

# The expressive features of Colville's works from the raven image

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**Abstract:** Jung believed that the image created by the artist is the result of a certain cultural archetype passed down from generation to generation in an unconscious way. Gombrich believed that even representational art is still conceptual and belongs to the accumulation process of artistic vocabulary, which begins with the diagram. Throughout Colville's works, it can be found that the artist has a special preference for the image of crow in the creation of works involving birds, while the image chosen by the artist can reflect the artist's creation psychology and expression habits. This paper first briefly describes the evolution of crow image in Western culture, and then starts with the crow image in Colville's works to analyze the expression characteristics of the artist's works.

**Key words:** Crow; Image; Alex Colville

## I. The Evolution of raven imagery in Western culture

Looking back at the long river of history, we can see the figure of crows in myths and legends, literature and art works. At the same time, the cultural meanings represented by the image of crows are constantly changing. Different nations have endowed crows with various symbolic meanings due to political, economic, cultural and other factors in the process of historical development.

### 1. The image of crow in myths and legends

As a scavenger bird, crows have a more sensitive sense of smell than humans and a wider field of vision when flying in the air, so it is easier to find the carrion discarded by large predators. Humans are also able to use the birds' guidance to find food and satisfy their hunger. In the close contact with crows, humans gradually understand a lot of crows' habits. The sensitivity of crows will make them fly away before the danger strikes, and humans can also get the signal to take refuge in time. This is also the reason why in the early human mythology, crows always appear as prophets who guide human beings to avoid disasters and messengers of gods who bring hope. The habit of the crow always taking off in the early morning is also associated with the early people and the rising sun, and its black feathers are like the darkness of the long night. Therefore, in the legend of the early people, the crow opens the light for mankind from the darkness. However, the evolution of civilization has gradually abandoned the old friend of the crow.

Humans began to consciously erase the traces of their old friendship with crows. In the now-famous Noah's Ark myth, where pigeons found land in a flood, the raven from the original Gilgamesh became a dereliction of duty. The Roman poet Ovid, in the metamorphosis, claimed that the crow, though an oracle to the sun god Apollo, was burned by the sun god for his outspoken bad news, will be a white feathers burned into black, so the voice has become hoarse. This is one of the most popular explanations for why the crow is a bad omen.

### 2. The image of crow in art works

Many artists have chosen crows in their paintings. Whether as the main object of the painting or arranged in the corner of the painting, the image of crows frequently appears on the canvas.

For example, in Caspar David Friedrich's *The Tree of Crows*, crows are scattered around the canvas; Vincent Van Gogh's *"Crows in the Rye"*, with crows flapping their wings between a dark sky and surging wheat; Andrew Wise's *Crows*, with their heads dangling and struggling to fall, a bird lying on its side in a bush, a crow looking down on a moor and a cottage in an open field; Alex Colville's *Seven Ravens* and *The Cyclist and the Raven*, among others. The images of crows in paintings often represent loneliness, sadness and death, and the dark feathers and body naturally have the advantage of creating an oppressive atmosphere.

It is no coincidence that artists have chosen the image of a raven to express similar emotions. Jung believed that the images created by artists are the result of a certain cultural archetype passed down from generation to generation in an unconscious way, that is to say, the psychological motivation of artistic creation is not only based on the artist's ontogenetic history, but more importantly, on the human germline history as a grand and solid foundation. The image of crow is often used as an omen of bad luck in art works. On the one hand, it is undoubtedly influenced by the collective unconsciousness of human beings, and on the other hand, it is also related to the artist's life experience and the territory in which he created.

## II. The crow image in Colville's works

### 1. The proportion of crow image in his works

A total of 72 works were counted in this study. Because the theme of a work may involve two or three themes at the same time, such as nature and human figures, human figures and animals, etc., the statistics on the number of works may overlap, and the percentage is still taken as the total number.

Among the 72 works collected in this study, 32 are related to the depictions of animals, accounting for 44.4%. Birds account for 12.5% of the works involving animals, and crows account for 75% of the works involving birds. Although only 4 of the 72 works in this study depict birds, 3 of the 4 works are crows, which is enough to show the artist's preference for crows.

**Table 1: Statistical table of Colville's works in this study**

Works involve Themes	Number of works	Percentage of total
Natural	39	54.2%
People	56	77.8%
Animals	32	44.4%
War	7	9.72%
Birds	4	5.56%
Crows	3	4.17%

**Table 2: Statistical table of the proportion of works involving birds and crows in animal subjects**

Works on Subject matter	Quantity	Percentage of total
Animals	32	100%
Birds	4	12.5%
Crows	3	9.38%

## 2 Reasons for choosing crow imagery

In Canadian Indian mythology, the raven is often both a mastermind and a creator, so for Canadian artists, the image of the raven has sufficient symbolic significance. This may have been one of the prerequisites for Colville's choice of the image. The image of the raven in the artist's works does not fully represent the bad omen of death and loneliness in traditional Western culture, which may also be influenced by this.

Colville has also drawn many research sketches of crows, indicating that the artist has always been interested in depicting this bird. Another aspect of Colville's distinctive artistic style is the literary similarity of his paintings. In many ways, the most significant development of Colville's intellectual interest has come from its love of literature. In "Seven Crows", the artist's choice of images of Crows is also related to a traditional poem: One crow is sad two crows are happy three crows are a letter four crows are children five crows are silver six crows are gold seven crows are untold stories□

The scene of this work is not imaginary. It is a special landscape that has fascinated the artist for many years. Under a low sky, a river meanders toward the distant mountains, the withered yellow plain raised a wooded knoll, and the river disappeared behind it. In this kind of nature, the artist arranged seven crows in different postures on the screen, which is the most touching work in the animal painting, "Seven Crows"(Figure 1) . In the vast world, seven crows from near and far to fly wantonly, leading the viewer's eyes to look at the knoll and water sky boundary. In the cyclist and the Crow, the Crow is also arranged in an imaginary relationship structure. In the quiet sunshine, crows and people are in harmony and wonderfully on the same level line, heading in the same direction. Colville's crows always seem to appear casually in the frame, perfectly coexisting with the people and nature around them, as if they were born that way. The performance of such a picture does not mean that the artist can vent without thinking or daub at will, and can rationalize such a scene that does not exist in reality without the artist's imagery thinking, before the expression must be after the creator's deliberation and long-term accumulation, is a mature, advanced way to express personal feelings, is completed by the interaction of Sense and Sensibility.

## III. Expressive characteristics of Colville's works

### 1. Clear structure of order

Colville's procedure for painting is to sincerely and intuitively transform objects into figurative forms. When he decided to represent an idea, he would draw a series of sketches to develop the composition and details of the picture. What starts as a subjective sketch that seems to be mixed with fantasy develops into a carefully measured, arranged geometric structure that is then used as the basis for the entire work, from which he continues to refine the final work. For example, in Seven Ravens (FIG. 1), we can see a large horizontal structural line group of grass, water, and horizon that slopes to the right. In this work, the image of crows also plays a role in organizing the moving lines. Surrounded by the seven crows and the distant mountains, they also form an oval structure that inclines to the right, interspersed with the straight structure line. Other parts of the painting, such as the direction of the growth of grass, the direction of the crow's wings and the arrangement of clouds, can be seen that the artist has arranged them, and the tilt Angle echoes the overall trend of the painting.

This painting space structure is based on line segment perspective. From this point of view, Colville's creative method inherits the tradition of Western painting. The basic principles of unified perspective were developed as early as the fifteenth century in Florence, but Colville has long altered, criticized and abandoned the traditional principles of painting in modern painting, and continued to use the habit of unified perspective to describe the image of the person and the subjective construction of space that we can understand. The persistence of this method of composition is important not only for the actual composition of the picture, but also for the artist's inner expression.

Colville's use of repeated structures reflects his view of the artist's responsibility. He believes that the artist must bring order to the intricacies and vagaries of life. He liked to tell the ancient Greeks about hell, which they described as chaotic and dark. It is the duty of a man, and of an artist, to try to give order and an intellectual basis to the world, by which men may act, and to restore harmony to the irrational and incomprehensible aspects of life.

### 2. Subtle textures of color

Directly viewing Colville's works, we can see two prominent painting habits, one is the small and dense brushstrokes, the other is the subtle changes of color layers, the combination of the two makes the media Colville uses mostly silk screen prints and acrylic, but also

includes oil painting and tempera. Among them, acrylic is mostly painted on Masonette fiberboard, which is light and porous with a rough surface, and the artist's small brushstrokes make the texture of the picture more vivid and rich.

Light is very important in Western traditional painting. Light and shade and color are the tools used by artists to express light, and light and shade are also related to color. In modern painting, artists are influenced by the flatness and symbolization of the painting style, which weakens or omits the role of light in their works. Colville's work continues this concept of representation by dispersing light sources to minimize the damage that light and shadow can do to form and color. However, this weakening of light and shadow also alienates the real scene depicted from reality, and the result is that the picture has some sense of surreal. There is no clear boundary between light and dark in the image created by him, and the transitional changes of the body are completely soft and subtle color gradients, while the surface of the image boldly omits many details to show the texture, so that the overall sense of the picture is highlighted.



**Figure 1 "Seven Crows" 1980**



**Figure 2**

"The cyclist and the raven"(Fig. 2) depicts a scene in summer. The first space of the picture is a woman on a bicycle and a raven. The woman is turning her head to the right of the flying raven, the second space in the picture is a wheat field floating in the Sun. Structurally, the woman's line of sight, the flight path of the crow, and the horizontal lines of the field of wheat run parallel to each other across the screen. The fields, which cover large areas of the screen, are mostly blue-green, brown-red, and yellow-green, and appear to reflect sunlight from erect leaves onto white translucent ears held up by rounded, opaque grains. The light source is in the upper left corner of the frame, the edge of the Crow's wings, the top of the woman's hunched torso, and the top of her arms and legs. It also depicts bloom in warm colors, and the bike's metal frame depicts a cool bloom. We can see that the artist used the change of color lightness to show the volume sense and different texture of the subject.

### 3. Animals coexist with nature

Gombrich believes that the difference between artists is not in imitating nature, but in their different experiences with nature. All representational art is still conceptual, a process of accumulation of artistic vocabulary. Even the most realistic art begins with preschemata, with the artist's painting technique; And this technique of representation is constantly revised until it matches the real world. Crows are different from artist to artist because of their different experiences facing nature and because of the different angles they choose to reproduce. Compared with other artists, crows in Colville's works are less desperate and sad, but more calm and free, which is inseparable from the artist's attitude towards animals and nature.

Colville's attitude towards nature is typical of the "Canadian style" of the old generation. He is influenced by the natural scenery of Canada and the concepts of the old generation of literary artists. He agreed that animals have a similar rational part to their instincts, that they don't do evil, and that they live in harmony with nature. In the absence of humans, the artist's crows (animals) are not relegated to a secondary position, but are given the status of subjects. Even in works with humans, crows exist simultaneously as another subject in the picture. Colville's other works about animals also have this feature. Animals and humans in his works coexist, and they are all creatures living in nature. Animals and humans often move in the same direction. For example, the shepherd and his shepherd in Three Shepherds and the father and his Dog in My Father and His Dog all keep the same orientation. There are also works in which animals look at the audience instead of the characters, such as the Strong Cow, the black dog in the Milk Cart, and the horse in The French Cross.

The artist's attitude towards animals and nature also affects the inner meaning of animal images. Colville's crow changes from an ominous emissaries to a quiet life in nature, living with human beings in nature and gradually disappearing with time.

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