

The Symbolic Meaning and Interpretation of Cubist Painting

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Abstract: *Cubism has been born for more than 100 years, but its meaning is still unknown to a large number of audiences. Compared with the direct and clear meaning of traditional painting, cubist works require the audience to enter the same symbolic discourse system as the artist. In our dialogue with the works, we can realize our own limitations and thus have the opportunity to enter into new aesthetic experience. This paper is mainly around cubism painting symbols for analysis.*

Keywords: *Cubism; Symbols; Interpretation*

1. Introduction

Modernism established the symbolic art road, cubism is the most typical representative. But cubism was not understood by most people from the beginning. Cubist paintings shook the foundations and principles of western painting more thoroughly, thus embarked on the road of symbolization. Compared with the direct and clear meaning of traditional paintings, cubist works require the audience to enter the same symbolic discourse system as the artist to interpret its meaning.

2. Symbolic Cubist Works

In 1908, Georges Braque's solo exhibition gave rise to the term cubism. In the beginning, cubism was a meaningless term, which used to disparage work published in humor magazines. Cubism had two groups of artists, one of which was the painters who exhibited in the major Paris salons, such as Le Fauconnier, Gleizes and Metzinger. The more influential artists were another group of gallery cubists, known as Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso. From their works, we can clearly see the process of cubism moving towards symbolization.

In the early stage of cubism, Braque and Picasso devoted themselves to the study of how Cezanne summarized and shaped complex natural objects with simple geometric forms, focusing on solving the problem of form, and achieved some breakthroughs. Braque's "Estack's house" (Figure 1) is more geometric than Cezanne's, and objects have lost all the details, texture and attributes of things. Against the serious tone, it looks silent and solemn. Light and shade are still used to shape objects in the picture, but we cannot find the direction of the light source. Light and shade only appear to shape objects. The artist considers the arrangement of light and shade from the form, while subjectively ignoring the rationality of reality. He is no longer a single point of view. By using multiple points of view, the artist can arrange things more subjectively to achieve a two-dimensional effect. Picasso's "Woman and Pear" (Figure 2) was guided by the structure of the body and the intuition accumulated by the artist for many years. Similarly, in a geometric way, the object was decomposed into large and small pieces, and these pieces were reassembled into a figure with sharp edges, exaggerated and deformed, but full of sculptural meaning. This is a process of artistic transformation, in which Picasso gave full play to Cezanne's geometric modeling theory in a unique symbolic way.

In the stage of analytical cubism, Braque and Picasso paid more attention to the structure of painting itself than to the appearance of objective objects. The objects in the picture are broken and reassembled, and their shapes are like pieces of pieces stacked on each other in the space of the picture, which is both flat and thick. The integrity of the object is broken down and its recognizability is repeatedly weakened. In Picasso's works at this stage, the models were first thoroughly deconstructed, and then, under the guidance of the internal structure of the picture, the fragments, large and small, were reassembled and reassembled. The three-dimensional depth of the work was removed to create a relief like shallow space. In this process, the artist deconstructs the image subjectively and seeks, explores and grasps the internal

structure of the work by juxtaposing and deconstructing the geometric fragments.



Figure 1: Braque, Estack's house, 1908



Figure 2: Picasso, Woman and Pear, 1909

In the process of deconstruction and recombination of things, Braque and Picasso explored the characters at the same time. In "Still Life with Pipe and Newspaper" (Figure 3), painted in 1909, the artist wrote the letters "GILB" on the newspaper. When the audience notices these characters and symbols, influenced by their reading habits, they will unconsciously interpret their meanings and associate these details provided by the artist with the picture. Text symbols in cubist works, like directional markers, can guide the viewer out of the maze of abstract structures and make the meaning of the work return to the level of realism to a certain extent.



Figure 3: Braque, Still Life with Pipe and Newspaper, 1909

This opens the way for cubism to be symbolized. Cubist works are no longer straightforward expressions of meaning, but events connected by a series of meaningful symbols. As the most familiar symbols in People's Daily life, text symbols can arouse the audience's deep understanding, arouse the

audience's more association with the work, and form a complete image of the events in the work. The picture itself is no longer a single pointing meaning, and each painting symbol in the picture contains different time, space, perspective and event.

Cubist titles undermine literariness as much as their content. It does not directly present the meaning to the audience, but hopes the audience to know its meaning just like reading symbols, and then further think about what meaning it wants to express according to its meaning direction. For example, Picasso's *Maid of Avignon*, which is said to have been titled *The Reward of Sin*, was associated with the epidemic of venereal diseases at the time. In its original sketch, a man can be seen holding a skeleton in one hand. When the title is changed to "Avignon girl", the audience will think about what "Avignon" is and what direction the girl has to interpret it. The literary description of the title also reduces the impact of the title on the interpretation of the content, which leaves more room for interpretation for the audience.

The characters in Picasso's "*Maid of Avignon*" are like broken mirrors. A complete mirror presents a coherent and unified object, while each fragment of a broken mirror can map a relatively complete object, but not completely complete. Each fragment has something to say, and the same content is repeated by different fragments. In *The Maidens of Avignon*, the first woman on the left uses a profile commonly used in Renaissance portraits. The pose of the second female body from left to right is the classic pose of the female body in classical painting. The third woman from left to right looks like a bath girl from Cezanne. The two women's faces on the far right are African masks, products of popular culture far from Picasso's time. The picture from left to right is a metaphor for the development of painting from ancient times to today, showing not only the change of form, but also the change of content and culture.

In addition, in the symbolic process of cubism, these works are abstract compared with classical works, but it still retains some traces of reality, and this is what distinguishes Cubism from later abstract art. Abstract and symbolized things are still directed in cubism. In cubist modeling techniques, artists have never crossed this bottom line.

3. Interpretation of Cubist Painting Symbols

The symbolization of painting refers to the beginning of the interpretation of meaning when the painting "obtains the meaning beyond its individual existence as something in itself and for itself".^[1] Painting symbols are the mapping of objects, which is the symbolic process of the real world. Through the constant replacement of reality, painting symbols are created one by one. Mature symbolized cubism works solved many problems in the early works, such as complanation, multi-perspective perspective, the law of painting's own development and so on, which affected the 20th century modernism painting. In Picasso's mature cubist works, things in the picture are geometrically abstracted, but they still retain certain realistic traces, so that the audience can identify them. The geometric symbols in the picture are not simply pieced together, but make the picture reach a balanced state in form from the angles of density and weight. Cubist artists have become very adept at using these formal elements to organize their images.

We can see that cubist painting is non-objective and abstract, composed of point, line, surface, color, structure and other formal elements. Each painting symbol in the work has its own information, and sometimes there are cross contents between the information. The meaning of the work is not the accumulation of each symbol meaning, but the organic combination. The meaning of its painting symbols is vague and indescribable. On the one hand, the symbolic language used by artists is a vague language. In the process of creation, artists abstract out the essence of things and form painting symbols based on their own aesthetics. On the other hand, under the social background of modernism, it is difficult for people to form a unified understanding of the same object.

Therefore, in the face of modernist paintings, people cannot passively receive information, but have to combine their own personality interpretation. German hermeneutic scholar Hans-Georg Gadamer believes in Art and Imitation that the symbolization of modernist painting is the use of signs and symbolic language.^[2] Symbols provide a platform for judging the artistry of a work. In other words, painting is regarded as a sign language, so that artists and audiences can enter the same symbol and sign language system, and the audience can understand the painting symbols and understand their significance.

Cubist art works express symbols with abstract meaning. In order to express such abstract meaning, artists can only use abstract sign language. Because of the symbol system, different artists and artists and audiences form a language for communication. These artistic symbols are certainly different from literal symbols, but there is still a correspondence here. In cubist abstract painting signs, painting language, like shorthand, completes the form of signs. Such symbolization as shorthand means some abandonment of

meaning. Cubist painting language increasingly tends to abandon the comprehensibility of art and becomes a symbol that only a few people can understand.

If we judge works with different systems of discourse, we will see different aspects of the same painting. When we try to interpret the painting symbols in cubist paintings by reading texts, we will find that these works no longer regard painting as a mirror of reality, but as events recorded or arranged in the way of painting symbols, which can only be combined with each other after being understood and interpreted.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, from the perspective of modern hermeneutics, symbolized cubist works themselves contain a kind of power, which makes the audience attracted by the work when they watch it, and makes the audience want to unearth its meaning and gradually interpret its meaning through the form of painting symbols. The dialogue between the painting symbol and the audience expresses the stipulation of the world for us. It is because of this stipulation that we realize our own limitation and make it possible for us to open up to new aesthetic experience. Art exists in the experience of a work of art and in its meaning to the audience.

References

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