

Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Painting and Its Connection to Design

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Abstract: Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology-based approach to painting highlights the intersection of subject and object in artistic expression. This philosophy is relevant to design, as it encourages a deep understanding of users' perceptions and interactions with designed objects or environments. Designers can draw inspiration from Merleau-Ponty's ideas to create meaningful experiences that resonate with users on an emotional and intuitive level, beyond mere aesthetics or functionality.

Keywords: Merleau-Ponty, Intangible cultural heritage (ICH).

1. Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Painting

Paul Cézanne, a French painter from the late 19th to early 20th century, is often regarded as the father of modern art. His unique style and approach to painting broke with traditional principles of perspective and color usage. Cézanne's focus on recomposing nature through color and form emphasizes the flatness and compositionality of the canvas.

The parallels between Merleau-Ponty's thought and Cézanne's style lie in their shared emphasis on the importance of perception and experience. Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodied perception offers a new understanding of the relationship between humans and the world, while Cézanne expresses his perception and understanding of the world through the forms and colors of his paintings. Both push the boundaries of traditional ideas, presenting novel and unique perspectives and expressions.

In painting, Cézanne's works often exhibit a generative state and dynamism, echoing the fluidity and changeability described by Merleau-Ponty. Cézanne's brushstrokes and use of color are no longer solely aimed at reproducing nature but become means of expressing perception and emotion. This closely aligns with Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on subjective bodily experience and perception. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty's reflections on the relationship between art and science resonate with Cézanne's style. He sees art and science as two distinct ways of understanding the world, complementing rather than excluding each other. Cézanne's works similarly explore the possibility of combining art and science, investigating the nature and structure of the natural world through painterly forms and colors.



Figure 1. Paul Cézanne

2. Merleau-Ponty's Aesthetics and Its Relationship to Design

According to Merleau-Ponty, Cézanne's paintings, like phenomenology, embody a "desire to understand the meaning of the world." Understanding this meaning begins with comprehending our bodily perception of the world. Secondly, in discussing objects as being for us, he argues that in everyday habits, we grasp objects as ours. It is only in primary perception that we suspend our familiar relationship with objects and can truly perceive their autonomous existence. The object in primary perception is a silent otherness. "But the object must also present itself to bodily perception through its sensible appearance. Thus, to paint an object is to paint its presentation in perception." Cézanne's landscapes, for instance, depict a primitive, pre-human nature, as if perceived for the first time, retaining their strangeness and silence while emerging in perception. Thirdly, in discussing synesthesia, Merleau-Ponty points out that color does not merely present itself to our vision but responds to inquiries from multiple senses. Cézanne, therefore, speaks of including even smells in his paintings. What Cézanne attempts to convey is the synesthesia evoked by the object or landscape in the viewer's senses, not just the visual impression.

There is a tight coupling between painting and design. Designers can draw inspiration from the visual elements of painting, such as color, composition, and line, and apply them to product design, creating unique and artistically inspired works. Both painting and design are forms of expression that explore and present the diversity of the world through different media and forms.

2.1. The Concept of "Harmony between Body and Object" in Contemporary Design

Contemporary design should move beyond the pursuit of functionality or aesthetics alone and embrace a deeper design philosophy—the "harmony between body and object." This philosophy, rooted in a profound understanding of bodily perception, emphasizes the harmonious coexistence between humans and objects, aiming to create designs that are intimately connected to the human body and mind.

In this perspective, design is not just about shaping objects but concerns human perception, experience, and emotional

resonance. Designers carefully select materials, consider dimensions, and refine textures to create pieces that naturally fit the human body, as if they were extensions of it, enhancing our perception and actions. Such designs also carry and convey emotions. By exploring people's inner needs and using design languages like color, form, and texture, designers evoke resonance and turn their works into repositories and bridges for emotional expression. Interacting with such pieces elicits a sense of ineffable joy and fulfillment, as if finding a soul's home.

Simultaneously, this design philosophy does not negate the pursuit of functionality and aesthetics. Instead, it demands that designs meet basic functional requirements while also being visually appealing. Designers need to blend practicality with aesthetics, using creativity and aesthetic sensibility to create both functional and heart-stirring works.

Realizing this design philosophy requires designers to possess interdisciplinary knowledge and innovative thinking. They need to understand the human body's structure and perceptual mechanisms, be familiar with the characteristics of different materials and techniques, and master modern design tools and technologies. At the same time, they must remain sensitive and curious, constantly capturing inspiration and needs from life, and daring to experiment with new design languages and techniques.

2.2. Color Expression

In classical painting, line preceded color, outlining the contours of objects before applying color to fill them in. Color played a secondary, auxiliary role compared to line. However, starting with Impressionism, color gradually gained prominence. While Impressionistic colors were fragmented and lacked stability, Cézanne introduced gradual color mixtures to replace their separation, presenting objects' perceptual changes through color progression. Objects no longer required lines to define their contours, as color became the primary means of rendering their solidity and presence. Color was not just the surface of objects but the way they presented themselves. It was color that first registered on the senses, occupying the bodily perception. Coloring became synonymous with depicting the object itself. Forms emerged from color in the painting. "The more harmonious the colors, the more precise the drawing." Cézanne used color to express the object's wholeness and reality, simultaneously sketching and coloring, refining both as the colors matured.

3. Design Elements of Suzhou Embroidery Symbols Inspired by Merleau-Ponty's Artistic Philosophy

In the extraction phase, we delve deep into the use of lines in Suzhou embroidery stitches, recognizing their role not just as decorative elements but as essential components in pattern formation, object representation, and texture depiction. By studying traditional Suzhou embroidery works, we can identify various stitch lines, such as smooth curves, delicate running stitches, and lively jumping stitches. These lines embody the essence of traditional craftsmanship and cultural significance.

During the translation phase, we aim to incorporate these extracted lines into modern designs while preserving their unique aesthetic qualities. Drawing inspiration from Merleau-Ponty's theory of bodily perception, we manipulate the thickness, curvature, density, and other attributes of the lines,

employing different stitches and techniques to evoke specific emotions, atmospheres, and senses of movement. Furthermore, we blend modern design principles and aesthetic trends, innovatively combining and rearranging these lines to create new works that are both contemporary and artistically significant, showcasing a harmonious blend of tradition and modernity.

4. Conclusion

This chapter explores the connection between Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of painting and design, as well as its application in contemporary design and Suzhou embroidery symbol design. Through the interpretation of "perception", it reveals the importance of bodily sensation and emotional experience in design. Meanwhile, inspired by Merleau-Ponty's ideas, contemporary design emphasizes the integrated experience of color, line, and style. Furthermore, the extraction and translation of Suzhou embroidery symbol design elements also draw on these concepts, providing a new direction for the innovative development of Suzhou embroidery and promoting the combination of traditional and modern design.

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