

A Study on the Aesthetic Theory of “Significant Form”

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Abstract: This paper explores the aesthetic theory of “Significant Form” proposed by Clive Bell and developed by Roger Fry. Using literature review, theoretical analysis, and comparative research, it examines the origins, core ideas, and development of the theory. The study finds that Bell regarded significant form as the source of aesthetic emotion independent of representation, while Fry further emphasized the expressive function of form and its relationship with emotion. Although the theory has been criticized for overlooking social and historical contexts, it marked an important shift from representational art to formal expression and laid a significant theoretical foundation for modern formalist aesthetics and the development of twentieth-century art.

Keywords: significant form, Clive Bell, Roger Fry, formalist aesthetics, aesthetic emotion

1. The Concept of “Significant Form”

The theory of significant form first appeared in his book *Art* [1]. He gives a clear definition: it is a special combination of lines, colours, and other formal elements that stirs aesthetic emotion. The theory has two parts: the “aesthetically moving” quality and the “form or relations of form.” Roger Fry later enriched the idea from a philosophical angle. He believed art’s beauty lies not in the depicted world, but in the inner structure of form — the arrangement and expressiveness of colour, line, and shape. Fry held that an artwork’s meaning does not depend only on content or subject. The formal elements themselves arouse emotional and spiritual response.

2. Clive Bell’s Propositions

2.1 Distinct from Representational Form

In his book *Art*, Bell says that to explain aesthetics clearly, a person needs two things. A person must have a feeling for art and also clear logical thinking. A feeling for art lets you notice the many forms of beauty and their fine details. Logical thinking helps you analyze these feelings and organize them in a rational way.

In all visual art, lines and colours are not isolated; they interrelate in specific patterns, building a formal structure with inner tension. This formal relationship itself arouses aesthetic emotion. Clive Bell called this “significant form” and regarded it as the fundamental quality common to all visual art. Whether in painting, sculpture, architecture, or decorative art, the artwork moves us because of a particular relation among formal elements that can stir aesthetic feeling.

Bell got his inspiration from the aesthetic ideas of Immanuel Kant when he built this theory. Kant was the founder of German classical philosophy. His teachings on formal beauty, in both philosophy and aesthetics, gave Bell an important source of ideas. Kant criticized the dogmatic ways of earlier thinkers. He drew a line around the limits of human knowledge. He divided the world into the “phenomenal world” and the “thing-in-itself.” He held that the world as it really is cannot be known. People can only know the world of appearances. [2]

In simple terms, the phenomenal world is what we perceive through our senses. It is the picture of the world we build from our lived experience. The thing-in-itself, on the other hand, is the reality behind these appearances. This marks a basic difference between how things look and what they really are.

Moore said we do not need complex reasoning or outside evidence to know what things are beautiful. We see beauty through direct perception and intuition. Bell believed that the value of a work of art lies in the artwork itself. It lies in the pure experience of beauty the viewer has with it. That experience stands on its own, apart from any third party.

Bell separated art from reality. He gave “significant form” its own independence. This form brings about a special feeling of beauty through pure form. Bell also made a clear distinction between the feeling of beauty and ordinary emotions. He set “significant form” apart from the ordinary person’s idea of “beauty.” He said that the word “beauty” is often used for objects that carry feelings easily picked up by the senses. [3]

2.2 The Alliance between Art and Religion

In his book *Art*, Clive Bell looks closely at the link between form and religion. He argues that art and religion are deeply tied together. Both are important ways that humans express their spiritual life.

Bell believed that art and religion both express a certain “sense of ultimate reality.” This sense is a spiritual experience that goes beyond everyday life. Art carries this experience through “significant form.” Religion also expresses the search for ultimate reality. It does so through rituals, symbols, and teachings.

Art and religion are allies. They are two paths people use to reach a certain spiritual state. The religious feeling finds expression through both art and religion.

Bell also suggested that art holds a “significant form.” This form can stir an emotion much like a religious feeling. In Christian art, form is not just outer decoration. It acts as a carrier for the artist’s emotion and spirit. Through these forms, artists share a spiritual power that goes beyond reality. The viewer then feels a deep sense of spiritual joy and peace while looking at the work.

This is exactly where art and religion meet. Art guides people to let go of material things and aim for higher spiritual goals. In this way, they can find their true selves. The heart of religion leans the same way. It gives up the material world to find comfort in the spiritual world. It finds a spiritual home in what may be a nothingness that can never be proved. [4]

3. Roger Fry’s Propositions

3.1 The Theory of the Double Life

The idea of the double life came from Fry’s response to the changes in art during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. At that time, traditional realistic art was challenged by the rise of photography. Then Post-Impressionism appeared and brought new energy. Post-Impressionist artists gave up copying nature and turned to exploring form. Fry wanted to give this turn a philosophical foundation. He wanted to show that art is not just a dependent copy of reality. Art is its own independent spiritual world.

At this point, Fry discovered the works of Cézanne. He believed that art should go beyond life and free itself from the limits of reality. So he put forward the “theory of the double life” as the theoretical base for artists like Cézanne. In his *An Essay in Aesthetics*, Roger Fry suggested that humans can live two different kinds of life: one is the actual life, and the other is the imaginary life. [5]

Fry split daily feeling from art feeling. He valued form’s own beauty, not copying or teaching. Art must stand free and seek pure formal order. Form, then, is the orderly arrangement and combination of lines and colours. This gives the viewer a sense of pleasure.

In his early phase, Fry believed that the pleasure brought by form is not affected by the art’s content. Form plays the most powerful, leading role. By the time his *Art and Design* was published in 1960, Roger Fry was a perfect example of a formalist thinker on beauty. He stressed that beauty in art comes from form. He opposed the naturalist view that sought lifelike copies of natural objects. [6]

At this stage, Fry still firmly held that form came first. He paid little attention to elements beyond form, such as content or subject matter.

Bell talked a lot about “significant form,” but he never said clearly what it really is. Fry explained this idea by comparing music and painting. He said that musical notes, when put together in a certain order, form a melody. This melody has a sense of wholeness and direction. It can stir the listener’s feelings. In much the same way, elements like line, colour, and shape in painting can be arranged with rhythm. They produce a kind of “living rhythm.”

Fry stressed that painting should have depth. It should not be just a flat pattern. It should show its depth and structure through the push and pull of solid masses and space.

3.2 Form: A Dialectical View of Art

Fry at first shared Bell’s view: form is art’s core. “Significant form” itself arouses aesthetic feeling. Art is about formal harmony, not imitation. Later, Fry rejected Bell’s abstract turn and his own early ideas. He believed form and content interact. He described art as a harmony parallel to reality. Tolstoy’s idea that art infects audiences with the author’s feeling influenced him. Fry combined pure formalism with expression theory. He called it “expressive plastic form.” He saw form as a vehicle of emotion. The artist transmits feeling through form, and the viewer relives it. Fry believed painting is essentially expressive. He even preferred the name “Expressionism” for Post-Impressionism. Form and emotion are inseparable. Structure, rhythm, and composition stir emotional echoes. Different emotions need different forms—solemnity through symmetry, drama through contrast and balance.

4. Conclusion

Bell and Fry's "significant form" theory was central to early formalist aesthetics. They stressed that form itself creates aesthetic feeling. It shifted art from copying to expressing form. The theory had limits: circular reasoning, ignoring deeper meaning, separating art from society. Yet it supported modern art and sparked diverse ideas.

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