

The “Simplicity” and “Serenity” in Ingres’ Ideal Beauty

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Abstract:

As one of the most influential painters of Neoclassicism, Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres was shaped by the art of ancient Greece and Rome, the Florentine school, humanism, and the era in which he lived. The ideal beauty that Ingres pursued was both the ideal beauty of the combination of form and nature and the ideal beauty of the combination of art and women, an aesthetic that unified “simplicity” and “serenity” in the ideal beauty. Ingres had a pure soul of the Homeric age, and he always pursued the “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur” of the 18th-century aesthete Winckelmann as his style and perfectly integrated it into his works.

Keywords:

Ingres, Ideal Beauty, Painting, Artistic Concept

1. Introduction

Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres was one of the representative painters of neoclassical painting in the 19th century. Ingres was a controversial painter. He was an inheritor and defender of the classical school of painting. For Ingres, ancient Greece was a very good era. He followed the philosophy of ancient Greek art and continuously developed and broadened his path in artistic painting. [1] Ingres not only revered ancient Greek art but also took Raphael art as his teacher. He believed that the beauty of that era was “the beauty of ideals”. Ingres had a pure soul of the Homeric era. He has always pursued his style with the “noble simplicity and serene greatness” of the 18th-century aesthetician Winckelmann. His artistic style still illuminates the artistic path of later generations to this day.

2. Research Status

2.1. Ingres and Ideal Beauty

In the context of “truth” and “ideal beauty” in Ingres’ paintings, Hou Yongxuan points out that the common subjects in Ingres’ works are women. Ingres, who devoted his life to pursuing ideal beauty, undoubtedly linked the beauty of women with ideal beauty. In his paintings, Ingres meticulously portrayed the unique charm and delicacy of women. During the painting process, Ingres adhered to the beauty of nature as

much as possible, striving to portray this ideal beauty in a truthful and objective manner.

Zhao Yang reexamines the aesthetic connotation of Neoclassicism in the “beauty” of Ingres’ art, summarizes Ingres’ theoretical exploration of beauty, analyzes the artistic ideas and painting styles of Neoclassicism represented by Ingres, and proposes an analysis of Ingres’ paintings. We should approach it from different perspectives, including the beauty of rationality and the beauty of idealism. The beauty of rationality refers to the proportion and scale, truthfulness, and objectivity in classicism, while the beauty of idealism refers to a kind of aesthetic sentiment that follows natural beauty and conforms to people’s subjective desires, reflecting human aesthetic sentiments.

Ju Xiumei proposed in “Classical Beauty, Ideal Beauty, Formal Beauty - A Brief Discussion on Ingres’ Nude Paintings” that the appreciation of Ingres’ art should be viewed from three different perspectives: classical beauty, ideal beauty, and formal beauty. It is precisely the combination of these three different forms that ultimately completes the ideal beauty of Ingres’ painting art. The abstract ideal beauty that has long accumulated in the center of Ingres’ nude paintings, combined with the classical beauty of the specific realistic human body, forms a perfect form, creating a paradigm of classical ideal beauty.

In his discussion on the artistic view of classical master Ingres, Li Fengqi proposed that the core characteristic of Neoclassical painting refers to depicting the ideal beauty naturally existing in objects. All artistic creations are inseparable from aesthetic standards. Only elegant and graceful artworks can evoke pleasant feelings in the audience. Ingres believed that the purpose of ideal beauty is to cultivate human virtues, including both aesthetic and moral virtues, and that the ultimate goal of ideal beauty is humanity. Therefore, the choice of painting themes should also embody noble ideals, should be just, conform to history, and be beautiful. Although Ingres stood on the shoulders of predecessors to paint and learn from the ideal beauty of ancient Greek art, he was not limited to this, but rather developed the art of ideal beauty. In Western art, Ingres’s painting art reached a historical peak without slackening, and he devoted his entire life’s effort to pursuing ideal beauty, respecting the beauty of form, and personally lighting the lamp of classicism.

2.2. “Noble simplicity, serene grandeur”

In “Great Tranquility, Sublime Simplicity” -- On the Classical and Ideal Beauty of Ingres’ Female Nude Paintings, Du Peng proposes that Ingres’ art can be described as “lofty and unworldly, solemn and dignified”. This unique artistic aesthetic is reflected in a series of nude artworks he depicted. Most of Ingres’ female portrait paintings are dazzling and magnificent, exuding the gentle and mysterious charm of women and revealing a sense of “great tranquility and sublime simplicity”. The paintings will last forever, and the beautiful female images in them will be fixed on the canvas, thereby gaining eternal vitality.

In “A Heart of Ice—Rereading Ingres on Art”, Chen Jiujian proposes that Ingres’s ideal beauty of art is highly meaningful to reread in today’s era where art has become a commodity. The article further elucidates what constitutes true ideal beauty and the meaning of “noble simplicity, serene grandeur” by citing Ingres’s original words: “Painting should be healthy and moral” and “I hope to let time and wisdom purify my taste”.

2.3. Summary

“Ideal beauty” by Ingres refers to an idealized beauty pursued in painting, where artistic techniques are used to erase flaws and imperfections in the real world, presenting a pure and perfect realm. This “ideal beauty” manifests in Ingres’s works, especially in his depictions of female figures, which possess both realism and idealized beauty. Ingres’s painting style emphasizes accurate depiction of details and the use of light and shadow effects to highlight the texture and form of objects. It also focuses on the proportion and composition of the painting, making his works highly credible and persuasive. The relationship between this “reality” and “ideal beauty” runs through Ingres’s works, giving his paintings a unique style and profound connotation. There are articles and content discussing the rational and ideal beauty in Ingres’s paintings, but there is less research on Ingres’s ideal beauty and the concepts of “simplicity” and “serenity”. Therefore, the author believes that in today’s era of commercialized art, it is valuable and meaningful to revisit Ingres’s pure innocence towards art.

3. The Beauty of Ideals

3.1. *The ideal beauty that combines aesthetic beauty with natural beauty*

The ideal beauty in Ingres’ mind is the ideal beauty that combines the aesthetic beauty of classical art with nature. Classical beauty is the ideal beauty that Ingres follows. The reason why classical beauty has become a classic aesthetic that continues to thrive to this day is that it has reached a very high level on the aesthetic level. Although classicalism follows objective proportions, it also has certain degrees of change, and this change brings about ideal beauty. Therefore, the seemingly real and objective classicalism is not truly real, after all, there is a difference between what appears to be real and what is truly real. Therefore, we believe that what classicalism embodies is idealism that includes reality. At its core, classicalism is not realism but ideal beauty.

Based on his mentor’s foundation, Ingres conducted more in-depth research and exploration into the ideal beauty. Ingres’ artistic pursuit of ideal beauty and his pursuit of aestheticism are vividly reflected in his works. In his portrayal of “The Turkish Palace Woman,” Ingres completely ignored the facial expressions, focusing instead on the graceful lines of the woman’s exposed body, which portrayed the exotic charm with remarkable skill. The renowned “Courtesan” series is the result of Ingres’ pursuit of aestheticism in fashion with an oriental flair. One of the paintings, “Nude,” features Ingres’ skillful depiction of a voluptuous and symmetrical nude back, utilizing his unique ability to handle graceful and charming lines; while the rhythmic musicality comes from the nude’s unique female aesthetic sensibility, portrayed in a very relaxed posture, with gently undulating skin, seamlessly depicting the nude’s slight twists and turns. The typical image of a sensual nude is set against a poetic and picturesque oriental backdrop. In the painting, three colors - gray-green, neutral flesh tone, and plain white - are used to create a lively yet not intense headscarf, which, against the backdrop of different textures such as hangings, headscarves, and bed curtains, presents the simplicity of a woman’s back, with delicate and soft skin tone that appears healthy and plump due to its natural vitality. The ideal beauty in Ingres’ heart is reflected in such images, combining the beauty of classical art with nature. Finally, this work, which ended up in the hands of the wealthy banker Wapinsong, became his heirloom, hence the name “Wapinsong Bathing Woman”. [2]

3.2. The ideal beauty that combines artistic beauty with femininity

The ideal beauty in Ingres's concept is the ideal beauty that combines artistic beauty with femininity. The ideal beauty pursued in Ingres's art is not only the ideal beauty that follows the beauty of nature, but also the feminine beauty that combines with humans. It is the beauty that conforms to human subjective wishes and the beauty that conforms to human idealistic sentiments. In Ingres's view, if one wants to pursue the true and objective beauty of nature, one must first study aesthetic taste and then learn the standards of aesthetics. [3] In ancient times, beauty was deemed more important than truth, to the extent that the term "Greek" became synonymous with perfection. The Romans emulated this absolute beauty, and the Greeks were renowned for their flawless perfection in sculpture, architecture, poetry, and beyond. Consequently, artists of that era were highly esteemed for their ability to reproduce beauty. Ingres' artistic philosophy clearly reflected these classical artistic theories, indicating that he was influenced by the ancient Greek and Roman periods. [4] In order to win the audience's favor, Ingres also strived to impart a strong sense of realism to his paintings. As he once put it, "You can catch flies not with vinegar, but with honey." This implies that only by creating beautiful and elegant things can one bring joy and enjoyment to the audience during the creative process. In Ingres's philosophy, the ultimate goal of ideal beauty is to educate and nurture people. [5] In his view, painting must serve noble ideals, and must express the artistic beauty and value through the medium of women, with justice, history, and religion as the themes and content of the art.

Ingres' work "Fountain" is the most renowned among his body artworks. The depicted scene is of a girl holding a water pitcher, with a stream of clear water pouring down from it. The graceful yet powerful straight lines give the girl's body a beautiful, youthful aura, and her plump figure - Ingres' work "Fountain" is an embodiment of his lifelong pursuit of the ideal "Goddess of Beauty". The girl in "Fountain" represents the ideal beauty that Ingres admires, combining artistic beauty with femininity. The "Eternal Feminine" in Ingres' female body paintings captures the artist's vision of capturing the youthful beauty and vitality of women on canvas, thereby achieving an eternal artistic life, walking forever in the radiance of beauty. [6] The work that best embodies the ideal of a perfect goddess is "The Fountain." An art critic once said, "All the beauty in the world combined cannot match her own. She concentrates her beauty, making her image more abundant, and her anger even more reflective of ideal beauty." The serene beauty, purity, and ideal beauty that humans seek are vividly portrayed in the painting. The girl in Ingres' "The Fountain" is lifelike, adhering to the rational beauty of ancient Greek sculpture art. The varied lines fill the entire painting, revealing complexity within simplicity, and simplicity within complexity, yet the changing image appears unified. The left side, with the towering elbow as the apex, has a body contour resembling a gently falling strand of gauze, forming a changing circular arc; the right side, with the water pitcher and raised arm, constitutes a circular and triangular geometric shape, giving the dynamic lines a sense of movement, forming a contrast with the simplicity and serenity on the left. The painter strictly adheres to the principles of form beauty such as rhythm and cadence, and the girl's posture reveals the beauty of the S-shaped curve created by the ancient Greek sculptor Praxiteles. Ingres pioneered a new paradigm of perfect human body aesthetics that has brought endless rational charm to future generations. [7]

4. Noble Simplicity, Serene Grandeur

Ingres always pursued a pure and elegant aesthetic, considering ancient Greek art and the works of Raphael as his ultimate ideals. He constantly studied the painting, sculpture, and artistic qualities of ancient Greece and Rome. At the same time, he continually learned from the art master Raphael to refine his painting skills. He also studied under the great masters of Italian Renaissance art. In Winckelmann's view, ancient Greek art embodied the ideals held by the ancient Greeks towards beauty. He said, "Noble simplicity and serene grandeur are the most accurate evaluations of ancient Greek art." This is precisely the charm of ancient Greek art and the ideal beauty in Winckelmann's mind. The ideal beauty in Winckelmann's mind is not only rational but also spiritual, abstract, and conceptual. Ingres' artistic style emerged from the aesthetic taste of ancient Greek and Roman classical art, which is most prominent in the artistic system of "noble simplicity and serene grandeur." His painting style is elegant and noble, with a free and natural brushwork, crisp and clear lines, simple shapes, rigorous composition, and an eternal aesthetic of pure and elegant art.

4.1. *"Simplicity" of ideal beauty*

"Noble simplicity" refers to the purity, serenity, simplicity, and unity of art. Ingres' pursuit of "simplicity" in pure art is admirable. The "simplicity" in Ingres' ideal beauty encompasses meanings such as "purity", "health", and "morality". Ingres said, "Painting must be healthy", "The form must be healthy", and "I hope that time and wisdom will purify my interests." He added, "We are not driven by invention, but by a multitude of things that must be done. We sincerely reproduce, endowing them with a pure and decent style, making the image pure." Baudelaire said, "Mr. Ingres has exceptional talent. I feel there is something special about him, and that is his evident love for painting women." He spares no expense, like a surgeon, revealing the most exquisite beauty in them; the contours of women's bodies, even the slightest wavy curves, he treats like his beloved, with a detached and objective approach. Despite Ingres' opposition to Baudelaire, Baudelaire also recognized Ingres' works. Ingres' paintings have a magical power; they can soften the viewer, as if purifying the soul and imbuing it with a serene strength. His paintings always appear gentle and dignified, delicate and flawless, refined and elegant. Even images with exposed backs, such as "The Bathers at Valpinçon", appear healthy and plump, permeated with a vividness that carries no hint of lechery. When we look at Ingres' painting "The Fountain", we cannot help but feel a spontaneous sense of being cleansed by the clear spring, feeling as if we have been rejuvenated. When we look at another of Ingres' works, "The Cub and the Lamb", we can definitely feel the pure and ideal beauty of simplicity and purity that Ingres conveys through his paintings. Especially those pure and flawless eyes, which are hard to find in real life, but we can glimpse them in Ingres' paintings. It can be seen that Ingres' inner simplicity allowed him to create such pure expressions. The purity of these eyes brings spiritual serenity, peace, and unity. "Noble simplicity" is the soul of Ingres' paintings. [8]

4.2. *"Serenity" of ideal beauty*

"Serene grandeur" embodies a profound impact on the soul and a spiritual guidance. The term "serene grandeur" carries three layers of meaning as an aesthetic concept, namely aesthetics, morality, and spirit. On the aesthetic level, Winckelmann believed that ancient Greek art, imbued with classical wisdom, encompassed not only the elegance of ancient Greek sculpture but also represented the pinnacle of ancient art.

Ancient Greek art valued nature and human freedom. On the moral normative level, it metaphorically signified a moral purity, embodying a noble morality of self-restraint and calmness, tinged with Puritanism. On the spiritual pursuit level, he believed that freedom is precious, and only the principle of freedom supremacy can allow the flower of art to flourish.

He pointed out: “The artistic portrayal of the Greeks reveals a great and serene soul, even though this soul is immersed in intense emotions. Just like the sea, despite the tumultuous waves, no matter how it churns, its deepest part always presents a magnificent tranquility. All enthusiasm ultimately leads to a serene balance.” Therefore, in our pursuit of art, we must adhere to Ingres’ ideal of “serenity” in beauty. Serenity is not only an aesthetic concept but also an indispensable source of strength in artistic practice. In serenity, people can perceive the beauty of nature and discern the essence of things, thus realizing Ingres’ ideal of beauty.

4.3. “Simplicity” and “serenity” are unified in the beauty of ideals

The “simplicity” and “serenity” in “Noble Simplicity, Serene Greatness” are not opposites, but are unified in the beauty of ideals. This is not only the pursuit of ancient Greek art, but also the core summary of Ingres’s artistic aesthetics. Kant wrote “On the Feeling of Grace and Majesty”, in which he expressed his understanding of “grace”: “Grace makes people rejoice, and those who are gracious are often laughing.” Noble simplicity is also the meaning of grace in the text. The purest and most authentic meaning of Greek sculpture art, coupled with its consummate skill, are the reasons why it has been passed down to this day. Winckelmann regarded Greek sculpture as “no matter how turbulent the sea may be, its deepest depths must remain serene.” It is precisely because Greek sculpture possesses “Noble Simplicity” and “Serene Greatness,” and unifies them in the beauty of ideals, that it remains unsurpassed to this day. He pointed out that one can feel the deadly pain on the face of the Laocoön statue, but to avoid depicting a tragic cry, the artist only used “a timid, breath-holding sigh.” Despite the physical pain and mental torment, he still had strong endurance. It is this “Serene Greatness” that deeply shocks the soul of every viewer. The reason why “serene” artworks shock people is not because of their intense and explosive emotions, but because their emotional condensation moves people. It is not about the verbal elaboration, but about the subconscious feelings of the heart. The unique spirituality and emotional fluctuations of human beings, as well as the fluctuations of the mind and will, are all brought into a serene and distant realm by it. In Laocoön, we feel the unshakable great power, and it is this serene power that overcomes the tribulations of the world. In short, you can feel the joy of “Noble Simplicity,” and at the same time, you will be deeply shocked by the serene greatness of “Serenity.”

“Simplicity” and “serenity” are unified in the beauty of ideals. These noble terms, simplicity and serenity, inspire our lofty thoughts. They enable us to face art with greater ease, unencumbered by the hustle and bustle of the outside world. When we possess simplicity and serenity, we can construct a noble and beautiful artistic life.

5. Conclusions

Ingres’s life was a life of controversy and also a life of legend. Throughout his life, he yearned for the artistic pursuit of “noble simplicity and serene grandeur” in ancient Greece. Ingres was a rebel of his time, a refiner of rational beauty, a follower of

classical beauty, and an abstractor of ideal beauty. His ideal beauty is the ideal beauty that combines form and nature, as well as the ideal beauty that combines artistic beauty and femininity. The masterpieces he left to posterity and the spiritual guidance of simplicity and serenity still guide the path of future art scholars.

Conflicts of Interest

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