

An Analysis of the Influence of East Asian Art on Impressionism

Jin Lin, Lian Jin

School of Arts, Zhejiang Normal University 321004, China

Abstract: In the era of rapid technological and industrial development in the West, various industries began to rush to reform and breakthrough. Western painting was no exception, and began to transform from traditional academic painting to modern painting. At this time, the emergence of Impressionism was also eager to break through, and they projected their focus on East Asian art, which was completely contrary to the Western tradition, and used it as a breakthrough point to seek innovation. Therefore, East Asian art is reflected in the subjects, language, forms and emotions of the Impressionists. This paper focuses on the changes brought by East Asian art to Impressionism, as well as the case study of specific painters, to explain the influence of East Asian art on Impressionism.

Keywords: East Asian art; Impressionism; Color; Composition

1. The Emergence of Impressionism

In the middle of the 19th century, as Western society was obsessed with the singularity brought by the rapid development of modernization, which inevitably led to the destruction of the wholeness of life, the Western modernization process began to seek changes in the field of spiritual culture after several decades of rapid development. As a result, a series of changes sprang up in Western culture, from philosophy, art and literature to lifestyle and social mores, and it was at this time that Impressionism emerged. In the case of the fine arts, the modernizing turn that began in the 19th century pointed to a break with the monotony of the academy.

The impact of photography was also an unavoidable factor in the rise of Impressionism. The art of photography began to call into question the need for traditional painting to persist. As a result, painters began to seek new ways to compete with photography, trying to escape from the dilemma and seek innovation. Under such a double pressure of reconstructing the spiritual wholeness of man and the technology of photography, the traditional vocabulary had to enter an era of renewal, and Impressionism then stood out. Impressionism was born not only to seek differences in photography, but also to seek differences in the past. It opened the modern chapter of Western art, mainly under the inspiration of East Asian art.

2. The East Asian Imprints in Impressionism

The study of East Asian art in the West was not an occasional event, for as early as the 17th and 18th centuries, there was a “Chinese fever”, and cultural specialties from China continued to pour into the West, which had an important influence on Western gardens, architecture, and art at that time. For the Western countries that had a strong desire to change the status quo, they had great interest and enthusiasm for East Asian art.

First of all, in terms of the language of painting such as line, color and form, the point, line and surface in early Western painting did not have a separate meaning, but were only dependent on the object and objectively shaped, but in East Asian art, the artistry of line and color was emphasized more, and the line and color used were not exactly the same as everyday, with more emphasis on subjective color. Unlike the competent Western art, East Asian art formed a duality of abstraction and realism through the unification of subject and object, while the West formed a kind of archetype through refinement. Thus, in the mid-19th century, the Impressionists, who were looking for a breakthrough, were also attracted to this unique style of art that was purely pictorial in its use of line and color. They found that even if they had no knowledge of the background of the story of the picture, they could still be attracted by the picture and appreciate the beauty in it.

In addition, composition is another innovation that Impressionists sought from East Asian art. Unlike Western three-dimensional perspective, East Asian art transcends the traditional Western fixed-point perspective and adopts a scattered perspective, which makes the sense of three-dimensionality disappear and produces a completely different painting method from the West. East Asian art is characterized by simplicity, such as the white space in 17th century Japanese painting and Chinese painting.

Thus, the Impressionists gained the following inspirations: firstly, they flattened and simplified the depth of the picture, broke the traditional thinking of fixed vision, began to appear cross-line composition, formed multi-view point inclusion, and formed scattered perspective; secondly, they replaced the expression of three-dimensionality with flat color, adopted subjective color, and emphasized the painting method of using contrast and contrasting color to suggest the volume of the object in East Asian art. Thirdly, they pay more attention to the expression of the spirituality of the subject, including a certain rhythm of life of the subject, which also makes them shift their focus to brushwork painting, combining brushwork with images, which is also a fundamental point in the East Asian art vocabulary.

3. East Asian art in the impressionist painters

3.1 Whistler

Whistler was one of the most avant-garde painters in the 19th century art history. Because he did not pursue his personal style and did not form a specific style, his influence on later generations was not as great as that of other Impressionists, but it is undeniable that he opened the door to modern Western art together with the early Impressionists. He went to Paris, the capital of art, to study the realism of Courbet, but Whistler was always looking for breakthroughs and innovations, so he turned his attention to the “Japanese style” that was prevalent in Paris at that time. He began to collect a large number of works of East Asian art, including Chinese blue and white porcelain and Japanese prints and screen paintings. At this time, Whistler’s obsession with East Asian art was so overwhelming that the ceiling and walls were filled with East Asian art. In 1864, he created a series of works influenced by the East Asian art style, thus achieving a break with the realist style.

The Oriental influence is particularly evident in Whistler’s “White Symphony Suite,” which has received widespread attention. In *White Symphony No. 2: Woman in White in a Small Frame* (Fig. 1), first of all, in terms of composition, in contrast to the traditional Western realism, in which the center of the picture is reserved for the protagonist, Whistler places the figure on the left side of the picture, leaving a lot of space on the right side. The viewer’s eyes are then focused by the girl’s eyes and the mirror figure’s eyes on the vase, a Chinese orchid vase that Whistler particularly cherished. Whistler’s vision of East Asian art is not only reflected in this work, but is guided step by step through the fireplace to the girl and then to the vase, rather than simply placing the protagonist in the center of the picture. This way of guiding the center of the composition by the arrangement of the view composition and thus not revealing it is unique in the European tradition. Secondly, in terms of color, Whistler diluted the colors with gasoline, abandoning the traditional gloss of painting and adopting the lightness of the colors used in Chinese painting, which is also a mark of East Asian art that can be clearly seen in Gu.



Fig. 1 Whistler’s White Symphony No. 2: The Lady in White in a Small Frame 1864

Whistler’s landscapes are also heavily influenced by East Asian ink paintings, such as *Gray and Silver: Lake Charles Marina* (Fig. 2), which uses a scattered perspective composition and abandons the depiction of spatial details to convey the inner meaning of the image. Whistler’s love of East Asian art is evident in the picture, making him a pioneering figure in the Impressionist Enlightenment and thus significant in art history.

3.2 Manet

Not only Whistler, but also Manet, one of the early Impressionist painters, was inspired by East Asian art. Manet and Whistler created a series of new generation works in Paris and London from 1862 to 1864 respectively, thus marking the inspiration of the modernization movement in the West. Manet’s love for East Asia and the influence of East Asian art on him are reflected in the following aspects.

Firstly Removing the depth of the scene from the picture. At this time, Manet did not paint in the traditional three-dimensional perspective, but highlighted



Fig. 2 Whistler “Grey and Silver: The Docks of Lake Charles”, 1875

two-dimensional space. For example, his most famous portrait of Émile Zola (Figure 3) was created as a tribute to Zola's support of his style.



Fig. 3 Manet, Portrait of Emile Zola, 1863

Secondly The picture is more minimalist. Comparing with the work “The Birth of Venus” by the academic painter Alexander Cabanel, we can easily find that “Olympia” (Fig. 4) minimizes the three-dimensionality of the figure by flat painting, so as to achieve the effect of flat painting, except for the overlapping of the two legs and other parts reflecting a small amount of volume, all other parts are painted by flat painting method, which is precisely reflected in the East Asian art for the middle tone This is a minimalist painting method that reflects the abandonment of the middle tone in East Asian art. The Birth of Venus (Fig. 5), on the other hand, uses a three-dimensional perspective to reveal the full three-dimensionality of the picture. The latter is more ornamental, while the former is able to depart from the ornamental appearance and focus more on the expression of emotion in the picture. In addition to the above two points, Manet's treatment of the disappearance of light sources and the expression of the overall sense of the picture also formed his own style characteristics based on the characteristics of East Asian art painting.



Fig. 4 Manet, Olympia, 1863



Fig. 5 Alexander Cabanel, The Birth of Venus, 1863

4. Summary

Although Impressionism cannot be separated from the influence of East Asian art from its emergence to its development, it still essentially follows the development direction of Western art, and the Oriental element is only an important element to promote the development of Western art. Over the centuries, not only Eastern art has influenced Western art, but also Eastern painters have studied Western art in many places amidst the artists' desire for new reform and innovative consciousness. Such cross-cultural aesthetics can often produce a dramatic collision or crossover, in which a positive meaning is created, leading to the development of Eastern and Western art in a more innovative direction. Whether in East Asia or the West, there is a certain correlation and interoperability between art and art, and it is precisely because the Impressionist painters seized the correlation between them that they were able to draw inspiration for innovation and open a new chapter of modern Impressionism.

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