

The Analysis of the Vision of the Sermon: A Comparative study on Gauguin's relationship with Symbolism and Fauvism

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Abstract. Paul Gauguin is one of the three masters of post-impressionist painting school. The Vision of the Sermon is a landmark work of Gauguin in the process of artistic creation, which was created during Gauguin's sketching on the Brittany peninsula. It is through the completion of this work that Gauguin is known as the "founder of symbolism". Through the image analysis of the Vision of the Sermon, this paper summarizes and compares Gauguin's painting characteristics with symbolism and fauvism. Combined with scientific literature research, we can better understand Gauguin's artistic characteristics and his thinking on art and life. Symbolism and fauvism all have many common skills and characteristics with Gauguin and have a close relationship with each other. Through research, we can comprehensively and objectively analyze the connotation of Gauguin's illusion after his sermon, understand Gauguin's painting style and ideas, and witness Gauguin's influence on other painting schools and their position in the history of art.

Keywords: Paul Gauguin, Symbolism, Fauvism.

1. Introduction

The Vision of the Sermon was created in 1888. It is a landmark work in Gauguin's artistic creation process and the forerunner of a series of religious fantasy works. This work was drawn with the help of Genesis 32:24-30 [1]. The scene depicted in Vision of the Sermon is mainly the back of the women under the stage and the illusion in front of them when the priest of the parish of Brittany explained the doctrine. This paper aims to analyze the Vision of the Sermon of Gauguin's works, analyze the characteristics of Gauguin's artistic style, and compare it with the art schools that have a certain connection with Gauguin's artistic style, to have a clearer understanding of Gauguin's artistic characteristics and the influence and position of Gauguin in the history of art.

At present, there are many studies on Gauguin. The written materials left by Gauguin in his life are limited. Through the letters between him and his friends and the works of some theorists, we can still have a more comprehensive and detailed understanding of his life. Among them are letters from him and his friend Morris. Maugham, a famous British novelist, wrote the novel the Moon and Sixpence based on Gauguin's life from a stockbroker to a poor painter [2].

This paper compares Gauguin's artistic style reflected in his Vision of the Sermon with symbolism and fauvism. In 1886, the poet Jean Moreas first put forward the concept of "symbolism"; In 1891, art critic Albert Aurier published the article "symbolism in painting: Paul Gauguin" in the magazine *Mercure de France* [3]. The article published the declaration of the symbolic painting by strongly praising Gauguin's Vision of the Sermon, which established Gauguin's leading position in the ideological trend of symbolic art; In As for why Gauguin and fauvism are studied together, it is because they have so many things in common Both of them were in the autumn Salon of Paris art in 1905 at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. When the famous critic Vauxcelles saw Marquet's work the head of a child, he evaluated it as "Donatello in a beast cage". Later, Gil Blas quoted this passage in the art magazine, Soon the art world began to use "Fauvism" "This expression refers to this artistic creation style. From the macro perspective of the times, they must be influenced by the interesting points of the times at that time. They all advocate the plane decoration to form the interest. The shapes of the objects are hooked with a certain line, applied with simple and loud colors, slightly deformed the objects, yearned for the primitive directness and simplicity, disdained the natural description of the objects, and the common characteristic is obvious

It shows the characteristic of the times, and different characteristic points show their respective values [4].

At present, the research on this aspect is based on the analysis of the picture of the Vision of the Sermon. Among them, there is also the analysis of the style characteristics shown by Gauguin in this painting, as well as a rough analysis of the relationship between his style characteristics and other artistic styles, or simply compare the relationship between Gauguin and other styles and schools from the perspective of the artist. This paper aims to analyze Gauguin's painting style, and systematically compare and summarize it with the two closely related style schools, by substituting the painting characteristics and styles reflected in the Vision of the Sermon into the analysis, we can better understand Gauguin's unique painting style charm, his current state of mind and his subjective thinking on art and life.

2. The Vision of the Sermon

2.1 The relationship between Gauguin and symbolism

At the end of the 19th century, after the Franco-Prussian War, serious social unrest occurred in France, which bound people's free lives and depressed their hearts. In addition, most countries in Western Europe have entered the industrial era. The rapid industrial development has affected people's outlook on survival and values, as well as the imbalance of natural balance. As a special group in society, painters are keenly aware of the unbearable situation of the current society and are eager to seek a simple, natural and beautiful primitive life. The simple description of objective nature can not meet the artists' inner spiritual world, so they began to think about and explore the essence of human nature [5]. In 1886, the publication of Moreas's Declaration of Symbolism provided a unified name for symbolism aesthetics.

Gauguin was once the master of Post Impressionism. With the change of ideas, Impressionism's description of light and color in nature gradually deviated from Gauguin's artistic point of view. He was tired of depicting nature and wanted to pursue an original and real feeling. Gauguin yearned for the original and real feeling. The hope of creating primitive Symbolic Art opens the road of symbolism [6]. Gauguin believes that Impressionism is visible to the naked eye and cannot reflect his inner feelings. The Vision of the Sermon was created after Gauguin set foot on the journey of the Brittany peninsula. In this work, we can see his obvious preference for the change of symbolic color. In short, it is to use some non-naturalistic colors, lines, and composition to express the painter's feelings and thoughts, not the kind of abstraction that people can't understand. In other words, he expresses his feelings by transforming real things.

The scene depicted in Vision of the Sermon is mainly the back of the women under the stage and the illusion in front of them when the priest of the parish of Brittany explained the doctrine. The women at the bottom left of the picture are dressed in costumes and praying piously. The white hats on each person's head account for two-thirds of the whole picture; The scene of "Jacob wrestling with the angel" is unexpectedly reduced by Gauguin, which is located in an inconspicuous position in the upper right corner of the picture. In this way, the viewer can understand that this symbolic picture is both reality and fantasy. Gauguin uses an intuitive and symbolic approach to show the piety and fantasy of Brittany peasant women when they listen to the doctrine in front of the viewer. The picture of the peasant woman should be further reduced, which shows that the original picture of the peasant woman should be occupied.

The picture of Jacob and the angel is divided into the foreground, middle scene, and back scene. In the middle shot, a tree trunk intercepted obliquely from the top left to the bottom right divides the work into two pictures: the long view at the top right and the close view at the bottom left. The upper right space depicts the fighting scene: an angel with golden wings and dark blue clothes behind him is wrestling with Jacob with his head down and black clothes, both barefoot. At the top left of the picture are two rows of women wearing white hats, which gradually shrink back according to the perspective relationship that is not necessarily rigorous. At the bottom left of the tree trunk, there is

a brown back and white belly cow. It forms the vision of the picture. In the foreground area at the bottom left of the picture, there are four Brittany peasant women, of which two on the right are their backs and two thin Brittany peasant women on the left are their silhouettes. On their right, there is a man with his head down. The white hat worn by the peasant woman stands out against the brownish-red flat background and a dark dress. These five people constitute the foreground of the picture.

Some painters in the early impressionism still followed certain perspective rules in the application of perspective. In this painting, the distance between the peasant woman and the cow in the picture, as well as the scene of Jacob wrestling with the angel, are not related in scientific proportion. Gauguin ignored the scientific perspective principle but considered how to combine the perspective and close range to make the picture more harmonious. He adopted the attitude of composition serving the picture and perspective system serving the picture and combined the images of two different perspective systems.

Gauguin presents the stories in the Bible in a clever way. Gauguin makes a lot of subjective treatment of the scenes described in the Bible. For example, in the scene described in the Bible where "Jacob met an angel by a small river at night and wrestled with him until dawn", Gauguin shows this scene of day and night conversion in a unique way. The background of the picture does not have a rigorous perspective depth of field space, but a large area of flat painted brownish red, painted with very prominent colors. Gauguin also changed the stream next to the two wrestling into a winding trunk, which runs diagonally from top left to bottom right, visually breaking the plane feeling brought by a large area of flat painting, making the whole picture more rhythmic and spatial. And cleverly divided the realistic scene in the picture and the scene in the fantasy of the peasant woman, which can be said to kill many birds with one stone. All the images in the painting are set off by a large red background. This red can represent both the field and the sky. The strong colors in the painting are non-naturalistic and are completely determined by the painter's subjective feelings [7]. The strong contrast makes the picture full of rhythm. The images of the picture have no shadow, and there are no traditional perspective picture expression skills used to see. Therefore, this is a symbolic painting with strong personal color depicting the unrealistic physical space.

Gauguin's subjective treatment of the Bible has many manifestations. In the Bible, "Jacob sent his wife and children across the river and then wrestled with angels." Gauguin combined the scene of "Jacob wrestling with angels" with the real-life scene of peasant women praying on the Brittany peninsula. The spectators of the wrestling scene changed from wives and sons to peasant women. Before that, few painters would draw realistic scenes and religious scenes together. Even if there were, it was often the request of the provider or the scene of people witnessing miracles in reality. The angel image in Gauguin's painting is more like ordinary people. The scene of "Jacob wrestling with angels" in Gauguin's painting is common in real life. Gauguin hopes to express the relationship between the picture in the religious story and the real situation. He hopes to express his artistic fantasy and thinking through the combination of religious legend and real-life [8].

The passionate fantasy contained in *Vision of the Sermon* is indeed unprecedented in previous paintings. This kind of work created under the influence of new modeling consciousness is only a purely subjective combination of color and geometry. This decorative painting itself must be subjective, comprehensive and symbolic art.

Gauguin's charm has attracted and been affirmed by Albert Aurier, Stefana Maramé, naturalist writer Huysmans and others in the symbolic literary circle. Albert Aurier, one of the founders of *Mercure de France* magazine, led the symbolism movement. In 1891, art critic Albert Aurier published a famous review article by Paul Gauguin in painting, which affirmed the position of Gauguin in the field of symbolic painting. Aurier's article is like the significance of Moreas's symbolic declaration in the history of literature. As a "symbolic painting declaration", Gauguin's *Vision of the Sermon* in 1888.

Gauguin himself has no direct answer to why he painted this religious theme. He just said in his letter to Vincent Van Gogh, "I think I painted the simplicity of the characters and the simplicity dominated by superstition. The overall effect is very serious. For me, The scenery and angels in this

painting only exist after the sermon. In people's imagination when they pray. Therefore, there is a contrast between the natural and real people and the wrestling on an imaginary and disproportionate scenery" [9].

Gauguin wants to use this combination of religious legends and real-life to express his understanding of the meaning of art and life and the proposition he has been exploring. How should he live as a "man"? Is the so-called "civilization" the only destination of mankind? No matter what kind of civilization people are in, whether there will be a potential connection, although different races have different choices for "civilization", and whether there is resonance in faith, emotion and senses. It is Gauguin's paintings that convey the ultimate concern and thinking about human beings [10]. The honesty, sincerity, and enthusiasm in his paintings can be felt by the viewer for the first time. The real source of this appeal comes from the artist's thoughts. People's belief in all the original themes and compositions of life comes from higher respect for all the themes of life. Although his themes seem to be illusions, this real and persistent belief can be strongly confirmed in the picture.

2.2 The relationship between Gauguin and Fauvism

In the last century, the field of art has been diversified, and many painting schools have been born one after another. Fauvism is one of the pioneering art schools that emerged during this period. It is a modern art school that attaches importance to individuality. The Fauvism movement in France in the early 20th century was a great change in the history of Western painting. Fauvism never formed a real community, there was no clear declaration, and its artistic activities were only three years, but its revolutionary influence continues to this day [11]. Among them, Henri Matisse is the most representative, the founder and spiritual leader. The Fauvist painting method shows the subjective personality of objective things through flat painting with bright colors and simple composition. The whole painting is full of strong composition and decorative meaning, showing a strong formal beauty, which is mainly reflected in the visual effect and psychological feeling [12].

The emergence of Fauvism marks that the world shows a modern consciousness of the idea of painting, and it is a rebellion against Impressionist and post-impressionist painting. Because Fauvism refuses to imitate nature. Although their creative objects are based on objective things, they want to "liberate nature" and make nature an object subject to the needs of the subject of the picture. But at the same time, the traditional concept of color has been completely broken by Impressionist theory. Many scholars believe that the emergence of Fauvism is the spiritual inheritance of Post Impressionism and completes the opening of the new art era by opposing the spiritual state of academic school. For different painting schools, their birth will not be detached from the historical context at that time. The existence of painters is not isolated, let alone from the objective environment at that time. The emergence of Fauvism is an art school born in the development environment of the historical period. Artistic innovation is always the inheritance and overthrow of the previous experience. Reconstruct the art genre according to the existing experience system and take the existing art field as the basic reference. For example, Fauvism gradually walks out of a new art path through the post-impressionist art concept [13].

Gauguin and fauvism both existed at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. From the macro perspective of the times, it is concluded that they must be affected by the characteristics of the times at that time. At the end of the 19th century, Impressionist painters' preference for Japanese and Oriental Art led to the change of the concept and the transfer of characteristics of the whole art world [14]. The traditional concept of space was greatly weakened, and the meaning of plane decoration became a prominent feature of the whole era. Similarly, they are also influenced by the characteristics of the times.

In the Vision of the Sermon, Gauguin also outlines an obvious outline outside each image, which highlights the generality and brevity of the object, which is a great feature of this painting. The images of the peasant woman on the back and side, as well as Jacob and the angel in the distance, are clearly outlined in lines. The outline outlined by Gauguin has an inflexible innocence, no obvious change in weight and thickness, as if it is a rigid outline without modification, no trace of flashy flying, but

appears careful and childlike meticulous, which can simplify the details of the object image. Gauguin is trying to avoid the flashiness of that art. The use of lines is an important means for Fauvist painters to achieve this desire. Matisse, as a representative of Fauvism, can be said to inherit the decorative lines of Gauguin, which can be seen in many of Matisse's works. For example, in his work *Dance*, Matisse uses more concise lines to outline the figure and depict the weight of the figure. Matisse shapes the figure with lines. According to the trend of the figure's body shape, the large block surface on the body is sketched as a long line, and the small block surface uses shorter lines. On the whole, there are more curves, focusing on the main outline of the figure. At the same time, the short line outlines the sense of the weight of human joints and muscles, and the general lines briefly show the structure of the figure's body. Matisse did not depict the character's clothes. In the line, he paid more attention to the outline of the character's body shape, used smooth lines to show the beautiful posture of the character in the dance performance, shaped the skeleton of the abdomen and legs with tension, and showed the character's actions and showed the character's healthy physique. Compared with Gauguin's lines, Matisse's lines have stronger randomness. His lines are uneven and of different thicknesses. The change of contour lines is the embodiment of the compressed volume of objects and images. Some are pure lines that need to exist for the composition of pictures and are not related to objects and images. He despises the actual shape, and its decorative meaning is also stronger.

Strong and simple color is one of the characteristics of Fauvism and Gauguin, and fauvism is even worse. Gauguin and Matisse, the representative figure of Fauvism, once studied in Pissarro. They opposed rigid copying of nature and paid attention to exploring the emotional and ideological implications of their works. Gauguin was influenced by Pissarro in his bold and contrasting colors and the choice of themes, and Matisse was also influenced by it in this regard [15]. Gauguin prefers to have a lot of mysterious atmosphere in colors with high brightness and purity. In the *Vision of the Sermon*, the large-scale white hat of the peasant woman is contrasted against the brownish-red background and dark dress. All colors in the painting are set off by the large red background. Red, blue, white, black and Brown are combined in an almost perfect way. The picture has no so-called scientific light at all. It only sees strong colors and is full of rhythm, which makes the picture stable, harmonious and dynamic. In this regard, Gauguin said: "color is like the vibration of music. We use skilled chorus to create symbols and obtain the most ambiguous and universal thing in nature: the most profound power in nature." The biggest characteristic of Fauvism is that they completely break away from the inherent color characteristics and combine exaggerated color collocation with minimalist painting. Matisse, the leader of Fauvism, is also very prominent in color. Compared with the mysterious atmosphere created by Gauguin's color, Matisse's color pays more attention to a balanced, pure and quiet atmosphere under strong contrast [16]. The picture of the *Portrait of Madame Matisse* is very thick and strong in color, but the whole picture is very quiet. In this painting, Matisse draws a thick green line in the center of the figure's face; This line became the core of the whole painting. Not only does the modeling structure of the whole face closely adhere to this green line, but also many elements in the painting are unified and balanced by this line. It is against this green line that the black eyes and eyebrows will not appear too strong, and the black hair and green collar can be connected. It also connects the avatar with the green background, and the green thick line on the face echoes with the green background, maintaining the plane feeling of the picture. The red and orange of the character's face and the green and purple in the background not only form a contrast in color and area. Even if the color of the picture is rich and changeable, it also makes the picture harmonious in the color contrast. The classical multi-layer gray is almost invisible in the palette of Gauguin and Matisse. The use of red, orange, yellow, green, and blue is the prominent feature the color used by Matisse and Gauguin. They fully strengthened the solid color of the object image to the extent close to the primary color, and Matisse sometimes even painted directly with the primary color.

Harmony of the Gauguin color does not depend on mutual participation, but on the proportion of the color area; It can be seen from the *Vision of the Sermon* that Gauguin adopts a brand-new painting language of flat painting and edge hooking, and uses the flat painting of large-area color blocks to flat paint a large number of reddish-brown, white and black, forming the change and subjective

treatment of the shape of the object. However, Gauguin is by no means a simple and uniform flat painting, which divides the spatial form of the object with color without emphasizing the stroke. It has strong decoration and harmonious beauty of form [17]. Matisse's harmony of colors not only depends on the proportion of color area but also boldly uses the mutual reflection of environmental colors. In his *Woman at the Window*, the orange clothes on women give people a feeling of warmth and vitality, while the orange-yellow wall gives people a feeling of joy. Combined with the blue sea and pink sky outside the window, the whole painting is full of a dreamy and comfortable feeling, and the gorgeous colors look particularly beautiful against each other [18]. In his other work, *The Dessert: A Harmony in Red*, the pure red of the indoor wall and desktop constitute the tone of the picture, and the green outside the window forms a comparative relationship. At the same time, this contrast is buffered by the yellow of the window frame, resulting in a sense of balance in the whole picture. The top of green indicates that the blue of the sky makes the picture calm. This blue, together with the flowers and grass patterns on the wall and table, adds a quiet atmosphere to the picture. The red house in the upper left corner of the picture adds an active atmosphere to the calm of the picture, which echoes with the large area of red. As he said later, "I want to create with color blocks. I want to combine those flat color blocks like a composer combines his harmony" [19].

3. Conclusions

Through the analysis of the *Vision of the Sermon*, this paper understands the creative characteristics of Gauguin and compares them with symbolism and fauvism to have a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the artistic characteristics of Gauguin. The elements of symbolism and fauvism expressed by Gauguin in the *Vision of the Sermon* expressed Gauguin's emotion and ideas in his situation at that time. This study can be used as a reference for scholars who will study Gauguin's symbolism and fauvism in the future. At the same time, during the research, it was found that Gauguin was greatly influenced by Oriental Art, especially Japanese ukiyo painting, which provided a direction for the research of later scholars. For a long time, among the three masters of Post Impressionism, there have been more and better studies on Cezanne and Van Gogh. There are many studies on the similar types of Van Gogh and Gauguin, but Gauguin, as a special artist, Future research should liberate Gauguin and his works from the type of Post Impressionism, rather than always looking for the research path of Post Impressionism.

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