



Exploring the Heterogeneity and Commonality of Emotional Expression in Eastern and Western Painting Art

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Abstract

Despite the heterogeneity between East and West in terms of emotional expression, there are some commonalities in their works of art. This study explores the heterogeneity and commonality of emotional expression in Eastern and Western painting, focusing on the works of abstract expressionist Mark Rothko and Chinese artist Zhang Xiaogang. Rothko's art seeks to evoke fundamental human emotions such as tragedy, ecstasy, and doom through his innovative use of color and form, leaving a profound impact on viewers. In contrast, Zhang Xiaogang emphasizes internalized and contemplative emotional expression, reflecting on individual destiny and historical themes, thereby illustrating the cultural distinctions in emotional expression between the East and the West. Despite the differences between the East and the West in terms of cultural background, aesthetic concepts, and artistic traditions, both Eastern and Western artworks convey deep emotional connotations and reflections on life and society. These differences and commonalities not only enrich the diversity of global art but also foster exchanges and integration between distinct cultures.

Keywords

Emotional Expression; Eastern Art; Western Art; Abstract Expressionism; Cultural Comparison

1. Introduction

In examining the heterogeneity and commonality of emotional expression in Eastern and Western painting art, the works of abstract expressionist Mark Rothko and Chinese artist Zhang Xiaogang serve as significant points of reference. Rothko stated, "I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on—and the fact that lots of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I communicate those basic human emotions" (Wenhui Liu, 2021). His use of color and form to create emotive abstract art aims to influence the emotions and spirit of the viewers. However, this expressive mode is not exclusive to Western artists.

Chinese artist Zhang Xiaogang, a leading figure in contemporary Chinese art, has gained international acclaim for his unique perspective and expressive methods. His oil paintings often convey a sense of melancholy and gloom, which he attributes to a feeling of nihilism. Zhang wrote, "My artistic sense has always leaned towards a kind of 'enclosure' and 'privacy'. Generally speaking, I am accustomed to observing and experiencing the reality I am in, as well as our heavy history, from a distance" (Skandarajah Sayan, 2019). Unlike Rothko, Zhang emphasizes deep internal reflection on individual destiny and historical themes, intricately linked to the heterogeneity and commonality in emotional expression between Eastern and Western cultures.

Despite the shared pursuit of artistic purity and emotional impact, Rothko and Zhang's methods of expression differ. Rothko primarily uses color and form to create emotive abstract art, focusing on the purity of art itself, whereas Zhang focuses more on profound reflections on individual destiny and historical themes, incorporating these inner emotions into his works. Thus, although both artists explore the power of emotional expression, their focal points and techniques vary, reflecting the complexity and diversity of emotional expression across Eastern and Western cultures.

In this research, we further explore the emotional expression methods of artists from different cultural backgrounds and the cultural, social, and historical factors underlying these methods. By deeply studying the works of Eastern and Western artists, we aim to broaden our understanding of different cultural perceptions and contemplate the relationship between artistic language and emotion.

2. Emotional Expression in Western Painting Art

Rothko finally developed a style in 1949, a style that seemed to remove all barriers between the painter and the idea, and between the idea and the viewer. Rothko often viewed works and books in museums just to learn about visual ideas, he studied philosophy and literature, and he drew inspiration from music. For example, the composer Edgar Varèse isolated a single tone or pitch in his most famous piece, playing it according to various orchestral compositions and rhythms in order to bring out the subtleties of its individuality. In Rothko's work the same effect is expressed by isolating single tones, and his paintings bring to the viewer a sense of the fineness of detail of the color blocks in the picture. Rothko turns geometric finite into infinite forms, creating a wide range of emotions, and the images are rich, full, and thought-provoking, as if seeing into the future. Rothko's paintings are not just to be seen, but to be experienced. Beauty also needs to be experienced, and the experience is not to treat people and all things in the world as if they have no connection with each other and have a utilitarian relationship, but rather to unite heaven and man, that is, people and all things in the world should be integrated together, and it is to treat people and all things in the world as if they are intrinsic, non-objective, and intertwined with each other. Rothko in the creation of not only through the thinking to control the nature and laws of external objects or entities, but also with life, life is closely linked to the direct experience to seek the true feelings of the creative process, that sometimes is the direct feeling of the moment, in the momentary feeling of the world of imagery will be created, however, to illuminate the world of a real life, that is, the existence of the true.

Mark Rothko's series of paintings in the Rothko Chapel are among the most emotionally charged of his creations. This chapel, which serves a religious function, features 14 black paintings. Can these paintings convey abundant emotion? In "Pictures & Tears," James Elkins describes how some viewers wept while others left hurriedly, suggesting that this series can indeed convey emotion to the public. As Rothko himself stated, "I am not just an abstractionist... I am only interested in expressing basic human emotions... Those who weep before my paintings are experiencing the same religious experience I had when painting them" (Spee Blanca T. M. et al., 2023).

Rothko's reference to religious experience is a key point. Philosopher William James described religious experience in "The Varieties of Religious Experience" as "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine" (Ang Li, 2023). For Rothko, the chapel lacks overt religious decoration, and his works do not directly depict religious content, suggesting that for Rothko, religion is related to human nature. His creation evokes contemplation of the concept of religion, considering Rothko's atheistic upbringing. His "religious spirit" is not confined to specific traditions; thus, here, religion signifies moments of self-awareness, where social and personal emotions intertwine.

Willem de Kooning, another key figure in abstract expressionism, also conveyed intense energy and emotion through his works, known for vivid brushstrokes, strong colors, and complex emotional expression. His unique artistic style emerged under the influence of European modernism and American abstract expressionism. His work "Woman I," started in 1950, rejects traditional female imagery, instead portraying a figure with exaggerated eyes, breasts, and a grinning mouth. Through rough brushstrokes, bold colors, and dynamic compositions, de Kooning expressed the complexity and contradictions of human emotion. His creations deeply reflect existentialist ideas, stemming from post-war fears and identity anxiety. As an immigrant, he loved America but struggled with gaining legal status, his solitary nature and inarticulateness leading to long-term emotional suppression, only released through art. Viewers sense this emotional eruption in his works. De Kooning believed the essence of art aligned with the artist's inner spirit, saying, "Spiritually I am wherever my spirit allows me to be."

3. Emotional Expression in Eastern Painting Art

Zhang Xiaogang's oil paintings have a place in Chinese contemporary art, especially after his return from Europe, where the success of his oil paintings from 1992 onwards quickly propelled him to the forefront of contemporary art. At a time when domestic artists were busy with international art, Zhang Xiaogang focused instead on portraying his inner feelings, and eventually became a pioneer in Chinese oil painting with his "Big Family" series. From "Big Family" and "Bloodline" to "Amnesia and Memory" and the "Green Wall" series, the works are always about the relationship between the individual and the outside world. From "Big Family" and "Bloodline" to "Amnesia and Memory" and "Green Wall" series, all of them are about the relationship between the individual and the outside world, that is, the relationship between the living environment of human beings and the outside social ideology. The "Big Family" series emphasizes the conflict between personal values and social values or the co-existence of the two, and not only expresses the inner emotional state of the assimilated personal values, but also a "microcosm" of the society at that time; the "Bloodline" series is about the artist's relationship with the outside world, i.e. the relationship between the living environment and the social ideology. The "Bloodline" series is a series of paintings created by the artist after he became a father, with a closer understanding of bloodline from the perspective of personal emotion; the "Amnesia and Memory" series emphasizes the theme of the impact on the inner structure of the artist in the face of rapid development and changing backgrounds; the "Green Wall" series is a series of paintings created by the artist after he became a father, with a closer understanding of bloodline from the perspective of personal emotion. The "Green Wall" series aims to illustrate the influence of the aesthetic value of public space on the aesthetic value of private space or individuals. In his subsequent series, it is not difficult to find that Zhang Xiaogang's primary concern is to depict the emotional experience and feelings of the individual in the context of the times, whether it be the past, the present, or the future. Therefore, by exploring the visual forms of Zhang Xiaogang's paintings, it is possible for us to understand more briefly and clearly the external visual forms of emotion behind his oil paintings, as well as to broaden his creative thinking about the expression of emotion in contemporary painting.

In painting, color is the most important and direct form of visual expression, which can bring the viewer the most direct visual sensation and at the same time convey emotions. It is not difficult to find cold grey appearing extensively in Zhang Xiaogang's paintings, which not only has a great relevance to the historical era and environment in which he lived, but also conveys a series of real emotional responses to the history and memories he paints. Zhang Xiaogang's paintings are always based on grey, with the occasional use of magenta and yellow as a unique form of color expression. As the most special and time-spanning visual form in the artistic language of contemporary painting, grey tone not only directly reflects the characteristics of the local cultural context, but also expresses the greyness of individual memories, the greyness of the times, and the greyness of people's overall mental state.

The series "Amnesia and Memory" is a concentrated expression of this grey-toned memory. The background of this series is that Zhang Xiaogang moved from Chengdu to Beijing in 1998, and at the same time, it had been some time since the "Big Family" series became famous, and his family had changed, so he was once again lost in his heart, and he once mentioned in an interview that "it makes me look back to the past once again, and my memories of the past are being lost, and I have to face the real environment, which seems to be a contradictory and somewhat terrifying state. He once mentioned in an interview that "it makes me look back to the past again, but the memories of the past are constantly being lost, and I have to face the real environment, which seems to be a contradiction and a state of some fear". Therefore, the tragedy of life, the cyclical loneliness, and the fear of the future may be Zhang Xiaogang's reality, which is symbolically expressed by the artist's inner emotions in the visual form of grey and cold tones.

Morandi's tranquil paintings share similarities with traditional Eastern art, where emotion is central but presented less directly than in expressionism. Traditional Eastern painting, especially Chinese landscape painting, conveys the artist's emotions and philosophy through natural depictions, emphasizing the expression of artistic conception. For example, Fan Kuan's "Travelers among Mountains and Streams" portrays majestic landscapes, showing awe for nature and a sense of human insignificance. Dong Qichang's "Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains" uses simple brushstrokes and light tones to express a longing for a tranquil life. Ink wash painting, with its varying ink intensity and water permeation, creates rich visual layers and artistic conception.

Artists must flexibly use various techniques to imbue landscapes with emotion. Zhu Da's "Clear and Elegant Trees" and "Lotus and Water Birds" use symbolism to convey the artist's emotions, utilizing the technique of leaving blank spaces to create a grand and cold emotional tone.

Realism plays a crucial role in painting creation, especially in Chinese and global art. Realism emphasizes detailed observation of life, a basic premise in Chinese painting. Specifically, Chinese painting draws materials from real life,

presenting true life scenes, differing from Western painting creation. For example, Zhang Zeduan's "Along the River During the Qingming Festival," Chen Minglou's "Southern Song Capital," and Gu Hongzhong's "Night Revels of Han Xizai" vividly recreate ancient societal life scenes, underscoring realism's vital role in Chinese painting (Diaz Erbetta Myriam, 2020). Without real life, it is difficult for artists to imbue their works with genuine emotions. Only by tightly integrating emotional expression with real life can Chinese paintings gain greater impact and resonate deeply with audiences.

4. Conclusion

The concept of "Qi Yun Sheng Dong" (vivid spirit and lifelike movement) in Eastern art fundamentally differs from the "self-expression" concept in Western modern art, highlighting cultural and philosophical differences. Despite both emphasizing emotional interaction between art and audience, their theoretical bases, creation purposes, and expression methods are fundamentally different. "Qi Yun Sheng Dong" is a core aesthetic principle in traditional Chinese art, especially painting and calligraphy, emphasizing conveying the artist's temperament, emotion, and spiritual state. Based on ancient Chinese cosmology and humanistic philosophy, it views the universe as full of dynamic energy (Qi), and artistic creation as mobilizing this energy to express the artist's inner spirit. For example, calligraphy not only records text but also expresses personal emotion and momentum through brush force, ink color, and structure, seeking a resonant "artistic conception" that allows viewers to sense the work's vitality and emotional depth.

In contrast, the "self-expression" concept in Western modern art, particularly in expressionism and abstract expressionism, emphasizes direct expression of the artist's emotions through the free use of visual elements like color, form, and line. Jackson Pollock's drip painting technique is an extremely personal expression method, intuitively conveying the artist's emotional state and creative passion. This approach breaks traditional form constraints, emphasizing subjectivity and spontaneity in artistic creation.

Despite the significant theoretical and practical differences between "Qi Yun Sheng Dong" and "self-expression," both strongly emphasize emotional interaction between art and audience. Whether through resonant artistic conception in Eastern art or direct emotional reach in Western art, artists strive to touch viewers, evoking emotional resonance and spiritual reflection. This cross-cultural emotional exchange underscores art's universal value—transcending cultural and geographical boundaries through visual language, allowing people from different backgrounds to find common emotional experiences and spiritual resonance in art.

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