

Background of Western Modern Art in the 20th Century

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ABSTRACT: In the 20th century, many major events were represented by the two world wars. They not only changed people's living environment, but also affected people's mental state. In the field of arts, modern industrial science and technology have opened up the expressive techniques of arts. War trauma has affected the creative mood of artists, and the inheritance of art value from the previous generation have also profoundly affected the inner spirit of arts. From the perspective of social and cultural contexts, the analysis of the time motivation of the development of western modern art in the 20th century can further understand its influence on art expression techniques, and also assist people better understand the connotation of art works, and better appreciate art works.

1. Introduction

With the development of society, it is not difficult to see a trend which is the change between non-realism and realism (Honour & Fleming, 2005) [1]. Moreover, the field of art has gradually shown many genres characterized by non-likeness. Therefore, many schools of western modern art in the 20th century also reflect this characteristic. For instance, grotesque, abstract, exaggerated, obscure and anti-traditional have become the main impression of most citizens on modern art from different countries in the world. However, artists would pay more attention to personal subjective feelings than the "normal" people when they are working on their artwork, and tend to be more extreme in artistic expression, making their works difficult to understand. I think this is not surprising for me. Because in this period, people have experienced world wars, the new development of industry, science and technology and so on. Also, the communication between different countries had increased to some extent and the artists had started their new adventure of exploring art in different aspects.

Art itself is a metaphor for the world, and its existence means that the world is metaphorized. The recent history and culture of mankind are full of cracks, especially the people at the bottom in the industrial revolution, the two world wars, the Nazi Holocaust, colonialism, racism, terrorism and other events and struggles, and they are in particular in hardship and suffering. Therefore, in art creation, the metaphorical meaning of images is more valued by the art world. When looking at the metaphorical expression behind the paintings, we should not only appreciate the intuitive experience conveyed by the surface, but also explore the deeper, rational and hidden philosophical thoughts through the surface.

2. The development of the techniques of modern industrial science and technology to the artistic expression

The modern industry has affected the techniques of art expression and made it proceed faster than before. The development of science and technology has broadened the artists' sight of understanding the world. Hence, they begun to create a kind of new expression of art. At the same time, the fast pace of life which is brought about by industrialization has increased people's sense of tension and made people no longer satisfied with the traditional forms of artistic expression.

In the 20th century, human beings have created more scientific and technological achievements. The development of numerous materials, the exploration of optics and the development of machinery have enriched the expression techniques of art, and artists have boldly used all kinds of new materials. Take an example in the *Art of the Twentieth Century* by Harrison (2004) "*The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors*" which is created in 1915-1923 by Marcel Duchamp [2]. He used to show that he wanted to get away from the physical aspect of painting, so he created this masterpiece. And this must be one of the most important showcases of the creation of industrial infection in the history of art.

In addition, Russian Constructivism is the result of the innovative use of modern materials in the field of fine arts (Wang, 2011) [3]. They used steel wire, glass and other materials to make collages, to show the achievements of modern industrial science and technology which have non-traditional abstract concepts. So, they are also called artistic engineers (Gough, 2005) [4]. In Dadaism, the use of new materials is often reflected. The artwork I have mentioned above also can show this characteristic.

Furthermore, advances in industrial technology and

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science have greatly reduced the artists' attention to religious themes. As a result of the abandonment of traditional religion, the individual's search for self-worth became the God of their faith. The inability to locate personal values and the confusion of self-knowledge made art a substitute for faith in its role of spiritual salvation for life. Regarding the spiritual expression of modern art, Motherwell (2007) argues that the social condition of the modern world has given form to every experience, which is a spiritual collapse following technological progress and the collapse of religion [5]. This condition has led to the isolation of the artist from society. The social history of the modern artist is a spiritual existence in a world that loves wealth. He also expresses the true expression of modern art history to modern emotions, each artist needs his or her own religious faith, a faith that cannot be replaced by a view of reality, and the artists themselves are all guardians of the spiritual world. Rothko's connection between abstract forms and spirituality is often strongly mystical. If ancient forms bear a resemblance to our symbols, it is not that we are deliberately trying to imitate them, but that we are trying to express the same state of consciousness and its relationship to the world. If previous abstract art was a scientific and objective expression of the times we live in, then our art is a search for an image that is a metaphor for a more complex, inner self, and a new vision and consciousness. Rothko has always denied that he is an abstract painter; he calls himself a myth-maker, which is inseparable from Rothko's Jewish identity. Disliking concrete imagery and the radical style of Western painting, the Jews' quest for the ultimate and their connection in the field of art has a strange and profound spiritual significance.

Through abstract expressionism, art can only contribute to society if it becomes an alternative to religion. Other forms of communication could not achieve this. In the introduction to the 1947 exhibition *Imaginary Word Paintings*, Newman's on the discovery that the Kwakiutl artists used abstract shapes to paint on animal skins, and that the shapes depicted were a living thing, a vehicle for abstract thought complexes (Schreyach, 2022)[6]. The purely stylistic language of the Kwakiutl was guided by a ritual will toward a metaphysical understanding. The suggestion of the essence produced by this abstract form is a real, not a pseudo-scientific illusion. Thus, Newman identifies the basis of aesthetic activity as the pure idea, an idea that is complex, linked to the mystery of life, of man, of nature, to the hard, black chaos of death, and to the gray, soft chaos of tragedy. For only the pure idea has meaning; everything else is just everything else. Americans evoke their world of emotion and fantasy through a personal language that has no shape of self-knowledge. It is an act of metaphysics. Led by European abstract painters, we enter their spiritual worlds through self-knowing images, which is an act of transcendence.

The development of society and technology after World War II promoted further economic and cultural renewal, and the development and success of Abstract Expressionism, as a typical representative of American culture, has become an important element for historians to

study the economic and cultural development of the United States after World War II. Abstract Expressionist thought had a great influence on the resistance to the bourgeois theory of worship and the idea of commercial interests to obtain individual inner freedom and democracy. As Talebi (2020) states, the rise of abstract expressionism is thought to correspond highly culturally to the overall military, economic, and technological rise of the United States in the post-World War II western world [7]. Abstract Expressionism, with its maturing artistic thought and great achievements in creative practice, won the recognition of mainstream American society, and their works were invited by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York's Museum of Modern Art, and the Whitney Museum of Modern Art, the highest cultural and artistic institutions in the United States, to hold exhibitions and collect their works.

Abstract Expressionism has become the most representative American art school. First of all, Abstract Expressionism, representing the American avant-garde, became a classic of the future development of American art, successfully defeating the traditional American realism and the trend of returning to vernacular art. Although located in the elite class, its audience was also expanding, and the idea of finding oneself and discovering one's own self-consciousness of subjectivity also became the belief of self-redemption for the new era American people to overcome the fear psychology brought by the bourgeois technological development. Secondly, the powerful and unique artistic expression of Abstract Expressionism was a great success in the exhibitions in Europe, and the economic and cultural arts in Europe were affected by World War II, which shifted the center of culture and art to the United States. The United States got rid of the long-term domination of European culture over it, won the right to express freely, and became the new hegemon of world culture, opening the outstanding American art era in the 20th century.

While searching for the spiritual world of the inner self, the artist expresses it through the visible form of art. Its expression is a tension between the artist's personal values against the contradictory values of interests in the bourgeois industrial development, a struggle and release of confusion, anxiety, confusion, anger, loss and pain in the heart. Traditional reproduction art can be expressed through the imitation of the real world, where the artist translates the subjectified spirit into the object form of the real world. Reality is visible, and the forms of natural objects are readily available, so art can be used to give reality a storytelling and three-dimensional illusion for empathy purposes. But most works of art express forms that are static and immobile. Due to the advancement of capitalist technology, the invention of the camera replaced the imitation of reality, bringing the realist style to the end of art. But the new problem was that the intuitionist to expressionist portrayal of the emotion of life was to express the vitality and fluidity of life, and therefore the abstract form of modernist painting was required to express the stretches of time through form. How the Expressionists gradually abandoned the depiction of nature to express the temporality of life through the formal

elements of color, line and form. Matisse and Kandinsky, for example, including the formal symbols of Surrealism, all expressed the way in which artists unconsciously and freely created form. Kandinsky's production of form paralleled the development of music, which he called the structure of melody.

3. War trauma and the artist's creative mood

The development of trauma theory has expanded and extended from the physical dimension to the psychological dimension and then to the social dimension. In the contemporary academic discourse system, trauma has both mental and physical characteristics. A special variant of trauma is war trauma, and the collective trauma caused by war is another core issue of concern for 20th century artists. The traumatic places they wrote about are extensions of memory, and as the places where war trauma is carried, individual and collective memories overlap and intertwine, telling memories that cannot be forgotten. War trauma, for the first time during the First World War, was medically diagnosed and treated as an epidemic symptom of male hysteria.

The war trauma affected the psychological state of most of the artists who lived in that environment negatively. There is no doubt that both world wars played an important role in this matter. During the Second World War, Europe was extensively damaged. The persecution of some artists by the Nazis and the criticism of modernist art by the Soviet Union led to the concentration of art groups, especially the research groups of art theory in the United States. Abstract expressionism is an art movement that emerged in the United States after World War II (McCloskey, 2005) [8]. Artists who lived in that time experienced a serious crisis of faith after World War II, and then began to be irrational and unconscious. This feature also presents in many other European countries. One of the most famous artists, Pablo Picasso, the representative of Cubism, created the famous "*Guernica*" after being bombed in a Spanish town. This work is mainly in black, white and gray, and uses abstract and exaggerated methods to show the people and animals in the town during the war. The black, white and gray tones are used as the background directly feeling the dark and depressive atmosphere of the war. What is more, the masterpiece "*The Tress Dancers*" which is created in 1925 is also negative either. It reveals that the world war has destroyed people's living environment, and depressed the mood of artists in this environment. Meanwhile, this has become an important source and trigger of artistic creation.

This kind of negative emotions make the expression methods of art works exaggerated, deformed, abstract and absurd, and contain profound connotations that are difficult to possess in the peace time. As a consequence, the state of the characters in the art work is a conveyance of mental damage, revealing the scars left on the psyche by the memory of the war. This trauma is externalized from the psyche into physical manifestations, a direct impact of the brutal battlefield on the human flesh and psyche. Therefore, through the portrayal of the mental

state of the combatants, the cruelty of war can be reflected, and the physical and mental trauma brought by war can be metaphorically reflected.

4. The inheritance and influence of the art values of the previous generation

Renaissance painting, Baroque painting and nineteenth-century painting are the three major peaks in the history of world art before the twentieth century (Craven, 1979) [9]. Compared with the first two peaks, nineteenth-century painting embodies the transition from traditional to modern forms, with a variety of genres and styles, experiencing neoclassicism, romanticism, realism, impressionism, symbolism, post-impressionism and other stages, becoming the historical source of modernist painting in the twentieth century. The nineteenth-century French-centered art movement can be called the third climax of European art development.

Regarding inheritance and influence of previous generations of art values. In the 19th century, there was a famous genre called post-impressionism. Artists of this genre had several different styles. The three representatives of the genre respectively derived three new genres with great influence in the 20th century. Cézanne pays attention to the volume, harmony and stability of objects and the performance of the internal structure. He believes that depth is more crucial than the plane, and he has created a lot of still-life works to explore this concept. As suggested by Barr (2019), although he claimed that he was studying the classicism of the past, and his ideas became one of the driving forces for the birth of cubist art in the 20th century [10]. The representative of this must be the famous artist Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin and they always pay attention to the expression of color and subjective feelings. About the latter one, he used a lot of pure colors in his artwork with strong decorative and philosophical nature, couples of his interest in primitive social themes. Hence, his works are full of primitive wildness.

Van Gogh's vision and expression deeply influenced twentieth-century art, especially Fauvism and Expressionism. According to Birren (1979), as a representative of post-impressionism, Van Gogh's style is similar to Gauguin, but the former's most common use is not a coherent solid color, but a non-coherent brushwork similar to neo-impressionism [11]. In his works, we can often see the use of warm colors, giving people a warm and unrestrained vitality, but also a strong emotional color. This technique continued into expressionism in the 20th century. The representative painter Munch of expressionism presents an absurd and intense sense of picture through exaggerated and distorted colors in the famous abstract style work "*The Scream*", which embodies the human inner spirit and has a strong impact. The "*Self-pictorial with Bandage ear and pipe*" is very similar to Gauguin's style of work.

5. Conclusion

As an important cultural form, the development of art is inseparable from the social context and the environment and complementary to the development of other fields. It can be foreseen that with the development of various fields, the art of expression will become richer and richer.

Based on the examples and analysis above, environment affects art, and art assists people to decorate the environment. It can be seen that the research process of art history cannot be separated from the textual research of the environment and the exploration of the artist's mood. At the same time, this connected vision is of great significance to the creation of artists, and also helps people better understand the connotation of art works, and better appreciate art works.

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