

# A probe into the Visual elements in female illustrations from the Perspective of Feminism

Jingyi Yu, Yuanhang Zhang, Yaling Zhao, Jiaying Zeng

College of Art and Design., Wuhan Textile University, Wuhan 430000, China.

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**Abstract:** With the rise of the feminist movement in the 1970s, the concept of feminism gradually entered the public's field of vision. Its theory revolves around with the development of society, the wave of feminism continues to deepen and affect all aspects of human life. The improvement of productivity and the change of production relations urge women to re-recognize themselves, and the improvement of productivity and the change of production relations urge women to re-recognize themselves, and women's self-worth and social status are more and more affirmed. The female image, as one of the common subjects in the history of eastern and western illustration, has rich forms of expression, thus reflecting multiple connotations, and analyzing the visual elements in female illustrations from the perspective of feminism. it provides a new perspective for illustration analysis, and can deeply understand the author's creative ideas through the selection and performance of picture elements. The author starts with feminist painting art, through the analysis of representative paintings including female images in Chinese and western art history. The author starts with feminist painting art, through the analysis of representative paintings including female images in Chinese and western art history, combined with feminist thoughts to analyze the implication behind image expression, and then from feminist painting to feminist illustration research As feminism goes deep into the public's As feminism goes deep into the public's field of vision, feminist illustration expression is endowed with more forms and meaning of the times, and it is always intended to show the viewer a At the same time, illustration, as a widely used form of artistic expression, can provide an effective perspective for feminist expression as a woman. At the same time, illustration, as a widely used form of artistic expression, can provide an effective perspective for feminist expression as a suitable medium, so as to provide a window for the public to understand feminism. The research and thinking of this paper is devoted to excavating the unique and diverse female beauty in different female paintings and illustrations. and hopes to appeal to the viewer to have more tolerance and appreciation of the current feminist art, in the present when many female artists are open up the artistic road in the future with practice.

**Keywords:** Feminism; Female illustration; Female image; Visual element.

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## 1. Introduction

The term feminism first appeared in the 19th century and has the same origins as femininity, but is used with a different emphasis. Feminism focuses on sexuality, breaking down gender hegemony, and calling for gender equality on a micro-individual level. Because of its emphasis on the individual and its relatively milder nature than feminism, femininity is better suited as a humanistic choice for deeper integration into literature and art. In fact, before the concept of feminism was officially introduced, femininity could be seen in paintings containing female figures in certain periods of art history, such as Alphonse Mouchard's female body, which expresses the primitive and individual beauty of women through the fusion of voluptuous and soft flesh with natural scenery; Bialy's slender female figures that transcend the conventional human structure, which break the secular perception of women's beauty. The beauty of women in the world. With the popularity and development of modern illustration language and the elevation of women's social status, feminism entered its second wave in the 1970s and 1980s, and feminism began to differentiate into various forms, such as ecofeminism, social feminism, and postmodern feminism, and various forms of feminist art also began to appear and become active.

As an important form of expression in modern design, illustration occupies a specific place in modern design and is widely used in many fields of modern design for its intuitive image, real sense of life and infectious beauty. Feminist subject matter in the form of illustration is the most intuitive way for artists to convey their thoughts to the viewer, and it

also gives the work a stable timeliness for future generations to examine. The reason for choosing to explore the female elements in the works rather than the female figures is that the language of feminist images is not limited to the depiction of the female subject itself, but often depicts different forms through various techniques and perspectives, which have hidden meanings. Through literature research and case studies, the author will analyze the illustrations containing female figures and elements from a feminist perspective, interpreting the themes, colors, compositions, and elements of the paintings with specific cases, and explore the feminist humanistic thinking behind the paintings.

### 1.1. Background of the study

Prior to the second wave of feminism, women artists were often denied access to exhibitions because of their gender, and art was often referred to as a "men's club," which was particularly evident in the American Abstract Expressionist movement—as evidenced by the contrast in fame between fellow artists Jackson Pollock and his wife Lee-Krasner, and Willem de Kooning and his wife Eleanor de Kooning in terms of fame. In order to resist the hegemony of male discourse, female artists began to create works from the perspectives of female physiology, psychology, family and social situation, trying to give a voice to women through art. Since the 1970s, the global feminist art scene began to emerge, and the topic of women was gradually integrated into the public eye with various types of art, of which painting was a common form of expression. As the topic of feminism became more popular, feminist art was gradually integrated into the form of

illustration. The main difference between feminist painting and feminist illustration is that painting does not have the commerciality and widespread application of illustration, and the form, carrier, and medium of illustration will change with the times.

## 2. Feminist painting research

### 2.1. The relationship between feminist painting art and illustration art

Feminist illustration is, in a way, an evolution of feminist painting, incorporating more functionality, commercial needs and contemporary characteristics, while also making its representation more obvious and intuitive. "One of the main uses of illustration is to make the meaning of words clear, so illustration needs to have distinctive visual characteristics and information transfer function, only then is the excellent illustration works with good functionality and formal aesthetics.

### 2.2. Analysis and Comparison of Feminist Painting Art in East and West

Linda Nochlin's 1971 book "Why Are There No Great Women Artists?" is popularly regarded as an important symbol of the beginning of feminist art, which created a dialogue between the viewer and the artwork through a feminist perspective. These artworks were not only for aesthetic appreciation, but also to encourage the viewer to raise social and political issues, thus creating a shift towards equality, and thus feminist art was consciously created. The active feminist artists in the West during the 1960s and 1970s showed us different forms of feminist painting, such as Mary Edelson, Frida Krogh and others, all of whom explored and broke through the language of painting using female subjects as a starting point. Generally speaking, there are two types of expressions in feminist paintings. One is to take the female figure as the main body and use the female body itself as a symbol to portray it from different angles and in different situations, which is the most intuitive expression form to express the feminist tendency. The second type is the metaphorical expression through some kind of objects, so that the viewer can receive the meaning expressed in the picture through association and reflection.

Feminist artists' portrayals of women in their images include the intention of highlighting female subjectivity and escaping the male gaze, so that women no longer exist as objects in the male perspective. For example, in Mary Cassatt's oil on canvas "In the Box" (Figure 1), the subject of the painting is a woman holding a telescope and looking at the interior of the theater. By this point, the author has created an image of a confident and special woman through the depiction of her movements.

When the female figure is freed from conventional aesthetics and perceptions and exists independently, the female elements that can appear in the picture are naturally enriched, and the woman no longer exists as a spectator in the eyes of others. standards.



Figure 1. "In the Box

#### 2.2.1. Visual elements in Frida Kahlo's paintings

The Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, known as the "Mother of Feminism," is influenced by her life situation, and the subjects of Kahlo's paintings are usually derived from her own. She eschews the formal aesthetic standards of "likeness" and beauty found in traditional self-portraits, and instead uses painting to explore herself in a more personal way. This work, Self-Portrait with a Monkey (Figure 2), is typical of Kahlo's self-portraits: the colors are strong and bright, the clothes on the figure and the background are full of Mexican atmosphere, and the monkey is a symbol of desire in Mexico. The face is somewhat masculine, steely and indifferent.

Another of Frida's intensely personal works, Two Frida (figs. 3), was painted shortly after Frida's divorce from her husband. The two Frida's in the painting seem to express their own conflicted and divided state of mind after various experiences such as marriage: the two Frida's are linked by blood, both are part of themselves, one Frida is dressed in the original famous traditional Mexican costume, the one her husband Rivera adored, fragile veins encircling her right arm, an amulet containing a portrait of her as a child, symbolizing the source of her love and life. Another Frida in a foreign dress has lost her beloved, her heart only half left, her blood dripping helplessly down, this Frida, abandoned in Europe, is likely to die of blood loss.

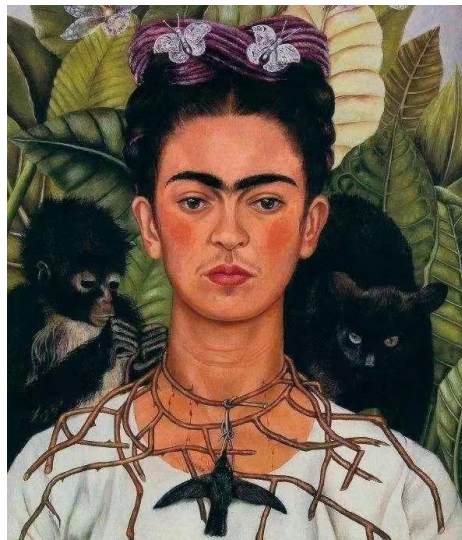


Figure 2. "Self-Portrait with Monkeys

The visual elements that often appear in Kahlo's paintings, such as exuberant tropical plants, monkeys, parrots, and thorns, blood, and tears, are all derived from her own real life, and are a strong reflection of her feelings of survival in a society full of trials and tribulations. By stitching together symbols of history, reality, fantasy, legend, and personal imagery, she transcends the linear realism of description and breaks the sense of order in the patriarchal discourse of reality with self-centered imagery.



Figure 3. The Two Frida's

### 2.2.2. The Implicit Female Language in Georgia Okia's Paintings

Georgia Okia is considered an important feminist inspiration by the Western art world and feminists, although she herself did not label herself in any way as gendered. Okia's paintings contain few direct images of women, and her images are mostly of flowers and natural landscapes. The picture "yellow sweet peas" (figs.4), a 1925 work by Georgian, depicts flowers in close-up composition, making the whole picture visually striking and showing the unique perspective and style of female observation. The author's meticulous detailing of the softly curving petals, the delicate brushwork, and the bright but not gaudy use of color are reminiscent of a woman's beautiful body or a woman's skirt with its cascading layers. Georgia's use of botanical elements as a metaphor for femininity is an important inspiration for feminist painting.



Figure 4. "yellow sweet peas"

### 2.2.3. Characteristics of Oriental Feminist Painting

Compared to Western feminist painting, Eastern feminism is subtler in its use of picture language. In "My Feelings, My

Body, My Way - Interpreting Women's Art in the 1990s," "Contemporary Chinese Women's Art," and "Chinese Women's Art since the 1980s," Xu Hong points out that Chinese women's art and Western feminist art have different forms of expression due to different environments of birth and development. "Although Chinese contemporary women's art is influenced by Western feminist thinking, Chinese women's art has a different environment and cultural background, and the works of Chinese women artists are clearly different in some respects from those of Western women artists. Chinese women's art works are subtler and more repressed, and the pain of suffering and being destroyed and torn apart in their works is more obvious, with more sadness and helplessness than anger. The linguistic forms are often subtle, borrowing more from customary symbols than from creative ones, but the cultural meanings are richer due to clever transformations, but this also diminishes the intensity that comes from the immediacy".

Xu Dongxiang's "Outside the Window" (see Figure 5) is a work that I believe better reflects the overall ethos of Chinese feminism. The image depicts a woman standing with her back turned, dressed in Republican-era clothing. The cigarette in the woman's hand reveals her inner rebellion, showing an image of a woman who is out of step with the standards of her time, while the deliberate blurring of the background is a metaphor for the oppressive and pale social environment, giving the picture an overall depressing and obscure visual base.

Tune in.



Figure 5. "Outside the Window" by Dongxiang Xu

## 3. Study of contemporary feminist illustration

### 3.1. Analysis of feminist visual elements in contemporary illustration

Since the world entered the third wave of the Internet, the concept of feminism has gained a new level of conversation, and its concept has been given new meaning as gender topics have changed and women's identities have diversified. The use of feminist themes in illustration is common, and the richness of the new image of the woman it reveals blends with

the characteristics of the twenty-first century, as the image of women is constantly being reshaped to break the conventional perception. The unrestricted subject matter and the integration of various techniques are one of the main characteristics of contemporary illustration. It is worthwhile for illustrators to consider how to present the charm of female images and convey the spirit of women in the new era with an illustration language that meets the market standard and caters to the aesthetics of young people.

### 3.1.1. External visual elements in contemporary female illustration

From the perspective of self-psychology, the choice of external clothing is the presentation of the self, and the dress has a certain symbolic meaning, while the various stereotypical standards of traditional female dress, such as skirts, high heels, etc., are actually an allusion to social expectations of women's roles (elegant, virtuous, etc.). Neutral, gender-blurred dresses, trouser suits, and even masculine dresses.

For example, Rosie McGuinness' paintings depict stylish, smart and independent women. She usually uses watercolor blocks to outline the form of women's clothes, and uses simple lines to outline women's facial contours and demeanor, and the expressions of the characters are mostly calm and peaceful, revealing the beauty of a competent and generous woman.

Rosie's colors are usually not too bright, but rather maintain a calm dispatch between, I also found that Rosie does not deliberately show the beauty of the curves of the female body, but rather through clothing to show a casual and comfortable state, in the depiction of this clothing can also be glimpsed in the shadow of Rei Kawakubo, Yohji Yamamoto and other female clothing masters. In her depiction of this kind of clothing, one can also catch a glimpse of Rei Kawakubo, Yohji Yamamoto and other masters of women's clothing. From this, one can read the attitude of contemporary women's dress that she advocates: unrestrained and generous.



Figure 6. Illustrations by Rosie McGuinness

"NANA" is a manga by Japanese manga artist Ai Yazawa, who created numerous illustrations for the characters in the story. The main character, Nana, is a popular character among young people. As the illustrations show, Nana's image is based on the female punk image that became popular in Europe and the United States in the 1970s: masculine hairstyles, gender-blurred silhouette coats, smoky makeup and dark lipstick, and eye-catching studs. As the subculture spreads among the youth, this anti-mainstream attire not only caters to young people's desire to be different, but also symbolizes a spiritual attitude and the spirit of punk - to break

stereotypes and rebel. In addition to punk elements, similar subcultural elements such as Lolita and Y2k are often found in contemporary female illustrations, presenting a rich image of women. These dress styles followed by young people of Generation Z reflect to some extent the psychological need of this generation to pursue individual uniqueness.



Figure 7. Source of NANA's shape

### 3.1.2. Gender social issues reflected in contemporary female illustrations

In addition to expressing the aspirations of the new generation of women through a breakthrough in the portrayal of women's appearance and dress, 21st century female illustrations also reflect various common gender issues, such as women's marriage and family, women's appearance and body anxiety, and the unfair treatment of women in the workplace.

Nechico Kinukaw's illustrations map these feminine social topics (Figure 8) In the illustration below, Kinukwa chooses the color peach, a typical feminine aesthetic, as the visual tone of the entire painting, and the figure's face is reduced to a semicircle, eliminating all the usual facial features. The body of the subject is exposed, and the torso is shown in a geometric form that runs counter to the softness of the woman's torso. Kinukaw's use of symbolism and cubism to paint the female figure is evident in the distortion of the facial features and the exaggeration of the figure's form, resulting in a grotesque and inflated figure that clearly defies conventional aesthetics. The viewer is able to reflect on the language of the images - what is the beauty of women? Who defines the standard of beauty? Women of all shapes, sizes, looks and dresses have the right to express themselves, they are all unique, special and beautiful individuals.



Figure 8. Nechico Kinukaw's illustrations

### 3.2. Research on contemporary applications of feminist illustration

With the development of information society and the prevalence of consumer culture, the connotation of illustration has grown wider and richer than the original book illustration as the mainstream. In addition to the traditional sense of book illustration and advertising needs of illustration, leaves across all fields related to graphic, such as games, packaging, etc., covering almost all design works in the image part, illustration thanks to its wide application and commercial, expression and design elements are increasingly diversified, becoming an independent art form with contemporary characteristics. While the topic of feminism is gaining more and more social attention, it also continues to inspire contemporary creators to use the subject matter to create different forms of creation, thus extending a rich variety of graphic applications, such as magazines, posters, etc., in various ways for contemporary women's female voice.

#### 3.2.1. Application of female fashion illustration

Fashion, it seems, is a theme inseparable from women, and fashion for women can become a decorative language to show the different external charms of women. Fashion illustration originated from the "fashion" world, the earliest fashion designer lock drawing fashion clothing is called "fashion illustration", "fashion illustration" is the extension of fashion painting.

Fashion illustration, in addition to the qualities of fashion painting, is closer to the art of painting. Fashion illustration was first popular among the aristocracy in the 18th century during the Rococo period, and began to show rich forms in the 19th century. bazaar" and so on. With the birth of new media and the continuous improvement and reshaping of the connotation of "fashion" itself, fashion illustration today is constantly changing its form and diversifying its expression.

Fashion illustrators portray the fashion style in their eyes through different themes and contents, but also give the viewer a clear picture that is different from the photographic image and brings more visual imagination. This vague and uncertain depiction is one of the characteristics of post-modern consumer images. Therefore, illustration designers must take into account different groups' consumer attitudes and cultural levels when creating their works and incorporate them into their works.

Mats Gustafson is a very active fashion illustrator in modern times, specializing in the interpretation of fashion imagery with simple watercolor shading. In this picture, a fashion illustration by Mats (Figure 9), Mats uses medium-saturated colors to divide four areas, each showing a different perspective of a female figure. For example, the top two panels show a rear-facing and side-facing portrait respectively, in which both women's necks are slender and high and completely exposed, fully showing the softness of the female torso while revealing a sense of detachment and hazy beauty through the narrative of the angle. The two areas below show the women's long backs and naked hips. It can be seen that although Mats exposes the woman's shoulders, neck, waist and buttocks to the viewer's eyes, it does not show any eroticism, but conveys the raw, natural and elegant beauty of the woman's body through the visual signal of "nudity"



Figure 9. Mats Gustafson's illustrations

#### 3.2.2. Feminist Picture Book Promotion

Both commercial and artistic illustration have evolved into independent forms of contemporary illustration, and the development of new media and the printing industry has allowed each creator to sell his or her artwork freely and independently.

Please yourself' (Figure 10) is an independent picture book created by illustrator Nimi Tokoto, translated as "please yourself". The illustrations in this book will break all that, from small things like freedom of dress to big things like freedom of marriage and freedom of childbirth, these things that happen to us women need to be decided by us women themselves." The book tells the story of women's life and the rules and regulations faced by society, including women's body management, stereotypical requirements for women's dress, etc. The author shows the picture of women's life through a flat figure illustration, in which various objects such as suspenders, girdles, high heels, etc. are all elements closely related to women's life. For example, one page of the book shows a woman pointing to her waist, and the text "MY BODY MY CHOICE" printed on the waist means that women's bodies should be in charge of themselves, without fear of the outside world. Another illustration, for example, shows nine high heels of different shapes, and the heel part of the shoes is quite special, such as thorny roses, spiders' tentacles, and even guns, and the use of these elements seems to convey a strong and beautiful image of women to the viewer, and tell the strong women themselves do not have to adhere to any external rules, but to say "no" to some unreasonable rules. "No". Through this form of image supplemented by text, the author makes the meaning conveyed by each illustration clear and interesting.



Figure 10. "Love Yourself"

#### 4. Conclusion

Throughout the passive position of women in traditional art and the pioneering feminist spirit in contemporary art, women have never given up artistic expression and keep moving forward. The study of the female figure in art and contemporary painting language can help us clarify how contemporary painting will advance in the context of feminist thought. In the process of writing my dissertation, I have thought more deeply about the above issues, and at the same time, I have come to appreciate the unique feminine charm of this era, young and dynamic, in the current female illustration art. The author sees that illustration, as an independent art with a rich formal language and a wide range of applications and a promising future, has brought into play its outstanding humanistic value in the combination of contemporary and feminist topics. As a female art creator and an illustration researcher, I have seen the efforts of previous female artists,

and in the process of studying and understanding them and their works, I have strengthened my position and hope to engage in art creation with a more open and free attitude.

To this day, we continue to ponder Linda Nocklin's question: Why are there no great feminist artists? Is it the social role that holds them back? Is it the constraints of the social system? Or is it a lack of self-confidence and self-reflection on the part of women themselves? Only in-depth research and continuous creative output can advance the solution to this question. The current domestic art environment is relatively tolerant and open, and I hope that art workers around the world, including the author herself, will continue to practice and innovate to open up a world of women's art belonging to this era.

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