Exploring German neo-expressionist painting

Kexin WANG, Lian JIN

College of Art, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua 321004, China

Abstract: In the 20th century, with the emergence of modernist and post-modernist art, artists opposed the traditional forms of art creation and began to wander between reality and illusion in a variety of styles, taking the mode of thinking and inner emotional cognition of art creation as the primary proposition. New concepts, materials and media began to break through the boundaries of painting. As a result, a variety of painting styles emerged, such as expressionism. Neo-expressionism is further developed from expressionism, and after decades of development, its influence on the contemporary oil painting style is getting bigger and bigger. Among the many contemporary oil painting artists, a considerable number of them are also influenced by neo-expressionism. They constantly combine this Western art with traditional Chinese local culture and art, and explore the development of local oil painting by themselves. This paper briefly analyzes some basic factors of neo-expressionism, so as to have a certain understanding of itself; then analyzes the factors in the process of its evolution, explaining the process of evolution; and finally analyzes its influence on the development of Chinese oil painting. All these can help to understand neo-expressionism better, and also understand the development trend of local oil painting.

Key words: neo-expressionism; German neo-expressionism; painting

1 Introduction

In the vast ocean of art, all successful art will have a certain expressive nature, and in modern or contemporary art, this expressive nature has gradually become more intense. Any piece of art is the product of the artist's subjective creative labor, and hyper-realistic paintings in contemporary art are not just mechanical depictions of objective things, but always add the creator's own thoughts and feelings, aesthetic ideals, and creative propositions, which will carry personal subjective colors. The development of neo-expressionism in China has brought certain influence to the development of Chinese oil painting style, and it is also an important artistic trend in contemporary art.

2 Concept of neo-expressionism

Concerning the concept of neo-expressionism, it should not be considered as an art school, but actually an art trend, or it can be called a creative tendency. The Dictionary of Art and Artists by Stangos defines neo-expressionism as "Neo-expressionism, a term used to refer to the revival of expressionism in Germany, the United States, and Italy in the late 1970s and early 1980s". Neo-expressionism was initially an art movement that originated in Northern Europe and involved many areas of popular styles in the art world, such as painting, literature, film, music, etc. Neo-expressionism was associated with the opposition to impressionism in the art world at the time, and expressionists paid more attention to the expression of subjective emotions and the inner world in their paintings and drawings [1]. In their creative concepts, they

also wanted to innovate and break the traditional art to show the true feelings of the inner world.

In addition, on the question of the origin of art, some scholars have thought that the origin of art is related to "expression" to a certain extent, and Croce, Collingwood and Susan Lange have all discussed and analyzed the origin of art from expression. Therefore, the term "expression" is widely used.

3 The expression of German neo-expressionist painting

Expressionism influenced by Nietzsche's voluntarism had a great influence not only on Germany but also on the whole modernist art and with its great influence, expressionism also influenced the future generations. In terms of artists' creative concepts, expressionism criticized the authority of the traditional academies, accepted the philosophical concepts of Kant, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer's voluntarism, and Freud's psychoanalysis, and advocated self-expression and awakening, advocating that everything should be shifted by the will of the human being. German expressionist artists pursued self-expression, free association and free expression, focusing on self-expression of emotions, and they did not fix the subject matter and content of their creations. In many different categories of art, they also pay attention to the expressive, which fully demonstrates the importance of the expression of "performance" in the art of painting. At the same time, German neo-expressionist painting advocates going back to traditional easel painting, and also constantly seeks for new content, form, color and self-language in the creation of paintings, and at the same time pays attention to the expression of personal feelings in the picture, and subjective treatment of the content of the picture.

German neo-expressionist paintings in the picture also pursues a primitive style, expressing some rude, primitive beauty. And some of them have a strong interest in primitive myths and religions. German neo-expressionist painters link their artistic creations with national concepts, remembering the lessons and wounds, and wanting to rediscover the cultural roots of Germany. For them, painting was rational and thoughtful, not a way to decorate their lives, but to present their own worldview and outlook on life. In terms of the techniques of expression, they broke away from the usual painting language and techniques of expression, and chose the techniques and materials that best suited them, and that were more capable of expressing the content of the theme as well as their thoughts and feelings. This directly influenced the expressionist artists to create distorted, exaggerated and grotesque forms and techniques, typical of which are Edvard Munch's *The Scream* and Wassily Kandinsky's *Little Joy*. These works use distorted images, exaggerated structures and multi-layered colors to show the truth of the artist's heart, and do not pursue the likeness of the picture, but try to express the spiritual world.

4 The graphic language of German neo-expressionist painting

Because of the deep history of German neo-expressionist paintings, the art in general shows a strong sense of uneasiness and sadness. The use of line color superposition, overlapping layers, and spiritual images with multiple meanings can highlight the unique personality of German neo-expressionist paintings [2]. The German neo-expressionism is innovative, respecting tradition but also adding uniqueness. It also focuses on self-expression and emphasizes the importance of subjective emotions in artistic creation. The use of rich colors, unique exaggerated deformation, and unrestrained brush strokes express the two extremes of the heart, showing its own unique tension. Therefore, it must have a unique individual language and modeling elements, and a subjective expression of emotion and imagination. Neo-expressionist painting focuses more on its own independent expression in the use of brushstrokes, which are no longer established for the sake of the object, but rather to express its own aesthetics and significance. Unlike the Renaissance, where brushstrokes were used to shape objects, and the Romantic period, where brushstrokes were clearly purposeful, and the Impressionist period, where brushstrokes were distributed in a regular manner, during the Expressionist period, the artist used brushstrokes as a medium for emotional feelings and to work from his own emotions and inner truths [3]. For example, in Luperci's *Arcadia Warrior*, we can see his reconstruction of the classical shape of Venus with broken arm.

Although the Venus under his pen is more ancient than beautiful, and its overall proportion is thicker than that of the original version, it has inherited the charm of the classic Venus in terms of the flavor of her body. The twisting relationship between the waist and hips reflects the rounded beauty of the female form, and the interspersed lines of the legs and buttocks are both accurate and graceful without losing their strength, injecting a sense of expressive power into the classical beauty of the ancient Greek style. In Marcus Luperz's *Donald's Wedding*, the main character is boldly written, and the momentum of the lines is more natural and dynamic between the movements of flinging and spreading, and from the splatter patterns and flowing lines of water stains, it can be seen that when depicting the structure of the body, the artist does not stick to structural accuracy, but emphasizes the slackness of the lines and the meaning of the writing, and the curved, wavy and twisted lines and the lines that fall from the brush are overlapping and interlacing with each other, and the whole body has a strong, expressive power in the classical beauty of the ancient Greek style. The lines are twisted in a curved wave style and the lines with accidental meanings are overlapped and interlaced with each other, and the whole picture is more expressive because of the rise and fall of the lines, the movement and static, and the intersection of reality and falsehood, which also makes the whole dynamic of the characters more expressive and leaves more room for the audience's imagination.

Color, as an expression of painting language, is a necessary element in the study of the multilayered nature of painting language. German neo-expressionism also attached importance to the use of color in the picture. Color was the strongest means of expression for these artists. At that time, German expressionist painters had already begun to break away from the previous dark tones and chose to use all kinds of colors flexibly in their creations. Expressionist painters expressed their hearts and revealed the depths of their souls through color, no longer hiding the essence of things. German expressionist painters focused on color in their paintings; they used all kinds of contrasts and brief, bold contours in their creations; they no longer depicted the external images of objective things in a simple and rough way, but rather, they incorporated their subjective emotions on this basis; they integrated the social environment and the inner world of the time into their paintings. In Richter's painting *Uncle Rudy,* the character depicted is the brother of Richter's mother, who tragically lost his life in World War II. Richter used grey, black and white to portray the dead characters, because he believed that "grey is the only color that can be regarded as thoughtful". Grey represents the dead or gloomy, therefore, when the audience sees the grey characters, they will psychologically associate them with death. This negative color choice prompts audiences to form cold and quiet moods along with different psychological effects. In terms of technique, Richter used a large brush to sweep the surface of the picture back and forth in parallel, and the whole work blurs the background and the portrait, with a visual haze, which seems to represent that the characters are disappearing and being forgotten.

German neo-expressionist painting consciously constructs in the visual space, and painters consciously and completely detach themselves from natural society, using various material and technical means such as physics and painting for visual innovation. In the hands of expressionist artists, the color, line and material of the picture can serve the expansion of the picture space. Through the continuous innovation of material carriers and techniques, the viewer's sense of space is greatly expanded from different perspectives. As Susan Lange said: "From the first lines of decorative paintings to the works of Raphael, Da Vinci and Rubens, they all illustrate the same principle of the art of painting: the creation of illusory space and the organization of illusory space by means of forms reflecting sensory and emotional patterns (i.e., lines, volumes, cross planes, light and dark) [4]. The charm of painting lies in the artist's ability to form a unique pictorial space from the reality of natural space through brushes, paints, lines, etc., so that the combined space of the real and the illusory interpenetrates and transforms each other, giving rise to more and more new spaces. For example, in Imendorf's 1984 work *C-D-Descendants-Church by the Roadside*, there are two different temporal and spatial sequences, one is illusory and the

other is real [5]. In his mind, everything seems to be an illusion, while those in the images are motionless and watching the scene in front of them. There are various approaches to confronting history directly, analyzing reality, reflecting on it, and ultimately finding healing.

5 Conclusion

From the perspective of artists, art language is a carrier that can constantly migrate and regenerate the spirit. German neo-expressionist artists, in the arrangement of artistic language, are based on the re-examination of history and writing, and at the same time based on the reconstruction of Germany's historical background and cultural background. Kiefer, Baselitz, Richter, Imendorf and other artists resolutely choose to use the way of art to regain the existence of their own people, and successfully put the form of artistic language in the wave of the times, in order to create an "unrestrained" gesture separated out of the exclusive language of Germany [6]. In the wave of the times, they succeeded in separating the form of artistic language from the exclusive language of Germany with a "wild" gesture.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

[1] Xie SP. 2023. Taking Kiefer as an example to talk about the performance of material language in German neo-expressionist painting. Changchun Normal University. https://link.cnki.net/doi/10.27709/d.cnki.gccsf.2023.000123; doi:10.27709/d.cnki.gccsf.2023.000123

[2] Liang YX. 2021. A comparative study of contemporary Chinese writerly oil painting and German neo-expressionist painting. Shandong Normal University. https://link.cnki.net/doi/10.27280/d.cnki.gsdsu.2021.001029; doi:10.27280/d.cnki.gsdsu.2021.001029

[3] Shao XD. 2021. Research on the use of symbolic images in German neo-expressionist painting. *Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts*. doi:10.27399/d.cnki.gxamx.2021.000058; https://link.cnki.net/doi/10.27399/d.cnki.gxamx.2021.000058

[4] Xu Q. 2018. Analysis of German "neo-expressionism" on contemporary Chinese oil painting. *Art Appreciation*, (05): 39-40.

[5] Liu F, Song XZ. 2023. Inheritance and transcendence - investigation of German neo-expressionist painting. *Literature and Art Controversy,* (01): 180-183.

[6] Quan SF. 2021. Return and transmutation: a study of German neo-expressionist figurative painting. Southwest University. doi:10.27684/d.cnki.gxndx.2021.000990; https://link.cnki.net/doi/10.27684/d.cnki.gxndx.2021.000990