. In short, Rothko's color field paintings have become a typical abstract artistic expression with a spiritual core. The reasons and driving forces need to be examined from the perspective of contemporary visual culture theory.

Keywords: Abstract Expressionism; Color Field Painting; Spirituality; Theater; Ritual

1. The emergence of American abstract expressionism

After World War II, the United States promoted New York to become the world's art center through cultural strategies. Since the 1930s, influenced by modernism, the field of American painting was first exposed to geometric abstraction. During World War II, a large number of European artists immigrated to the United States, further affecting the local art environment. Abstract Expressionism continued to focus on the "unconscious". For example, Gorky, Pollock, Rothko and Motherwell re-evaluated Surrealism in 1941-1942 and began to experiment with activism to express universal symbols of the human mind. Dadaist action and performance art provided the practical basis for Abstract Expressionism.

2. The continuation and difference between color field painting and abstract expressionism

Art history usually divides abstract expressionism into two categories: action painters represented by Jackson Pollock, including Willem de Kooning and Adolf Gottlieb; and the other type who create with large color fields or abstract elements Painters such as Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Clifford Still. The former focuses on the sporadic effects of body movement, while the latter focuses on painting colors and emotional energy.

In the mid-1940s, under the influence of John Miro and Gorky, Rothko began to utilize the free flow of watercolor paints in his creations, gradually developing a deeper understanding of the materiality of painting materials and the temporality of the painting act itself, and at the same time, the spiritual demand for painting expression has become increasingly prominent. American art critic Harold Rosenberg said that Rothko tried to achieve the ultimate symbol. Rothko inherited Kandinsky's concept in "On the Spirit of Art": painting should be internalized into the pure composition of the picture itself, establishing a connection between painting symbols and spirit. In the concepts of Rothko and Kandinsky, a very important point that continues the exploration of abstract art since modern times is the development of emotion and spiritual aspects. They both affirmed to varying degrees that creation originates from the

perception of the soul, and it can also "purposefully agitate the human soul." [1] These two artists are theoretically. There is no clear analysis of the philosophical issues regarding the origin of the world and artistic activities, but it must be admitted that both believe that artists have the ability to use art as a spiritual activity to express emotions and thoughts, and to inspire 'spiritual agitation' activities around them, enabling them to recognize and appreciate art's own value.

3. Mark Rothko as an Exception among Abstract Expressionists

3.1 Mark Rothko beyond Greenberg's vision

Mark Rothko developed his concepts in the context of color field painting, but they were less frequently seen in collective Abstract Expressionist exhibitions. Greenberg paid far less attention to Rothko than Pollock, and did not explain his spiritual pursuits, but insisted on the aesthetic concept of Cubism. In recent years, Rothko's works have repeatedly set records in the auction market, and contemporary interpretations of his art have become increasingly rich. Greenberg viewed Abstract Expressionism as an elite cultural avant-garde but did not discuss its absorption of ancient art. In 2004, Yale University published "The Artist's Reality" compiled by Christopher Rothko, which showcases Rothko's research on mythology and literature, as well as his thoughts on philosophy. Rothko's curiosity for philosophy and mysticism drove him to gradually explore the spirit of painting. There is no doubt that Rothko's repeated emphasis on emotion and tragic spirit is an important symbol of his representativeness among abstract expressionist painters. Rothko's tragic spiritual creation stems from his thoughts and feelings as a new immigrant, especially the influence of the Cossacks' terrorist activities on the Jews. After immigrating to the United States in 1913, Rothko was influenced by Surrealism in his creations. At the same time, the identity issues brought about made Rothko pay more attention to the inner thinking of modern people. Rothko and Newman once issued a declaration, saying that they were concerned with "original myths and symbols that still have meaning today, and in all this, only the tragic and the eternal have meaning." In this sense, the emphasis on coloring Domain painting has a spiritually inherited kinship with primitive and ancient art. His later works, such as the Rothko Chapel, gradually became darker and darker, reflecting his persistence in tragic concepts. The key to interpreting Rothko's art lies in the spiritual connotation of his paintings.

3.2 Rothko's Transformation in the 1950s and 1960s

The 1950s and 1960s were the era when large-format abstract paintings by Rothko and others emerged. It was also the era when color field painting clearly separated from abstract expressionism. Rothko's painting concepts were further determined and accepted. Three commissions were awarded to create murals for specific architectural spaces. Starting with the Seagram Building restaurant project, Rothko began searching for permanent installation sites, creating interconnected series of works, and carefully arranging the relationships and context of the works in the installation. Rothko wanted the exhibition space to be entirely his own, and even envisioned building chapel-like venues across the country where audiences could view his works in a dimly lit environment, creating a cinema-like atmosphere.

The Rothko Chapel paintings from 1964 to 1967 are the perfect representation of his ideas. He designed 14 murals for small churches in Houston, which he requested to be open to groups from different religious denominations. Rothko conducted rigorous experiments and arrangements, from adjusting the reflected light from the ceiling or floor to controlling the relative position of the paintings within the space. All the designs and arrangements based on art and the environment are jointly constructed into a complete work. The result is that Rothko has indeed created a sense of closed space, combining the work and the environment into a complete whole, integrating the thoughts in the entire atmosphere. The collection of experiences and feelings achieves a near-absolute viewing ideal.

4. The spiritual core of Mark Rothko's color field paintings

4.1 Large-format color philosophy and the time dimension of painting

The two key elements of color field abstraction are "color patches" and "colors". Compared with the attention of abstract expressionist painters such as Pollock on the traces of action on the canvas, color field abstraction pays more attention to the effect of color on the viewer's retina. Color here is not a

symbol, but condensed into a "de-themed" abstract spirit. The carrying range of large format exaggerates the expressive power of color and extends it to the invisible spiritual world, providing a vast autonomous space for color and emotional expression, and pursuing a de-themed abstract spirit. The large format exaggerates the expressive power of color and provides a broad space for emotional expression. The importance of size also enhances the sublime feeling of the work. Rothko believed that "the concept of size involves the relationship between the object and its surroundings, as well as the physical object or space it emphasizes, and it will inevitably involve the emotion of space" [2].

After 1947, Rothko, Still and Newman began to use color in large areas to enhance visual impact and eliminate all images and symbols, weakening the effect of brushstrokes, creating unified areas through color area adjustment, and forming conflicts and conflicts with similar color intensity. Dialogue, abandon the relationship between light and dark. Rothko rejected traditional rules in the use of color, using counter-tones and incongruous color juxtapositions to emphasize the role of color and shape in helping people understand the essence of things and accept emotions. As Greenberg said, the most radical phenomenon among abstract expressionism is the abandonment of the illusion of spatial volume caused by the contrast between light and dark in the basic design of painting [3].

In an interview with "The Power of Art", Rothko said that he painted large paintings to penetrate into his heart and humanity, while painting small paintings placed himself outside experience. Facing the huge painting, the audience seems to be immersed in the scene and not under control. Rothko repeatedly used the staining technique to introduce the dimension of time into the work in the process of making paintings. The rich color components formed by multiple layers of superimposed colors and the repeated wiping and twisting of the brush are composed of episodic intuition within the range of line time. They constitute the inspiration and spiritual core of the work. The easel painting emphasizes the time dimension of the production process itself, as if to create an organism that can breathe and grow.

4.2 Ritualized Painting and Dramatic Mysticism

Art creation and appreciation all share a basic human emotion, which is like a religious experience and can be summarized as a sense of divine self-existence. Color field painting, which has experienced the same thinking experience as action painting, puts more emphasis on pushing the audience into the artist's painting experience, allowing the audience to feel a ritualized psychological process, especially those with religious emotions. Psychological process, introduce this psychological process into the environment of display painting, form a dialogue through participation, and move from the ritualized painting process to the ritualized viewing.

Rothko emphasized that painting is not only a representation of experience, but also experience itself. In 1947, he published an article in "Possibility" magazine, stating that in order for art to reveal "transcendental experience", it must abandon familiar images, concepts and forms. He sees his work as a drama, with the shapes in the painting as actors, emphasizing a sense of ritual that transcends reality.

Rothko wrote in his notes that he liked objects and dreams, but he did not agree with abstract artists denying the existence of real matter, and believed that art is a spiritual activity that embodies different aspects of life. He compared artistic creation to drama, in which a sense of ritual constitutes drama, while drama is a characteristic of mysticism. He once used the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac in "Fear and Trembling" as a metaphor for the role of the artist, emphasizing that the artist's actions can become universal standards and reflect his unique sacrifice and dedication [4].

5. The extension of color field painting and contemporary Chinese abstract painting

5.1 From "de-imagery" to life form

Rothko's use of large format not only captures the viewer, but also cuts ties with the figurative things of the real world. He avoids clear images and even suppresses recognizable shapes by changing the direction of the canvas, creating a complex struggle between personal will and subconsciousness. In "The Inspired Romantic Painter", Rothko advocated giving up specific images, transcending the things themselves, and achieving visual intuition and painterly self-discipline.

After the 1950s, Rothko completely abandoned concrete images and often used rectangular color block structures, such as "Red No. 5" in 1961. By erasing the edges of the rectangle, he blurs space and depth, creating a gentle conflict of visual expressions of color fields. This conflict exploits the

mechanisms of visual perception to generate a pulsating rhythm that transcends the canvas and into environment and space. For example, the edges of the red color blocks in the work expand irregularly, forming an organic middle zone that is full of dynamics, transcends symbolic language description, and creates a meditative state. Color variations within a single tone create a dialogue with the viewer.

Chinese abstract painting often causes people to misunderstand abstract painting both theoretically and temporally. Some people also look for an outlet from the theory of traditional Chinese painting. However, contemporary abstract painting, as an expression of modernist thought, is still the product of concept first. During the period of growth of abstract art since the reform and opening up in the 1980s, Chinese abstract art was still imitating composition and form, while the exploration of independent abstract painting theory was indeed seeking explanations in the vertical time and broad global perspective. A more iconic change is the rise of experimental ink painting. After Wang Nanming proposed the concept of "post-abstraction", in the perspective of Chinese abstract art, a kind of conceptual abstract creation that transcends the superficialization of abstract forms has become a mainstream exploration. In other words, it is to consciously further develop the meaning behind "formal autonomy", abandon the superficial imitation of form, and instead use concepts to construct an autonomous space for abstract art behind the form.

5.2 From ritual to performance and continuity

After the 1950s, Rothko continued to simplify the shapes of the paintings, forming paintings composed of large floating rectangles of color, showing the visual changing effect of pure colors, abandoning the central theme and symbolic language. His exploration moves towards the space-time category of postmodernism, emphasizing the "theatricality" of viewing experience. This artistic value lies in the viewer's personal experience. The core of Rothko's concept is to create a theater of performance, so that abstract art can transcend the museum exhibition hall model, overlap and accumulate with human perception, and produce constantly flowing and changing results.

The "Thousand Layers of Ink" series by Yang Jiechang, a Chinese-born artist living in France, explores the characteristics of "ink". It is similar to Rothko's scientific and technological method and makes a unique exploration of traditional brush and ink. Chinese artist Wang Guangle's work "Untitled 121101" uses layers of colors to create a similar effect to Rothko's painting, but at its core is the exploration of time and concepts. Wang Guangle's works integrate time dimensions and procedures, giving creations a four-dimensional space and a sense of ritual, inheriting and developing the spiritual core of color field painting. Through his persistent expression of time, Wang Guangle combines coffins, human life, and repeatedly polished lacquer techniques to create a unique artistic effect, which reflects the Chinese artist's preference for concepts and inheritance of the spirit of color field painting.

6. Conclusion

Rothko developed an independent concept and way of thinking through color field painting in the context of American Abstract Expressionism. His focus on the exploration of time, ritual, theater and spirituality has made his art more explicit and given the dimension of time to easel painting, innovating the way painting relates to the audience. In the context of highly marketized art, the "Slow Art" trend has gradually expanded its influence. After the rapid consumption of the consumer era, re-examining Rothko's artistic expression form through contemporary visual culture theory reveals the spiritual essence of art more deeply and inspires changes in contemporary creation.

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