

The Characteristics of Abstract Realism in Moore's "Paper Nautilus"

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Abstract: The erudition of the American modernist poet Marianne Moore endows her poetry with a subtlety that transcends her era. The artistic expression in the poem "Paper Nautilus" bears the hallmarks of the Abstract Realism that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s; examining the manifestation of Abstract Expressionist artistic characteristics in Moore's poetry from an interdisciplinary perspective — panning art and poetics — allows for a more comprehensive interpretation of her artistic style. The fusion of painterly forms with poetic creation endows Moore's poetry with a distinctive visual aesthetic and exquisite descriptive detail.

Keywords: Marianne Moore; Abstract Realist art; Collage art

1. Introduction

The erudition and innovative writing style of the American modernist poet Marianne Moore endow her poetry with a distinctive artistic character; indeed, within their exquisitely conceived structures, such poems often possess artistic qualities that transcend their own era. Moore's erudition is richly reflected in her poetry, allowing readers to savour the profound and unique nuances of diverse fields of knowledge. The poem "Paper Nautilus", a work imbued with profound meaning and centred on the paper nautilus - a creature of the genus Nautilus with distinctive characteristics - is one of the representative works embodying this quality.

Marian Moore's extensive knowledge and experience infused her poetry with creative imagery spanning various disciplines, freeing her from the constraints of poetic convention; consequently, as a modernist poet at the forefront of her era, she earned the reputation of an encyclopaedic poet. The poem "Paper Nautilus" appears in Moore's 1940s collection "What Are Years?". The poet drew her inspiration from a paper nautilus shell given to her by her young friend, the poet Bishop, and wrote this poem as a gift in return. Ever since the two met, Moore had always harboured a motherly, mentor-like affection for the young Bishop, akin to the care a paper nautilus shows its offspring and the care Moore's own mother showed her (Costello 1984). This creature itself is also a most unusual entity. Biologically, the paper nautilus exhibits characteristics of both octopuses and nautiluses. Female specimens are considerably larger than males, construct fragile egg cases, and, like octopuses, defend these eggs with their lives (WOLFE 2012). Consequently, prior to this poem, research has primarily interpreted the "fortress of love" represented by the paper nautilus from the perspectives of maternal love and feminism (Zhao 2014).

2. The Poem "Paper Nautilus" and Abstract Realism Art

Looking back at the history of modern American art, in the 19th century, developed what was termed "indigenous" Luminism and Realist painting, focusing primarily on genre and landscape works (Liu 2022). During this period, the prevailing trend in the United States was to embody the "originality" of American art within the native landscapes of the frontier spirit and Transcendentalism, with an emphasis on depicting the beauty of the wilderness (Chen 2013). The Academics and the Native School had, over the past few decades, been content to follow precisely in the footsteps of European artistic trends without innovating.

3. The Real-Life Metaphor of the "Paper Nautilus"

Although so-called 'authorities' who merely followed the prevailing trends were all the rage, within the three major schools of American art, there remained a small number of artists who steadfastly upheld the ideal of innovative, indigenous American art rather than becoming mere copyists of European art. A very small number of masters within the American academic school, such as Robert Henry - a leading figure of the "Trash Can School" - sought to break free from European influence on American art whilst pursuing a realistic and naturalistic style, as the saying goes, "to express their own era and their own land" (Stokstad 1995), advocating the portrayal of the true and ugly aspects of contemporary American life. However, this art - which broke away from established conventions and was seen as "defaming" the nation - was inevitably

destined to be shunned at the time (Chen 2013).

The scientific name of the paper nautilus is *Argonauta argo*, which actually derives from the Argonauts of ancient Greek mythology who accompanied Jason in his quest for the Golden Fleece; the species was so named because the way the female specimens float resembles the Argo ship battling the waves to protect the heroes (WOLFE 2012). Yet the “perseverance” is by no means easy, Moore’s own innovations in poetic form and metaphorical content were at one time subject to criticism and misinterpretation within the literary world; his work was once deemed “obscure and difficult to understand” (Herd 2007). Yet they continued to “guard it day and night”, unwilling to abandon their ideals. This is precisely as mentioned in the poem, “By a crab loyal to the Hydra” was the dilemma faced by Moore and other writers in the art world of the time who were pursuing innovation; Even if the Hydra’s largest head were severed, it would regrow, leaving Heracles in a predicament. Thus, although the “crab” represented an obstacle, it could nonetheless serve as a source of inspiration. This mirrors the American art world of the 1950s, where traditional and modern art forms were in conflict: whilst acting as a barrier to progress and innovation, it also fostered the further emergence and formation of Abstract Realism, which ultimately burst forth with dazzling vitality in the 1950s (Chen 2013).

In the poem, written in the 1940s, Moore expressed two major characteristics that would later become distinctive features of American Abstract Realism: minimalist expression and unrestrained emotion (Mao 2022). Moore and the innovative writers he represented pursued an “Ionian” artistic philosophy. As described in the latter half of the poem: “Ionic chiton-folds” primarily refer to the pleats found in ancient Greek Ionic attire. This type of tunic was originally popular in the Ionian region on the western coast of Asia Minor. It was generally made of pure white fabric (Wang 2020). Moreover, this garment was perfectly in keeping with the ancient Greek way of life and spiritual aspirations, embodying a simple and carefree demeanour. Moore used the metaphor of this garment to express the Pure and Minimalist Colour-Field School and the free and unrestrained Action Painting movement.

American Abstract Expressionism is not a single concept, but rather a collection of diverse painting styles, which can be broadly categorised into these two main types based on their expressive forms (Liu 2016). The Action Painting movement sought the direct expression of the artist’s identity through bold and untamed brushstrokes. The Colour Field School seeks to provoke contemplation in the viewer through relatively uncomplicated compositions, employing primarily large areas of flat, pure colour and simple lines on large canvases; stimulating deep-seated emotions and encouraging spiritual contemplation, much like a pure white, minimalist paper nautilus shell (Mao 2022).

4. Conclusion

Although Moore wrote this poem before the heyday of Abstract Expressionism, it foreshadowed the movement’s core tenets of “artistic autonomy, local independence and formal purity”, thereby demonstrating the avant-garde vision of her poetry that transcended its era. Unlike a purely feminine lyrical text, this poem elevates a personal teacher-student bond to the grand theme of literary and artistic development, forging an interdisciplinary aesthetic bridge between poetry and modern painting. It also provides a new art-historical pathway for future interpretations of Moore’s modernist poetry, demonstrating that the value of her work extends far beyond the depiction of feminine emotions to encompass profound reflections on the autonomy of national literature and art, as well as the frontiers of innovation in modern art.

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