

In Pursuit of the Primitiveness of Easel Painting - The Emergence of Bad Painting

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Abstract. Art, as a manifestation of the human mind, is not valued for its objective depiction of the external world but the subjective recreation based on objective objects. The intuitive feelings and inner beliefs of painting override the objective reality of the depicted objects. And bad painting with the unreserved catharsis of emotions exists as a new artistic trend and a creative path that emerged in Europe and America in the late 1970s. At the same time, Gombrich believed that any painting that meets the two criteria of baseline mode and minimum mode can be classified as primitivism art, and the rebelliousness of bad painting to the established rules, the originality of its content and the pursuit of the true nature of painting share similarity to primitivism art. Throughout the history of art in China and abroad, the phenomenon of bad painting has appeared periodically in the process of art everywhere, and the development process of art itself has also undergone a spiral development from barbaric obscurantism to scientific truth-seeking and finally return to primitive. Therefore, this paper will analyze the phenomenon of bad painting at home and abroad, its spiritual connotation and philosophical foundation, establish the connection between bad painting and primitivism art, explore the primitive interest in bad painting art, and discuss how bad painting uses its unique approach to promote the aesthetic revolution of contemporary easel painting.

Keywords: Bad Painting; Primitivism Art; Unconsciousness; Return to Nature.

1. Introduction

As for the causes and stylistic characteristics of bad painting, domestic and foreign scholars such as Yi Ying, Zhu Xingguo, Stephen McKeown, and Marcia Tucker have already achieved fruitful research results, laying the foundation for further study. However, the spiritual connotation, philosophical foundation, and correlation between bad painting and primitivism art have yet to be further investigated. Bad painting is a complex concept that does not refer specifically to a particular painting style or group of artists, but rather to an artistic phenomenon that emerges in the process of art development. The spiritual connotation of this art phenomenon aims to break the hegemonic culture under the high-level civilization and advocate the return of art to nature, to the earth and to the body. The philosophical foundation of bad painting art is based on collective unconsciousness proposed by Jung. This theory emphasizes the artist's return to the true state of human beings in creation and searching for a world that is beyond the reach of human consciousness under the cover of modern civilization, which is the collective unconscious world accumulated by human consciousness so far. Rather than standing alone, bad painting is inevitably related to modernism, postmodernism and primitivism, among which primitivism plays a guiding role in the emergence of bad painting. The primitivism art mentioned in this paper refers to art with primitive interest as opposed to the primitive art of red powder and animal teeth in the Paleolithic period. Although primitive paintings cannot be defined as artworks created under active conditions, artists, with the development of contemporary art, have gradually developed a tendency to "return to the primitive" - the pursuit of mystery, the unconsciousness, and the primitiveness of painting materials. Such a tendency is especially reflected in the bad paintings, providing another way to pursue the inner truth in contemporary artistic creation. In this paper, the phenomenon of bad painting, its spiritual connotation, philosophical foundation, and its historical relevance to primitive art are discussed with the aim of exploring the unique creative approach of bad painting, and then demonstrating the influence of bad painting on the development of contemporary painting.

2. The Phenomenon of Bad Painting in both Chinese and Foreign Art History

The term bad painting first appeared in Italian art criticism and was supposed to be related to the art of poverty, which “resisted the erasure of historical memory by modernity, reflected on mechanical rationalism, advocated a return to nature, and evoked traditional, indigenous perceptions and memories from before industrial civilization. And this was where poverty art developed. In the 1960s and 1970s, American modern art sought to reduce art to a minimal, impersonal and highly industrialized form, which was called “monk art” by critics of poverty art. And only return art to nature, to the earth, and to the body can such cultural hegemony be broken. It was through two exhibitions of bad painting in 1978 and 2008 that the establishment and popularization of the term bad painting were made possible. Besides, the phenomenon of bad painting, inevitable in the history of art development both at home and abroad, can be traced back to an earlier period.

Bad painting is an inevitable phenomenon in art development and moreover, a phenomenon that is unparalleled at all times all over the world. The badness in Western art history is usually demonstrated as a concept over form and content over technology. If this is accepted as the criterion for judging bad paintings, then the phenomenon of “bad” paintings in art history can be traced back to prehistoric times. In traditional artworks, art forms were finely categorized through material media, painting techniques, and artistic effects, and artists were confined to a relatively closed frame under the constraints of rules and materials. However, primitivism art works are rooted in the unconscious human spirit of ancient people who were close to animals. And the rock wall art presented in the “soul of rock painting” is the full expression of artists’ unconscious and unaware “collective unconsciousness” in the process of creation, manifesting a primitive instinct. Compared with traditional art works, primitive art enjoys a higher spiritual connotation than expressive form. Even without any rules and regulations, it is closer to the origin of art.

The most obvious controversy between good and bad painting in the history of Western art began with the rise of Romanticism Art in the nineteenth century. Delacroix’s *Massacre on the Island of Shea* was called a “pictorial massacre” by the neoclassical master Engel. And since then, most of the classics in art history have been denied “bad” at the time of their creation. Courbet’s *Bathing Girl* was whipped by the French Emperor and the Empress thought that the naked girl in the painting was no longer a normal human figure; Miller’s *The Gleaner*, Rodin’s *Balzac*, Manet’s *Lunch on the Lawn* and Monet’s *Sunrise* were all cursed as bad paintings, but eventually became widely known classics. Fauvism, the beginning of modernist art, was also rejected in its entirety.

The definition of bad painting in Chinese art history differs from that in Western art history. While western bad painting mostly refers to rebellion in concept, the badness in Chinese painting focuses on pen and ink. During the Song Dynasty, the Chinese aesthetic had basically developed a specific “standardized formula” - the elegant and refined literati painting. Therefore, Liang Kai’s (Liang Lunatic) Ink painting was a manifestation of bad painting at the time. And Liang Kai’s Ink Painting of Immortals was, in a way, the precursor of bad painting in China. Xu Wei in the late Ming Dynasty in the wake of Liang Kai and Fu Shan with his bad calligraphy (ugly calligraphy), as well as Li Jin and Zhu Jianxin in the contemporary era, were the founders and promoters in the development of Chinese bad painting.

3. The Pursuit of Bad Painting to Return to Nature

The spirit of bad painting aims to subvert the trend and return art creation to its originality. In the contemporary world of image media, many artists are looking for a new way out of painting. And technology has provided artists with new creative mediums (such as AR/VR technology), but this has intensified the cry of “death of painting”, leading to the overwhelming situation of easel paintings. The existing easel paintings are inevitably burdened with too many complex factors, and their themes and forms cannot escape the fate of going with the flow. Art is pure and innocent, and bad painting starts from the most primitive needs of human beings themselves and refuses to be dominated by the market, leaving aside all distractions and faithfully expressing the “true” qualities that art should have.

The rustic, rough, contrasting colors and varied shapes fully reflect the celebration of life, the fear of nature and the love of life in terms of spirit and emotion.

Comparing the Paleolithic cave paintings and sculptures with the sculptures of the West Hellenistic period, it can be found that the latter seemed to be more rigorous and ideal while the former was more artistically realistic. During the Renaissance when art became more realistic and more consistent with the objective, the emotionality of the author's creation tended to be neglected. Although this period witnessed the further development of realistic painting, it also suffered from the loss of the true nature of painting. After the 19th century when modern art began to develop, artists started to follow the example of nature, pursue the expression of emotion and return to primitive painting. On the surface, modern art seemed to be detached from the painting itself, but in fact, it was in pursuit of the original stage of painting, abandoning the original constraints and habitual modes of thinking to return to the painting itself. In Picasso's work *Painter and Model*, the painter's treatment is very similar to that of primitive art. Specifically, they both point to the depths of the soul without the pomposity, artifice and glamour and focus all attention on the picture itself. From the "sketch" of the primitive period to the "brushwork" of the Renaissance and then back to the "sketch" of Picasso's period, painting has undergone a process of reincarnation.

The work of post-World War II American graffiti artist Jean-Michel Basquiat was also once classified as a bad painting. [2]Throughout Basquiat's work, there is a strong sense of primitiveness in much of his work, a primitiveness that came from two sources - human impulse and primitive tribal art. And he drew on African primitive art in particular in his work. Since the cradle of human civilization, the ancestors of *Homo sapiens* have left us many mysterious and monumental primitive works of art, which, from an aesthetic point of view rather than their practical functions, contain a profound reflection on the nature of human existence and always express the relationship between human beings and nature.

While technology, economics, society, and politics have changed dramatically over the millennia, one thing has remained the same: human beings themselves, and even though the tools and institutions available to modern people are very different from those of "biblical times," the deep structure of the human heart remains the same. That's why we can still find ourselves in the words in the Bible, the *Analects* or the tragedy of Sophocles. In the works of the theater of the past, the times of Oedipus and Hamlet may be far away, but their emotional conflicts are no different from our modern ones. This is one of the most important reasons why art, as an effective way for the human mind to manifest itself, must express the natural nature of human beings, or be expressed in the natural nature of human beings.

4. The Primitive Interest of Bad Painting

Primitivism art is distinguished from primitive art. Primitive art refers to rock paintings, statues, vessels, and accessories with practical or sorcerous functions that occurred in the Paleolithic period, such as European cave paintings or animal teeth and bones worn by Upper Cave Man. As primitive art, they did not have aesthetic functions at that time, but were mostly sorcerous rituals to pray for blessings and ward off evil spirits. Primitivist art, on the other hand, was an important art phenomenon in the history of Western art at the end of the nineteenth century. In the mid-19th century, due to the impact of the Industrial Revolution, the relationship between people and people as well as people and nature was affected to a certain extent. People began to tire of the established order brought by industrial civilization and sought to pursue a natural and primitive state of life. As early as the 18th century, French Enlightenment activist Jean-Jacques Rousseau proposed to return to nature and return to primitive life.

From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, the history of Western art saw the emergence of a group of remarkable primitivist artists, such as Gauguin, Henri Rousseau, Picasso, Matisse and others. Gombrich once said that in the more primitive period, artists were not as adept at representing people's faces and gestures as they are now; they worked so hard to express the feelings they wanted

to convey in a more moving way. And in Gombrich's book *The Preference for the Primitive - Episodes in the history of Western Taste and Art*, two criteria for judging the characteristics of primitivism art were proposed. The first criterion is the baseline mode which means that the works are not concerned with proportion, perspective and light and darkness, and the space created by the picture is not a three-dimensional space but a two-dimensional flat decorative space. And the second one is the minimal mode which refers to works that are not realistic but characteristically depicted with simple and rough lines. The minimal mode often includes artistic patterns depicted by those without any professional training. Therefore, the criteria of "baseline mode" and "minimal mode" raised by Gombrich can be referred to judge the primitive characteristics of a work. With any one of these two points satisfied, the work can be considered primitive.

Around 1950 was the golden age of the American contemporary art boom, and Joan Brown was absolutely gifted in this regard. In an interview, Joan Brown said that "I don't even know how I did it. The different elements were always free to show up in the paintings and I could only sense that they are going to appear; It's actually a special state of unconsciousness"[1]. Most of his works are based on female or animal subjects with bright colors, cartoon graffiti, and figurative symbols as the main methods, which are the hallmarks of the bad painting movement in 20th century America.

Li Jin can be regarded as a representative figure of the bad painting movement in China. With his paintings reflecting his characteristics, Li Jin should have had the rules and regulations of a literati painter as he received professional training in traditional Chinese painting. However, his paintings are rather "anti-academy", with heavy brushwork and rough figures that are very different from the traditional forms of Chinese painting. It is his character rather than his incompetence that results in this situation. Li Jin, emphasizing self-expression, is destined to go against the traditional academic school. In his discussion of the relationship between collective unconsciousness and artistic creation, Sigmund Freud mentioned that "people in modern society have lost their own self and self-worth due to the bondage of the industrialized mode of production, and art is a search for the primitive and simple way of life"[2]. In modern society, especially in post-modern society, nature has left us. With commercial symbols, graphic media, and fragmented information having taken over our brains, the self has long been lost, only to be discovered or restored in the depths of memory, in dreams, and in the subconscious. However, in today's highly civilized and institutionalized world, not everyone knows or dares to express the self in the depths of memory, and Freud believed that only the artist can say it. Li Jin's works represent such a self, a memory that is blurred and mutated, a forgotten memory of childhood and a mnemonic of the collective unconsciousness of the time. Deep in the collective unconsciousness is the primitive desire of human beings, which floats in the subconscious. And Li Jin paints the strong life and the life of desire. He expresses the unspeakable, inscrutable, inescapable self of modern people - the self that is being lost in the institutionalized society, returning to the primitive unconscious state," He uses rough burlap paper to erase the brush and ink, and uses shaky lines to combine images, gaudy colors, clumsy calligraphy, and absurd inscriptions that were self-explanatory"[3]. The price of high-level civilization is the dissolution of the traces of the human ego, and the emergence of bad painting is not a reconstruction of the forms of civilization, but a return to nature, so it is formless.

5. The Enlightenment of Bad Painting to Contemporary Artistic Creation

In a recent lecture, Professor Pang Maokun, the director of the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts, also spoke of "bad painting as a structure for perfection". What excessive civilization means for human beings is that the self is dissolved into the symbols of civilization[2], and the dissolved self can never return to its true state. This is just like under art training, the original "innocent eyes" are trained to become "painter's eyes" with rigorous sketches and uniform color tones, under which the unique sense of art gets lost while acquiring art knowledge. This is the inescapable fate of every painter trained by academic instruction. Once a person is institutionalized, it is difficult to return to the state before institutionalization. However, it is a well-known fact that artists and painters are

different in nature. The value of an artist lies in creation, while the painter is subordinate to the technique. When an artist is bound by technology, he is inevitably reduced to the status of a painter.

For modern people, bad painting has provided an intense spiritual manifestation of their unconscious mental state, which is repressed by high logic and rationalization. More and more academic artists have chosen to abandon the “good” and turn to the “bad” and move towards the path of bad painting. The Italian painter Nicola Samori is best known for his way of tearing apart a painting or sculpture based on a classical subject, using a destructive attitude or even a sharp instrument to tear off the face of a painted figure, either by sprinkling it with acid or by using the qualities of oil paint; the German neo-expressionism artist Baselitz reversed the traditional oil portrait, creating an artistic experience that is very different from the traditional one. The German Neo-Expressionist artist Baselitz reversed the traditional oil portraits, creating an artistic feeling that was very different from the traditional aesthetic; the contemporary Chinese artist Mao Xiaoguang believed that the so-called bad painting was the accidental manifestation of the artist’s inspiration in the process of creation; Li Jin and Zhu Xinjian stand as the top figures in the phenomenon of bad painting in China. The “cynical realism” that emerged in the 1990s was the bad painting of the avant-garde that was suppressed at the time. But after entering the 21st century, this pheasant became the phoenix and turned into the contemporary art that financial capital feverishly chased, thus driving the long-lasting “contemporary art” trend.

6. Conclusion

Bad painting literally means “anti-standard” and “anti-normative” painting. The so-called “standards” and “norms” were set by Classicism and Modernism, while bad painting is “conceptual painting” that is free from such standards and norms. (Unlike conceptual art, art created independently of medium, theme, and form, conceptual painting belongs to easel painting regardless of its theme and form). If the good paintings under market domination are the products of the artists’ rationality and restraint, then the bad paintings are the release of the artist’s sensibility and ego that is suppressed by rationality in the creation. Each historical period boasts an aesthetic stereotype that fits the characteristics of the particular era. As the era develops, its traditional aesthetic spirit changes with an unavoidable revolution in the aesthetic field. And the aesthetic revolution will inevitably contribute to the periodic production of the above-mentioned phenomenon of bad painting.

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