

On the Embodiment of Arnheim's Artistic Expression Theory in Chinese Calligraphy

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Abstract: Each art field has its own different artistic expression, and any work of art can show some aesthetic value. In other words, the presentation of all art has gone beyond the content of the work itself, with the subjective element being integrated into the objective element. The essence of art is actually an external presentation of the inner emotions of a person, which is transformed by visual perception art into physiological and psychological mechanisms, so as to convey to the outside world the content of the thing itself. As a kind of traditional Chinese culture, the artistic expression of calligraphy presents its aesthetic emotion and spiritual connotation through font. Anything is not an individual that exists alone, but a representation of many phenomena and things combined together, which are all cognitive, as is the expression of calligraphy.

1. Artistic expression and calligraphy expression

Artistic expression is mostly based on some kind of carrier. Through the external expression of specific things and the use of concrete or abstract expression techniques, the subject consciously or unconsciously receives the information conveyed by the object from the structure of the objective things, and integrates this information into the thoughts and emotions of the self, and then expresses it through some medium and skills. "Expressiveness actually depends on the patterns of perception itself and how the visual regions of the brain respond to those patterns," Arnheim said.^① From the perspective of art psychology, Arnheim's artistic expressiveness is judged by the subject's perceptual consciousness, while its essence is judged by the person's perceptual style, which is a manifestation of self-perception of objective things. Conversely, for an expressive style of perception, if there is no subjective perception of things, then the objective thing itself loses its expressiveness. Thus it can be seen that the expressiveness of natural things does not only exist in the structure with the object style, but is more reflected in the re-expression of human subjective consciousness to objective things. Of course, this subjective consciousness does not only refer to the perception of a specific person, but also includes the perception style category of the cultural community in the general sense.

In the history of literary and artistic aesthetics, the art which focuses on the reflection of the objective world is often referred to as the reproducible art, and its aesthetic reaction mode and function are also called the reproducibility of art; While the art which focuses on expressing

^① Rudolf Arnheim. Art and Visual Perception [M] Translated by Teng Shouyao. Sichuan People's Publishing House, 1998.

subjective feelings is often referred to as the expressiveness of art, and its aesthetic expression and function are also called expressive art.^② Calligraphy is a way to express personal feelings and daily life through people's subjective consciousness, so it is also a typical expressive art, while Chinese characters are an important carrier of the expression of the aesthetic characteristics of Chinese calligraphy, which convey people's subjective perception in an objective and abstract form. Susan Langer said, "Art is a symbol resembling a 'portrait', which presents a pattern, a rhythm, or a gestalt structure of an emotional state." From the oracle bone inscriptions in the Yin and Shang dynasties to the inscriptions on ancient bronze objects in the Zhou Dynasty, then to the small seal script in the Qin Dynasty, and the development of five calligraphy styles after the Jin Dynasty, all express the expressiveness of calligraphy art.

Through the changes of ink color, structure, composition and so on, calligraphy conveys an intuitive visual perception to people. Calligraphy works are the concentrated expression of the calligrapher's spiritual pursuit and emotional expression, while the expressiveness of calligraphy lays more emphasis on the inner perceptual pattern of art, which, unlike other artistic expressions, can give people a direct feeling, but expresses personal feelings in a symbolic form. There is no specific pattern of Chinese calligraphy. In Chinese calligraphy, what is stressed is random writing. A calligraphy work will produce different forms with the change of emotion when the calligrapher creates, so as to give people a rich visual enjoyment. Take The "Leek Flower Post" (Figure 1) by Yang Ningshi in the Tang Dynasty as an example. It tells how the author, feeling hungry after lunch break, is delighted when a friend brings in leek as a delicious meal. This calligraphy work seems to be a thank-you letter from the content, but the overall structure is from tight to loose, more and more clear, the font is from solemn to light, which can be seen the author's pleasant and leisurely state of mind, and this form of creation also became one of the unique forms of the Tang Dynasty.



Fig.1 Leek Flower Post

^② Song Yiwei. Appearance and Reappearance: Artistic Concept from the Standpoint of Dualism Theory [J]. Journal of Jinzhou Normal University, 2003 (1) .

Take The Huangzhou Cold Food Post (Figure 2) by Su Shi as another example. This poem is Su Shi's lament about his life when he was banished to Huangzhou and spent the third Cold Food Festival. The first three columns of this work are relatively calm and leisurely, but with the surge of grief and anger, the work also becomes ups and downs, and the overall view of the work is vigorous, achieved at one go, without panic and hasty brushwork. The lines and ink changes of the whole work revealed the mood and emotion changes of Su Shi at this time. From “The Spring River is about to enter the home” to the end of the work, the importance and urgency, the size and density, the uneven omission, unrestricted ruggedness between the lines are more obvious, which more reflects the author's sorrowful and indignant but helpless desolate melancholy feeling. The expression of Su Dongpo's true disposition and open-minded heart are shown incisively and vividly in this work, so it is also known as the third running script in the world.

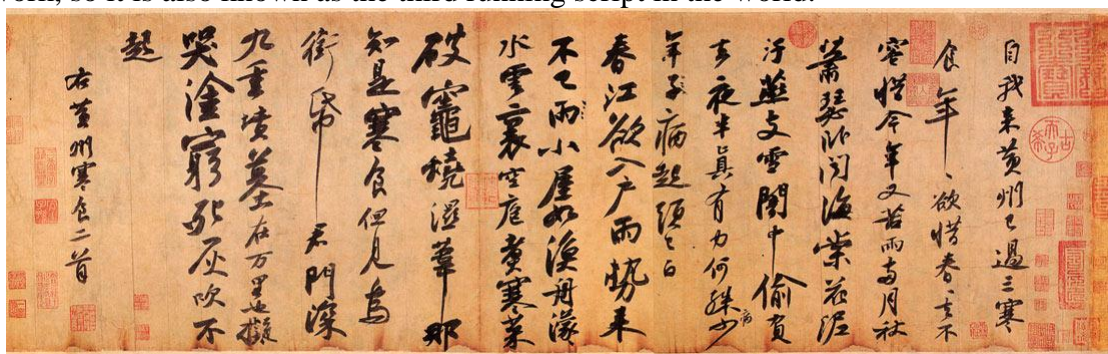


Fig.2 Huangzhou Cold Food Post

2. The symbolic representation of calligraphy performance

The symbolism of art is the essential characteristic of its aesthetic perceptive style. Different from other social ideologies, it is a specific, accurate and appreciable image. It can also be said that all art is symbolic. According to the western ideas, the cognition of artistic images is materialized into the combination of ideas of infinite conception and concrete perception of things. For example, in western paintings or sculptures, there will be the figure of Christ, who represents the redeemer of mankind; The Statue of Liberty symbolizes democracy and freedom. In fact, the same is true of symbolic cultural value of Chinese calligraphy. “For an ancient Chinese calligrapher, if he wanted to make 'character' reflect life and make it an art reflecting life, he must use the methods and tools he had to show the feeling of bone, muscle, flesh and blood of a life in the character. Here, however, the objective body is not drawn directly as in painting, but through abstract points, lines and strokes, so that we can experience the bones, sinews, flesh and blood in the image of the object from emotion and imagination. Just as music and architecture can reveal to us the content and meaning of human life through their emotional and physical representations.”^③

“Calligraphy as painting in the heart” proposed by Yang Xiong in the Western Han Dynasty is the best embodiment of symbolism in Chinese calligraphy culture. Most ancient calligraphers did not express their feelings and thoughts through specific text content, but through abstract symbols, the content of writing only explained the natural scene, not the real artistic aesthetic value of calligraphy. Susan Langer has always emphasized that art is a form of expression, which is the objectification and objectification of human inner life. He believed that “an artwork is a symbol, and the artist's task is to make symbols from beginning to end, and the making of symbols requires abstraction.”^④The abstraction of symbolic form or symbol is an important source for the formation

^③ Zong Baihua. Aesthetic Walk [M]. Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1981.

^④ Susan Langer. Problems of Art [M] Translated by Teng Shouyao. Nanjing Press, 2006.

of symbolic meaning. Although artwork is people's dynamic response to reality, this dynamic response of “reproduced world” is the embodiment of abstract thinking results on objective things, therefore, the symbolic representation of art also contains abstract expression. Taking the theory of “heart painting” as an example, when talking about “calligraphy as painting in the heart”, Yang Xiong believed that the “heart” was abstract, which was expressed through specific character symbols. In addition to explaining the thoughts and feelings that the calligrapher wanted to express in the content of each calligraphy work, each calligraphy work further expresses the feelings of the “heart” through various forms such as the rhythm of writing and the change of ink color. Zhang Xu, a calligrapher in the Tang Dynasty, was particularly good at cursive writing, known as “Zhang Dian”. He was adept in observing and experiencing natural things in daily life and combining them with his own emotions. Under the influence of Wang Xizhi and other calligraphers during the Wei and Jin dynasties, he inherited the tradition and formed his own unique style at the same time, making the art of “wild scribble” an important one in the history of calligraphy. The Four Posts of Ancient Poetry (Figure 3) is one of Zhang Xu's classic works, with the whole manner of writing smooth and free, and the interwoven priorities. The uninhibited brushwork is like the leap of a dragon and a tiger, with its winding lines. The overall view is bold and full of artistic conception. This swaggering and elegant style is related to Zhang Xu's preference for natural things and his nature of the mind not bound up with fixed objects. He integrated objective things into his personal understanding, and then transformed them into his own artistic language, to express his passionate and surging inner world with more abstract dot paintings, which is a symbol of natural beauty and eternal beauty. Historian Wallinger once pointed out that if the “empathic impulse” is a pantheistic condition of connection between man and the world, then the opposite “abstract impulse” is derived from man's “great psychological fear of space”, so it is “the product of man's great inner unrest caused by the outer world”.⁶ Through the description of the transcendence of abstraction, this kind of abstract symbolism is verified.

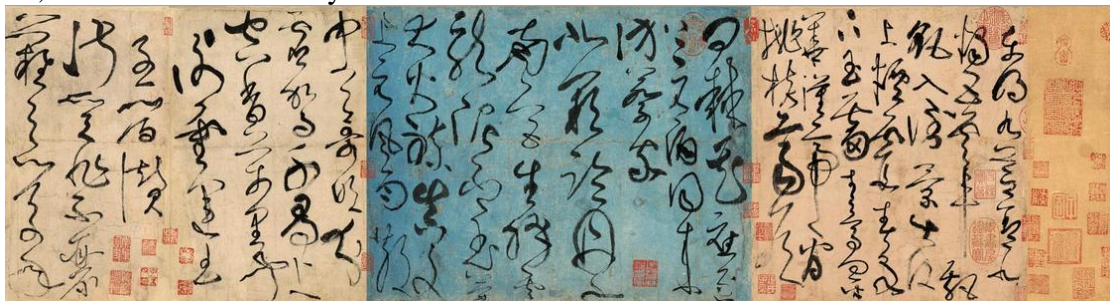


Fig.3 Four Posts of Ancient Poetry (Part)

The performance of calligraphy is not as direct as music or art, but reflected by the beauty of abstract lines. From the perspective of the origin of characters, in the beginning, Characters were created by Cang Jie and appeared in the form of pictographs, which were more concrete in terms of Chinese characters; While in the calligraphy art, the characters are more abstract, which no longer simply depict the natural things, but are added the personal thoughts and feelings of the calligrapher. With the continuous evolution of the times, the form of characters has also changed. Chinese characters have become more abstract from the concrete, and the stipple structure has become the soul of the whole work. Different from other art's deliberate description of the concreteness of natural things, the abstraction of calligraphy is to depict objective things through characters composed of “points, lines and surfaces”. Abstract expression is one of the basic spiritual characteristics of Chinese calligraphy. The famous aesthetician Li Zehou said: “The secret of the

⁶ Wallinger. Abstraction and Empathy [M]. Translated by Wang Caiyong. SBN:9787802515567 Press, 2010

line structure of Chinese calligraphy lies in its gradual transformation of the simulation of the object form picture into an abstract line structure that is purified (that is, purification). This kind of purified line, namely the beauty of calligraphy, is not the formal beauty and decorative beauty of general patterns, but the meaningful form in the real sense.”^⑥In Li Zehou's opinion, this aesthetic form of calligraphy is not simply considered from the perspective of national art, but more from the general direction of Chinese culture and civilization. The symbolism of calligraphy art is an abstract and transcending national artistic expression, occupying a decisive position in Chinese history and even in the world.

3. The expression of “force” in calligraphy

Arnheim said, “We have found that the foundation of expressiveness is the structure of a force, which appeals to us not only because it has significance for the object which possesses it, but also because it has significance for the physical world in general and for the spiritual world in general.”^⑦By this token, force exists in our natural world, whether concrete things or abstract mental activities, have the performance of force.

As we all know, the force emphasized in aesthetics is not a real powerful force, but an abstract expression, which exists in things. In calligraphy, the expression of power often exists in emotions, in which there is both strong tension and soft relaxation. In the emotional expression of natural objects, in addition to the clear expression of right, wrong or neutral choice, people also show structural changes in emotional strength and strength. The emotional intensity of calligraphy is an abstract expression of calligraphy art, and this direct emotional expression is also a special function of calligraphy. The ancients said, “When a man is happy, he is peaceful, and his handwriting is very comfortable; When a man is angry, his handwriting is dangerous; When a man is sad, his spirit is still, and his handwriting is reserved; When a man is cheerful, his spirit is flat, and his handwriting is very beautiful. There is a certain degree of ties of friendship, and the convergence, comfort, danger and beauty of characters, also have depth, with endless variations. There is a difference between the pure and solemn spirit, between the magnificent and the ancient” (*Tips for The Hanlin* by Chen Yi in the Yuan Dynasty). The expression of “power” in emotion is also divided into priority and urgency in calligraphy. Although it cannot give people an intuitive feeling of pleasure, anger, sorrow and joy, it can express different emotional contents in the form of lines, colors of ink, rhythm and rules. Different emotional states, such as calm, sadness, melancholy, helplessness, and joy, express different levels of strength, which is in mutual echo with multiple forms of calligraphy aesthetic, so calligraphy shows abstract structure of emotional strength with abstract line structure.

Take Yan Zhenqing's *Manuscript Dedicated to the Nephew* (Figure 4) for example. This post was at one go, with simple and vigorous lines, penetrating, natural and comfortable; Its structure is tight outside and loose inside, mostly with a horizontal trend, between the side and the point painting toward or outward extension; Its rules are unrestrained clever, looking back between each line, free and unrestrained. From the overall point of view, there are many altered points, and dry brush strokes more, dry moist complement each other. The contrast between the shade of its inky color and the change of its real and virtual is strong, and it can be seen in the rapidity of the late acerbity, which is not intended to be clumsy and fluent. The rich changes of lines and ink color are highly integrated with the author's grief at the loss of his nephew, which gives full play to the author's emotional strength of pain. This frank and painful emotion, combined with the author's superb calligraphy skills, has made this work a permanent classic in the history of Chinese calligraphy.

^⑥ Li Zehou. *Course of Beauty* [M] Life.Reading. Xinzhi Sanlian Bookstore, 2009.

^⑦Rudolf Arnheim. *Art and Visual Perception* [M] Translated by Teng Shouyao. Sichuan People's Publishing House, 1998.

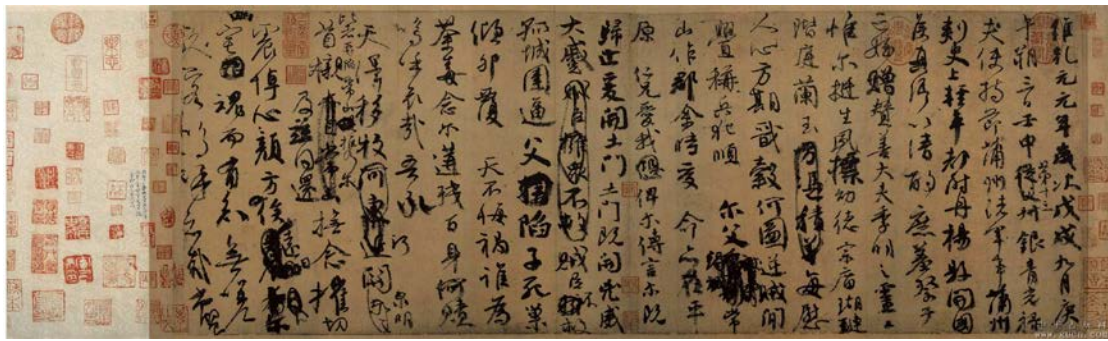


Fig.4 Manuscript Dedicated to the Nephew

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, calligraphy art is the embodiment of calligrapher's life and emotional rhythm, the embodiment of natural life and emotional symbols, and the mutual blend of calligraphy art form and human emotion. Whether the expressiveness of art is concrete or abstract, it embodies the value of art. Calligraphy is not only a pattern of manifestation of abstract lines, but also reflects the unspeakable and marvellous beauty of artistic conception. As long as we perceive the expressiveness of all natural things, we can realize the significance of the simultaneous existence of this material and spiritual world.

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