

Analysis on the Space Construction in Paintings of Alex Colville

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Abstract:

Alex Colville is the most representative painter in Canada in the 20th century. Most of his works depict fragments of daily life and natural scenes and express his thinking of the relationship between man and nature and the meaning of life. His works are rational and orderly and have a strong atmosphere of humanism. This paper tries to analyze the perspective, modeling, color block, and composition of works of Coleville from the perspective of space construction and interpret the connotation of his works.

Keywords:

Space, Perspective, Modeling, Color Block, Composition

1. Introduction

Born in Toronto in 1920, Alex Colville is the most representative painter in Canada in the 20th century. People, scenery, and animals are often the main body of his works. Most of his works depict the daily life of individuals and natural scenes and express his thinking of the relationship between man and nature and the existence value of all living things. People generally believe that his works are rational and orderly. In 1944, after graduating from Mount Allison University, Colville joined the Royal Canadian Navy and went to the frontline of World War II as a war artist. In this period, he recorded the fragments of the war he saw with his brush. This experience has a profound impact on his creation in the future. Perhaps because he witnessed the war and the disaster brought to humans by the war boosted by industrial civilization, in his works we could clearly see that he intentionally avoided the noisy modern life, returned to daily life he was familiar with, stayed in the vast nature, quietly watched everything in the world, and thought about the value of life. Most of his works do not have a clear narrative theme. People and everything in the world are individuals which exist independently. He showed his undifferentiated treatment of all living things in the scene creation not centered on humans and exquisite depiction of furs of animals. Buddhism advocates that all living things in nature are equal. "The yellow flowers are nothing but wisdom and green bamboo is your own nature." Every tree and grass in nature has its significance of existence. The concept of reverence for life and respect for the right to survive of all living things is specifically interpreted in his works. The creation level, mode of composition, perspective relation, body shaping,

and color layout all reveal his restrained personality. Various factors in the picture are presented orderly under his control. At the same time, the theme and image design of the main body is a little leisurely, easy, and warm. For example, in his work *Soldier and Girl at the Station*, the black carriages under the moonlight, the cold rails, and the embrace of the soldier going to the front and his lover on the platform at parting form a strong visual and psychological contrast. Rationality and sensibility compromise with each other in a special time and space. The balance of this contradictory relation may be the reason why his works are different.

Nowadays, with the rapid development of digitalization, digital devices can accurately capture the scene at a moment, output high-definition images, and even clearly display pores on the skin of humans one by one. We can say that there is no technical problem in objective representation. With the adjustment of images with photoshop and other software in the later period and the application of special effect technology, our visual experience has been greatly expanded. Since image production is so efficient, many people will naturally question the value of the existence of representational paintings. Coleville's works respond to such questioning powerfully with their unique representational presentation method. There is no doubt that Colville's works are representational and realistic. Its degree of representation is even clearer than that of impressionists who pursue the changes of natural light and color or expressionists who pay attention to the expression of personal emotions. However, we will not see his work as a photo moved to the canvas. It has gone beyond the discussion about being similar or not. For the people looking at his painting, the scene in his work is memories of the moment in the past and many images are strangers they are familiar with, from which they can feel the temperature of life and the breath of all things in nature. On the other hand, he seemed to refuse the contingency factor and chose to show his emotion politely in rationality and restraint. This contradictory experience integrating rationality and sensibility can obtain the factor unifying the two in a picture. The author believes that space construction is one of the key elements. Space can be a virtual thing, a sense of distance generated by close and far relations, or a three-dimensional representation of solid objects. In most cases, space is a physical concept and a neutral word without emotion. However, in the field of literature and art, a certain humanity is given to space. Many feelings about life and the pursuit of beliefs are implicitly expressed through the description of space. "There is no bird flying in thousands of mountains and no people on thousands of paths." Through thousands of mountains and paths, Liu Zongyuan imagined the space to show the loneliness of fishing alone on the cold river in the snow. The space expression in paintings is richer. In some paintings, distance and size are used to simulate three-dimensional space. In some paintings, emotions are expressed with visual space generated by the contrast of color tone, purity, and brightness. In some paintings, the creation concept is conveyed through the layout of various elements in the picture. Therefore, analysis of the form and rules of space construction in Colville's paintings is an important clue to interpret the connotation of his works. Next, we will analyze from the aspects of perspective, modeling, color block, and composition.

2. Perspective

The space construction of Coleville's works is shown by strictly following the rules of perspective. His brilliant interpretation of rules of perspective can be seen everywhere from the creation of foreshortening effects and the depth of space through

carriages on the platform, rails, and street lamps to the orderly arrangement of floor tiles indoors. Representation of the space with the rules of perspective is the most effective method and a traditional method of western paintings. In *the Lamentation of Christ*, a work of Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506), a representative of the Bardoa School of Painting, the painter compressed most of the body space of the remains with a strong perspective from the angle of view almost at the same level of the remains of Jesus to highlight the wounds left on his feet and hands when Jesus suffered calamities. The grief of Jesus suffering calamities was rendered through the depiction of details of the wounds. This extreme perspective relation was undoubtedly different in the creation of similar themes at that time. Coincidentally, there are similar treatment techniques in Coleville's works. For example, in *Skater* (Figure 1), we can hardly see the upper part of the body of the girl. We can mainly see the legs, especially the body characteristics of the raised leg and the details of the sharp ice skate blade. It is clever that there is not too much body presentation and the elegant figure when skating is shown vividly only with legs. We can say that Coleville is a loyal practitioner of the rules of perspective. The depiction of characters, landscapes, or scenes of life follows the basic principles of perspective. This is one of the reasons why his works are rational and orderly.



Figure 1. Skater, Coleville, 1964.

3. Modeling

The author believes that the body shaping in painting, including the treatment of edge lines, can be deemed as the means of expression of space. The modeling space treatment in most works of Colville is not the display of the three-dimensional sense of the body and the level changes in front of and behind the space by Caravaggio and Rembrandt by using changes in brightness of light and shadow in the classical age. Most of the shape space of each element in his works is flattened and the shape is almost not restrained by accidental details. According to the space presentation of the shape of the object depicted, it is square and hidden when it should be and the intention is definitely clear. In a sense, such hard-edge treatment of modeling is a typical feature different from the western traditional oil painting style. In the classical period, the three-dimensional sense of the body under light and shadow was paid attention to in oil paintings, creating an ideal atmosphere space. Even in the period of impressionism, the echoing of light and colors in the nature was simulated by using the changes of warm and color colors and pureness for the objective expression of things. It is challenging for painters to compress, flatten, and generalize the body space. In case of improper treatment, the elements in the picture will be isolated, there is forced substitution, and it will appear rigid. People will doubt the author's ability to control the overall picture space in creation. Coleville is obviously different. In the

body expression, he directly collaged reasoning and restraint to clarify the body boundary of each element in the picture. Character modeling is not limited to the objective presentation of the body of natural objects. Like the sculpture in the ancient Greece period, he pursued an idealistic, elegant, and refined temperament, shaped people with the ideal imagination of God, and advocated noble innocence and quiet greatness. Comparing his work *Research after Swimming* (Figure 2) with the sculpture work *Statue of Apollo* (530 B.C.) (Figure 3) in the ancient Greek period, we can see that the body shaping of the two works is similar. It was mainly manifested in that he did not intentionally pursue the objective and accurate body structure and proportion but he highly generalized according to his perfect imagination of the body. This simple and rhythmic body gives people a sense of holiness and ceremony, which cannot be shown by the presentation of the body captured by the camera.



Figure 2. *Research after Swimming*, Colville, 1955.



Figure 3. *Statue of Apollo*, the sculpture of ancient Greece, 530 B.C.

4. Color Block

Mondrian, a master of the abstractionist school, said in his article *Plastic Arts and Pure Plastic Arts*: “I think that ‘pureness and reality’ can only be expressed by pure modeling and the pure modeling should not be restricted by subjective feelings and representation in essence...” In this article, he explained why he did not use concrete images to convey his personal creation ideas but chose to use abstract color blocks and lines. In his eyes, color blocks are not meaningless. He tried to seek the balance between the appearance and essence of things and matter and consciousness through the combination of different color blocks, and raise simple color blocks to the level of philosophical thinking. At the practical level, the color blocks themselves have a certain visual space. When the color blocks with a cold tone and low lightness such as Prussian blue and the color blocks with warm tone and high lightness such as lemon yellow are put together, without the specific image, the strong contrast of complementary color relationship can also produce the feeling of depth of space. In contemporary paintings, many masters are good at using color blocks to express space, such as Katz and Hockney. The difference is that the color blocks in Coleville’s works are rationally generalized based on the basic physical features and inherent colors of each element in the picture, the method of induction is not flat coloring, some traces of paintings are always retained in the picture, and delicate strokes are used to express local texture and enrich spatial levels. For example, in the work *Woman, Man, and Boat* (Figure 4), a whole piece of purple gray is used to generalize the sky, no cloud is added, and only weak light and shade contrast is used to show the wide sky. The

expression of the boat is more concise. Details such as oars, sails, and wood grain on the boat are not depicted. Only one off-white block is used to generalize the shape of the boat. For the color block treatment of the sea, the high generalization method is not used. The depth of the sea level is shown through the depiction of water waves and the gradual change from the warm yellow in the close shot to the dark blue in the distance view. From this painting, we can see diversified generalization techniques of color blocks of Coleville.



Figure 4. Woman, Man, and Boat, Coleville, 1952.

5. Composition

Composition is the space layout of the position, size, and shape of each element in the picture. The clever space layout can convey the author's creation ideas and the spiritual connotation of the work more accurately. In this respect, in Chinese art history, "Ma Yuan painted in a corner and Xia Gui painted on half of the paper". Among the four masters in the Southern Song Dynasty, Ma Yuan and Xia Gui had a unique method to create space of landscape paintings. They got rid of the traditional panoramic layout pattern, extracted a corner or half of scenery from the complicated scenery, and highlighted the charm of local scenery with a large area of blank space. The blank space in the picture is also a kind of space construction and can also arouse the imagination of space of people looking at the painting. In creation, we tend to pay attention to the completeness of the picture composition and strive to achieve visual balance. For example, symmetrical composition, triangular composition, "s-shaped" composition, and other forms of composition have formed universal rules and are widely used, but the application of such general rules may be rigid and inconsistent with the diversified and personalized expression advocated by art easily over time. However, Coleville obviously has his own personal consideration for the layout of various elements in his paintings. In many of his works, he intentionally pursues incompleteness in the form of composition and often does not focus on people. To highlight his focus, the methods of cutting, mismatch, and overlapping are used for space layout. In his works, people are often used as the background, their backs or partial body are displayed, the specific image characteristics of characters become fuzzy, while animals are in the center of the painting. For example, in his work *Child and Dog* (Figure 5), the symbolic treatment method is used for the girl and only a sketch of her naked side is built, while the front of the black dog next to her is shown to people, the size of the dog is obviously exaggerated, and its visual tension is even bigger than that of the girl next to it. In another work *Dog and Pastor*, the pastor is the main image and his head is almost covered by the dog beside him. We can only imagine the pastor's look and thinking when he looks at the distance by his posture of lying on his side. We can see that Coleville is good at using space cutting and

mismatch to express respect for the independence of individuals and the subtle emotions of keeping you at an arm's length.



Figure 5. Child and Dog, Coleville, 1952.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, Coleville's highly personalized space treatment technique is the main reason for his rational and elegant works. From the space construction of the sky, sea, and grassland to the contour of the cat bending its body and licking, his unique understanding of space is revealed everywhere. Painting is a mirror showing the state of mind. He seemed to intend to keep a distance from modern life, integrate into nature, examine life, and have a gentle dialogue with all things in the world. Urbanites who are in the detailed and complicated affairs of human life and endless consideration of interpersonal relationships can obtain peace for a moment from his works and have a short resonance, which may be a valuable part of his works.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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