

Analysis of Lin Fengmian's Paintings from the Perspective of Bryson's Semiotics Theory*

Jing Wang

The College of Arts

College of Humanities & Sciences of Northeast Normal University

Changchun, China 130117

Abstract—Norman Bryson regards art as a "symbol" and regards art history as a history of conflicting transformations within the symbolic interior, which helps to locate the special examples of art history that cannot be explained by the "history of the visual style". In comparison, the study of Chinese art history is still mostly based on the method of social history. From this point, the semiotic perspective of Bryson's study of art history undoubtedly has positive practical significance for the study of Chinese contemporary art theory.

Keywords—Bryson; tradition; Lin Fengmian; Chinese art history

I. INTRODUCTION

Norman Bryson, is a famous contemporary European and American art theorist and art historian. As one of the most accomplished and influential scholars in the study of the "new art history" that emerged in the 1980s, Bryson published books called "The New Art History Trilogy" in the 1980s, which was hailed as "the most prestigious academic achievement in the study of Western 'New Art History'". [1] Its quite new ideas and challenging attempts have injected new vitality into the study of the quiet art history.

II. THE PERSPECTIVE OF BRYSON'S SEMIOTICS THEORY

Bryson expressed his attitude towards tradition in art history in his book "Tradition & Desire: From David to Delacroix" in his "New Art History Trilogy". He emphasized that the story of the art described by Gombrich is a traditional story that has been handed down from generation to generation. The artists of the later generations benefit more from traditions. The tradition is a step forward for the artists of the later generations and will not cause psychological anxiety and burden. The impact on them is positive. Bryson questioned this progressive view of Gombrich's history. He believes that tradition "for the pioneers, perhaps everything is possible, but for a person who feels late, the legacy of the past can be a kind of burden, a certain problem and some kind of anxiety." [2] In fact, painters of later generations often feel that they are

"latecomers".

Bryson borrowed the anxiety of the younger generation of poets on the fruitful tradition in Broom's "Anxiety of Influence", that is, the "anxiety of influence" to explain the actual psychology effect of the artists in the history of art. In the history of art, Bryson regards tradition as an "anxiety of influence" and undoubtedly has a positive significance for the study of Chinese art history.

III. INTERPRETING LIN FENGMIAN FROM BRYSON'S SEMIOTICS THEORY

As one of the representative figures of traditional art reform in the history of modern Chinese art, Lin Fengmian has been working on a new art path different from China and the West. He once said: "Western critics have divided the history of plastic arts into more than 20 types: Greek, Egyptian, three generations (should refer to: Xia, Shang and Zhou Dynasties), literati paintings of Tang, Song and Yuan Dynasties, maritime art around the Pacific Ocean, the Renaissance (similar to Greece), three-dimensional, abstract, icon of the Middle Ages, photographic, Persian... If a writer can transcend this existing image (type), it will be a miracle." [3] It can be seen that Lin Fengmian has been working hard to transcend the East and the West to "break a new path", and his anxiety stems from the influence of the strong traditions of the East and the West. However, Lin Fengmian has not been crushed by the perfect tradition. After a lifetime of exploration and experimentation, he blended Chinese painting traditions with Western modern art styles, overcame the highly stylized Chinese paintings, stepped out of the strong shade of traditional Chinese paintings brought to the artists of the younger generation, reshape the soul of Chinese painting, and thus creating a new art. This new art is different from Chinese and Western paintings, but it combines Western modern art forms with Eastern art spirits and transforms this tradition with specific artistic creations. Therefore, some people call his work "the essence of the Tang, Song and Yuan Dynasties, but also the style of artists such as the European Matisse." Faced with the fruitful achievements of traditional Chinese painting and Western painting, some of his works can clearly appreciate his awe of the strong traditions of China and the West and he has to learn some classics to reduce the pressure and anxiety brought by the Chinese and Western traditions, so that he can

*Project: The phased achievements of the "13th Five-Year" Social Science Research Project of Jilin Province Education Department (No. JJKH20181321SK).

make himself into the ranks of masters and find his place on the chain of art history. Here this paper takes Lin Fengmian's opera figure painting as an example, and analyzes Lin Fengmian's attitude towards tradition with Bryson's semiotics theory.

Lin Fengmian's era made him feel deeper than the traditional artists to bring him the pressure. He wanted to find a new way, that is, the transcendence of tradition. On the one hand, Lin Fengmian was drawing on the tradition as a whole, and on the other hand, he had abandoned some things in the tradition. He tried his best to get out of the painting program of following a set routine since the Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties. In Lin Fengmian's works, the bone line on which Chinese paintings survived was taken away, and black was only treated as a color and lost its special significance of traditional Chinese painting.

Lin Fengmian's oil painting "Farewell My Concubine" is a typical example of the combination of traditional Chinese shadow-shaping and paper-cutting art and the three-dimensional combination of the geometrization of Western advocacy. From the perspective of originality, any figure in this work is not the original creation of Lin Fengmian. Because from the shape of Xiang Yu and Concubine Yu, Lin Fengmian borrowed the characteristics of the flat and fixed stylization of the characters in the shadow play. The hard and exaggerated movements of the characters clearly have the shadow of folk shadows. In the visual presentation of the performance of the screen, the charm of folk paper-cutting is absorbed, and Xiang Yu and Concubine Yu are like paper-cut stickers on the screen. From the perspective of viewing, Lin Fengmian borrowed from the Cubist School, and he advocated the spatio-temporal transformation and abstract expression of the Cubism represented by Picasso. Lin Fengmian creatively associated the narrative space of opera art with the space-time concept of cubism, and used the opera image, which had the meaning of time and space continuity, to practice the solution of the cubist time and space contradiction on the plane, and modernity is incorporated into the visual style of the art of drama. Through his free and exaggerated performances, the arbitrarily combined stage set, and the performance of time and space, he re-understood the essence of Western modern art represented by Cubism in this most ancient art. Lin Fengmian's era made him feel deeper than the traditional artists to bring him the pressure. He wanted to find a new way, that is, the transcendence of tradition. He tried his best to get out of the painting program of following a set routine since the Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties. He carefully selected each of the predecessors' styles. Each art form blended these things in his own picture, while at the same time carefully aligning himself with his predecessors, getting rid of their influence and making himself different. From his "Farewell My Concubine", Lin Fengmian has included other images in the tradition into his picture. Although the content of the picture is familiar to people, it is a new depiction of the tradition. The visuals of the different angles of Xiang Yu and Concubine Yu were geometrically abstracted and integrated, which made the paintings that blended Chinese folk shadows, paper-cuts and Western cubist geometric

abstraction show strong decorative and formal aesthetics. It is precisely when people swim in the tradition and feel the pressure, Lin Fengmian has another sentiment, because he measures the whole tradition and competes with the whole tradition, including the Western tradition. From his "Farewell My Concubine", Lin Fengmian has included other images in the tradition into his picture. Although the content of the picture is familiar to people, it is a new depiction of the tradition. It is precisely when people swim in the tradition and feel the pressure, Lin Fengmian has another sentiment, because he measures the whole tradition and competes with the whole tradition, including the Western tradition.

In some of his other works, people can also see the shadow of Western art and traditional Chinese art. "He blended the folk line drawing, the Dunhuang murals and the Parisian paintings' colors and styles to form the modern and elegant style of paintings; he introduced the structure and picture strength of Cézanne to the thin rice paper, breaking the softness, wilting and rigidity of traditional Chinese painting, and forming modern Chinese paintings with diverse forms and rich emotional expressions." [4] (as shown in "Fig. 1")



Fig. 1. The influence of the shadows characters and Picasso's works on Lin Fengmian.

^a The above two works are shadows characters and Picasso's "Awenon Maiden", the following two works are Lin Fengmian's paintings.

In his letter to Pan Qiliu, Lin Fengmian expressed his embarrassment and anxiety when he went beyond the East and West to take the third road. He pointed out that the difference between East and West art is in dealing with time and space, and the discovery of the "a little light" of creating new art from the national art. That is, he thinks that the murals or literati paintings of the Tang Dynasty are "sources of the forms". Moreover, Dunhuang murals are regarded as a "source of form" for the creation of modern art, and they hope to draw "the second half of the 20th century" with more evolutionary significance than Matisse and Picasso.

Therefore, the study of Lin Fengmian is not only to point out how he cites the works of his predecessors, but also to point out why he would cite the things of his predecessors. According to Bryson's theoretical perspective, it is because

of the "anxiety of influence" caused by the two traditions of the East and the West on Lin Fengmian. This anxiety of facing a strong tradition makes Lin Fengmian transform the tradition in a certain sense. Lin Fengmian's anxiety and embarrassment under the influence of the strong traditions of China and the West, in some works, draws on Picasso's cubist art and Chinese folk art, and achieves a unique new art, reaching the purpose of transcending tradition, and making himself squeeze into the ranks of the same as the predecessors of art.

IV. THE INSPIRATION OF BRYSON'S SEMIOTICS ART THEORY TO THE STUDY OF CHINESE ART HISTORY

The history of art history in China has a long history. From the "Record of Famous Paintings in the Past Dynasties" by Zhang Yanyuan in the Tang Dynasty to the several versions of "A Brief History of Chinese Art" that people are currently using, there are many. However, in terms of research methods, the research methods of social history are basically adopted, and the development of art is put under the overall form of society, economy, politics, ideology and culture at that time, especially the influence of political and economic background on the development of art. As for the learners including the art theory majors, from the moment they enter the university to learn the true history of art history, the classroom of art history is such a scene: the students sit in the shaded classrooms and concentrate on the slides of famous paintings and other works of art that are highly respected, listening to the teacher says: "Who and when did this work create?" What theme does it represent? How is its composition, lines, and colors used? What does it mean?" The history of art uses the method of recording social history and the classroom teaching method that comes with it, so that the cultivated art theoretical talents can't jump out of this mindset. The history of art is the life of the artist and the formation of the art movement. The advancement of artistic skills and the social, political, cultural and other conditions related to its existence, or the unification of artistic works in a certain style category. And the analysis of the works of Chinese art history is not a plain picture description or a one-size-fits-all meaning analysis. Few people put forward different general views on the work itself. Some scholars have used some research methods in the Western "New Art History" to study the material cases and topics of Chinese art history. In this sense, Bryson's view of the history of art history also plays a role as inspiring a new thinking.

V. CONCLUSION

Bryson's semiotics theory focuses on the actual psychological effects of Lin Fengmian's powerful tradition. It is believed that Lin Fengmian's reference to tradition is to get rid of the ideal of Chinese cultural change that cannot be realized in the Western language schema system. Tradition, here with historical vertical ladder value and root meaning, is a strategic choice for seeking the new and the changes. Bryson's semiotics art history and visual culture theory have been widely recognized by the intellectual community as the opposite theory of traditional art history, especially

Gombrich's art theory. It can be said that Bryson's view of the history of art history is not only a theory, but also a strategy and means. It breaks the traditional concept of over-emphasizing the inheritance, absorption and acceptance of tradition, and emphasizes the cited, revised and innovative approach in the process of influence, which encourages researchers to exert their subjective initiative, gets rid of the inherent objective nature of the work, and carries out creative interpretations, thus making some discover and creation. This provides people with a new perspective and new ideas for studying art history.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ding Ning, *Rewriting Art History: Bresson and His New Art History* [J]. *World Art*, 1991, (3): 55. (in Chinese)
- [2] (U.K) Norman Bryson, *Tradition & Desire: From David to Delacroix* [M]. Ding Ning, trans. Hangzhou: Zhejiang Photographic Press, 2003: 18. (in Chinese)
- [3] Jin Shangyi, Lin Fengmian's Discussion of Abstract Painting and Others [J]. *Art Observation*, 2002 (1): 16. (in Chinese)
- [4] Li Shusheng, Notes on Interviewing Lin Fengmian [C]. *Collection of Research on Lin Fengmian*. Hangzhou: China Academy of Art Press, 1995: 170. (in Chinese)