

# Symbolic Recognition of Kramskoy's Figurative Painting Language\*

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**Abstract**—In realistic painting, symbol refers to an image with recognition function, and can be a specific image or a painting language with personal style. Kramskoy's paintings take "direct painting" as the main method, and pay attention to the application of realistic modeling elements. The figures in his paintings are clear and profound. From the perspective of semiotics, this paper explores and studies the deep meaning structure of Kramskoy's figurative paintings, deconstructs the "signifier" and "signified" of Kramskoy's painting language, and reveals the painter's ideas, thoughts and the meaning of his paintings through the carrier of space, lines and colors. This is conducive to the deep understanding of painting works, a closer view to the real history and revivification of the original creation of art works.

**Keywords**—Kramskoy; figurative painting language; symbolic identification

## I. INTRODUCTION

In figurative realistic painting, symbol refers to an image with the function of recognition. It can be a specific image or a painting language with a personal style. The reason why images and modeling symbols become symbols is that they do not exist for the sake of themselves, but create a constantly changing and vivid meaning. The figurative painting language of Ivan Nikolaevich Kramskoy (Иван Николаевич Крамской, 1837-1887) is a kind of figurative painting symbol with vivid meaning. Born in the 19th century, he is the representative figure of Russian realistic painting, as well as the founder and spiritual leader of Russian ambulant school. In the pursuit of painting, he advocated that nationality and ideology should be above form. His is good at revealing the inner world of the characters, taking "direct painting" as the main means, and paying attention to the application of realistic modeling elements. The figures in the pictures are clear and profound. To explore and research the deep meaning structure of Kramskoy's figurative paintings from the perspective of semiotics, deconstruct the "signifier" and "signified" of his painting language, and reveal the concept of the painter, ideas and the meaning of the painting through the space,

lines and colors and other picture carriers is conducive to the profound grasp of the painting.

## II. THE IMPLICATION OF SIGNIFIER IN KRAMSKOY'S PAINTINGS

Painting is the product of solidification and externalization of spiritual thinking by a painter's use of a variety of perceptive artistic techniques. It is a materialized form of expression, and the physical form on which painting works depend is the visual symbol. Visual symbol is the spiritual carrier of the painter's expression and aesthetic appreciation. All the material elements and their combination in the painting are the bearing system of visual symbol of the signifier. In Kramskoy's realistic figurative paintings, various portraits, flowers, trees, animals and environmental symbols are strong symbols of the painter's thoughts and emotions. Different from other pure symbols such as language and text, this is presented in the form of graphics and images in the picture and a symbolic form with expressiveness. The realistic figurative feature of Kramskoy's paintings is the expressive symbolic language with recognition meaning formed by the painter in his creation. His portraiture works cover a wide range of signifiers, including peasants at the bottom of society, religious mythological figures, elegant women and some famous cultural figures. The painter deeply reveals the inner world of the figures in the painting through the signifier bearing system of visual symbols such as the eyes, expressions, gestures and surroundings of the figures in the painting. The work "Desolate Grief" (see "Fig. 1") uses modeling symbols, color symbols and environmental symbols to create an overflow of grief for the loss of children. In terms of the signifier carrier of the figure's modeling, the mother in the painting covers her mouth with a handkerchief, with a vivid and well-rounded facial expression, and her eyes show a strong feeling of grief and sentiment of missing, which makes an unspeakable pain pop up before her eyes. In terms of the signifier used in the painting, the use of color in the gray hair, black dress and white towel of the mother shows a kind of repressed and solemn emotion. In terms of the signifier carrier formed by the environment, the warm tone presented by the golden curtains, gold books and gold frame paintings just forms sharp contrast with the black skirt of the mother in the picture, white towel, which produces a kind of intense visual conflict and make the picture more shocking. In terms of the signifier carrier of the spatial

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composition in the whole painting, the black dress of the mother and the black sofa at the back just form a cross structure, highlighting the painful atmosphere of the whole picture. Kramskoy deeply integrated his own thoughts and ideas into the signifiers depicted in the concrete scene and all kinds of signifiers in the painting are the products of the painter's careful consideration. As a carrier of signifier, these visual symbols carry the spiritual direction of the subject and make up for the lack of our language expression. It is a "meaningful form".



Fig. 1. "Desolate Grief", 228cm x 141cm, in 1884.

### III. LIVENESS OF THE SIGNIFIER IN KRAMSKOY'S PAINTINGS

The creation and acceptance of works is an interactive communication process. Through the creation of works, the creators transform their ideas of specific material elements into written language or schemata language and present them to the audience, who can construct new meaning expression schemas through the interpretation of the written language or schemata language of specific works. Therefore, the emergence of the symbol meaning schema in the work needs to go through transformation for twice in the author's creation stage and the audience's perception stage, and the interactive relationship between the symbol signifier and the signified from the author to the audience in the work can make the signified of the symbol produce "liveness" and "vitality". The work "Wasser-Nymphen" (see "Fig. 2") was created according to the novellas "May Night" (in 1831) by Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol-Anovskii (Никола́й Васи́льевич

Гоголь-Яновский, 1809-1852). The creation and acceptance of this painting has experienced a multiple transformation process from literal language to schema language, and then from schema language to interpretation of schema language. In "Wasser-Nymphen", Gogol describes the image of the female drowning ghost with poetic language, "The window opened softly, and the little reflected head he had seen in the water looked out again and listened to his song dreamily". The long lashes half hid her bright eyes. She was as pale as a sheet of paper, as silver moonlight; yet how enchanting! How charming! She laughed aloud... ". [2] In Gogol's novels, the female drowning ghost he referred to was a girl who was persecuted by serfdom and drowned, while Kramskoy depicted her as an angel pure as jade in the hazy moonlight with the signified of his pattern language in the painting. In the picture, the background of cool color and tone refers to the oppressive social reality of serfdom, and the girl's pure white dress and innocent expression contrasted sharply with the cool tone that symbolized the cruelty of serfdom, in which the signified is "only the gentlest determination is the most powerful struggle against the evil forces of serfdom." In the multiple transformation from literal language to schemata language, and then from schemata language to the interpretation of schema language, schemata language reconstructs the existence mode of literal language. This transformation process from the audience to the author of schema language sublimates the work's signification and enhances the "liveness" and "vitality" of the image symbols.



Fig. 2. Wasser-Nymphen, 88x132cm, in 1871.

### IV. CULTURAL VALUES IN THE SIGNIFYING PROCESS OF KRAMSKOY'S PAINTING

Signification refers to the direct and implicative meaning of symbols and the meaning relationship between them, which is a "symbolization process". Painting is a form of expression of human emotion, the objectification of the essential power of painter's creation, and a kind of visual symbol about meaning transmission constructed through the picture language environment. The signifying process of symbol can integrate the signifier and signified, connotation and extension, so that the receiver can analyze the real inner behind the symbol through the external form of the symbol, and further explore the cultural ideology of the symbol from various angles, so as to reveal the cultural values behind things. In the work "Christ In The Wilderness" (see "Fig. 3"),

the selection of painting signifier is different from the traditional image of Jesus in the gospels. The same signifier will have different signifiers under different signifiers. In his shaping of this image symbol, Kramskoy shows the tragic exploration of Russian advanced intellectuals in the scope of religious themes. Without any sacred feeling of religious figures, Jesus in the painting is just like a tramp in tattered clothes, with confused and embarrassed facial expression. His feet are all jagged rocks, and there is a faint glow at the end of the open field behind him. A sense of loneliness in the wilderness is penetrating. In the picture, the faint glow behind Jesus, symbolizes the bright truth; and the rocky rocks at Jesus' feet symbolize the reality of hardships and dangers. The sharp contrast between this glow and the stone highlights the hero's inner struggle. At the same time, the work expresses the loneliness and pain of Jesus' heart with a cool tone. Kramskoy, a realist painter who advocated the nationalization of art, cared about the sufferings of society and was good at thinking about social life, wrote to Garshin: "I know very well that everyone has a moment of hesitation in life — to go right or left, to beg from god or not to give in to evil... So this is not Christ... It's a reflection of our own minds." [4] So his image of Jesus is the connotation extension of his inner spiritual. Through the image of Christ for which the painter fell into a deep thought, he indicated the spiritual desire of a progressive intellectual who was willing to devote himself to the country and the nation, and showed his helplessness to the social situation at that time. Through the shaping of religious figures, the painter reflects his "high heroism of choosing the road to serve the society and dedicating himself to the soul of self-sacrifice struggle", [5] implying his patriotic cultural values of worrying about the fate of his nation. Kramskoy is known as "the artist who, after Alexander Ivanov, explained the spirit of Christ — the self-sacrificing figure with virtue and morality." [6]



Fig. 3. "Christ In The Wilderness", 180cm x 210cm, in 1872.

## V. THE UNIQUE EXPRESSION OF THE SYMBOLS IN KRAMSKOY'S PAINTINGS

Susanne K. Langer (1895-1982) believed that "the symbols used in artistic creation all have certain meanings, and these meanings and the carriers of meanings are the structural components of the work, which construct the

expression mode of the work". [7] Through the symbolization process of the carrier of painting works, Kramskoy transforms the intangible into tangible, presenting emotions and ideas to the recipient in the form of unique image codes.

The Crimean War in the mid-19th century exposed the corruption of Russian serfdom. The serf revolts one after the other and the rise of new aristocracy and capitalist forces contributed to the collapse of Russian serfdom. Against this background, Kramskoy got rid of the traditional aesthetic classical painting and advocated painting with national characteristics and reflecting social reality. He initiated the famous "Riot of the Fourteen People" in the history of Russian art, to resist the ideal and classical painting education idea advocated by the Royal Academy of Fine Arts. He called for painting works to reflect the social reality through brush strokes. Yet the dominant social thought of the time was that "the painters of the ambulant school could see nothing but drunks, cloaks, sandals and coffins, and could not escape the filth of their surroundings. So how can there be any beauty in their paintings? How can there be modelling?" [8] This contempt for the reflection of reality in painting led to the suppression of Kramskoy's creative ideas, and the fact that the painter broke away from the academy through riots could not be recognized by most people in essence. His heart was depressed, so most of the image codes in his paintings were metaphors for the instability of the current situation, uncertain future and his inner hesitation.

### A. Absent Graphic Symbols

The painter's sense of indecision made his paintings appear the features of absent graphic symbols (icon). In the work "Moonlight night" (see "Fig. 4"), the keynote of black, white, ash and grey are basically used, and the slightly depressed calm color set off the painter's gloomy mood. The girl in the center of the picture sits on a side chair in a white dress, which reflects the silver light after the moon shines. There is a strong color contrast between the light sensation of this bright white and the grey and black of the wood behind the girl, presenting the purity and innocent obviously. The girl's looks a little sad, deep in thought, as if the beauty around her could not move her. Despite of the name "Moonlight night", there is no such graphic symbol as the moon in the whole picture. The painter only referred to the moon by use of the light reflected by the girl's white dress and the light and shadow created by the moon on the flowers and trees. In the history of Russian culture, the moon, as a traditional graphic symbol, symbolizes love and happiness. [8] From the perspective of semiotics, if the girl in white is a visible symbol and refers to something pure and flawless, then the absent symbol of the moon symbolizing happiness means the absence of happiness and completeness. If the painter refers to himself with the girl in white, the gray and black background refers to the realistic creation idea suppressed by the cruel living environment. In the picture, the moon has light but cannot be seen and the absence of the source of the light indicates the painter's bright or dark future. The girl's thoughtful expression also symbolizes the painter's reflection on his own destiny.



Fig. 4. Moonlight night, 179cm x 135cm, in 1880.

### B. Index with Rich Meanings

Kramskoy is good at the construction of facial symbols, especially the description of eye symbols, while the projection of the "gaze" of portrait figures and the "gaze" of painters on models in paintings all reflect an indicative relationship between watching and being watched. This is a direct causal or adjacent relationship between the subject and object forms, and the projection of the eye is an index [9]. The eyes have a variety of indicative behaviors related to visual functions, such as "look", "observe", "stare", "peep" and "overlook". Through the projection of the eyes of the figures in the painting and the projection of the painter's "gaze" on the models, the viewer can associate and derive more meanings. From the perspective of the portraits in the paintings, the eyes are symbols to express human emotions. Their various dynamics and behaviors, such as lifting, bending and stretching, can reflect the different psychological states of the figures in the paintings and express their different character meanings. There is a strong spirit in the eyes of the figures in Kramskoy's paintings. The woman in the work "Portrait of unknown woman" (see "Fig. 5") gives a cool-hearted look, and her eyes showed a dismissive and haughty expression, as if she did not want to associate with the dirty society. The indicative sign of her eyes showed the spirit of the heroine, who was resolute and brave. In the work "Peasant Holding a Bridle" (see "Fig. 6"), the eyes of the character are slightly saggy, and although they are tortured by life, they are firm. The eye signifier shows the firm and self-reliant spirit of the weather-beaten farmer. When the painter depicts the creation object, he also injects his own aesthetic pursuit. When the painter extracts the interesting content of the creation object, he also reflects his interpretation of himself, giving the painting with the intersubjective meaning of expressing the artist's spiritual

ideas. When the act of "seeing" occurs, the subject and the object are integrated by the eyes. The work "the ranger" (see "Fig. 7") vividly depicts the ranger's sparkling, round and glaring eyes. In the painter's own words, he describes the ranger as "one of those typical figures who, relying on his own wisdom, understand the life of the people and many things in the social and political system, and have deep feelings of dissatisfaction, bordering on hatred". [5] The painter's interpretation of the figure in the painting shows that he himself is "a painter who paints the portraits of peasants in Russian art with extremely profound descriptions of personal and social characteristics and with a conscious emphasis on the possibility of the people's revolution". [5]



Fig. 5. Portrait of unknown woman, 75.5cm x 99cm, in 1883.



Fig. 6. Peasant Holding a Bridle, 125cm x 93cm, in 1883.

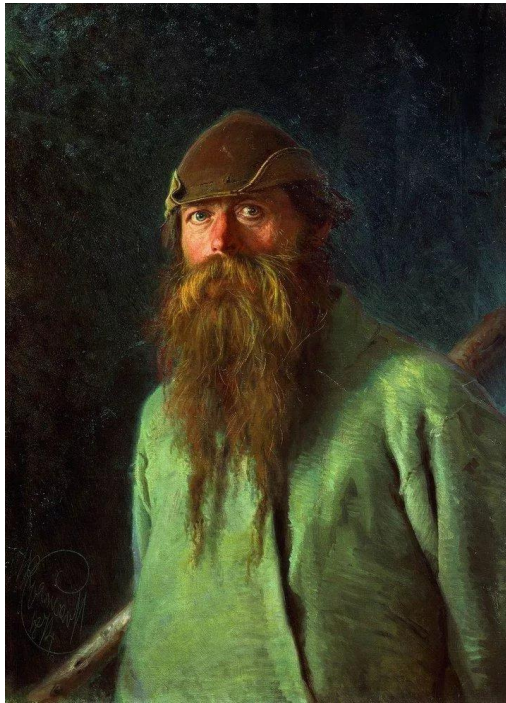


Fig. 7. Woodsman, 84cm x 62cm, in 1874.

### C. An Unfinished Symbol

Unfinished works of art are a method of free expression of the aesthetic paradigm in the spirit of the times. In his work "Natural History", Gaius Plinius Secundus (23A.D.-79A.D) said, "the unfinished work of an artist is more loved than the finished work because it gives a glimpse of what the artist really thinks, and the regret of the unfinished work after the artist's death is more evoking." [10] The work "Laughter" (see "Fig. 8") is an unfinished work of art. As early as 1874, the artist began to conceive this painting. He wanted to create a symbolic scene in which an unarmed missionary was mocked and insulted by a group of absurd and corrupt people. The painter was not rich at that time, and since his artistic creation was not recognized by the mainstream of the society, he was frustrated. Therefore, in the creation of painting, the painter did not hide his art concept full of struggle. With national consciousness as the driving force of his creation, he used missionaries as a metaphor for realistic painters and proletarian fighters who are not widely recognized by the society represented by himself. He also used stupid crowds to refer to the absurd and backward mainstream social thoughts at that time. The work creates a tragic atmosphere in which good things are destroyed, implying that truth is held in the hands of a few. The picture has a strong symbolic meaning of referring to the dark social reality at that time. The lines, colors, composition, perspective and other language elements in the painting have all become a symbol to accuse the social reality. The painter began the painting in earnest in 1877. At the beginning of the creation, he declined all the painting orders, class and family chores, and devoted himself to painting. However, the good times did not last long. Because of poverty, he had to give up the creation of "Laughter", and failed to complete the work

in 1882 after five years of intermittent painting. Later, his portraits became a success. The economic conditions were improved and there was a large and bright studio, but he never finished the painting. Why did the artist fail to complete this work of strong symbolic significance? It is because of this painting "hung in the air" that people can better understand the possibility of such an open context and get closer to the psychological state of the painter when he created the painting. Based on the assumption of such an open context, it can be speculated that the reason for the unfinished works of the painter may be that the painter was already famous, had a rich life and integrated into the upper class at that time and the change of living environment changed the concepts and ideas of creation and made the painter lose his passion for creation. Or it can be speculated that with the growth of age and increasingly rich social experience, his rational thinking outweighed emotional feelings, and he no longer believed in the impact of art on society. Or it can be speculated that the painter had lost his enthusiasm and inspiration for creation because of the large number of orders for portraits... "Unfinished" work is an open symbolic context, which can give the audience more imagination space.



Fig. 8. Laughter, 373cm x 501cm, in 1877-1882.

## VI. THE SPIRITUAL CONNOTATION OF KRAMSKOY'S PAINTING SYMBOLS

In his book "Aesthetics", Боров, Ю.Б (Ю́рий Бори́сович Бо́рев, 1925- ) mentioned that "symbols in art are the expression of the author's thoughts and emotions". [11] Symbols in works of art are carriers of artists' thoughts, and the depth of artists' thoughts determines the spiritual connotation of symbols in works. Kramskoy said, "We have to constantly strive to express light, color and atmosphere without losing the artist's most precious conscience." [6] He believed that the most important thing for a work of art was to reflect the thoughts of the artist. Through the symbolic interpretation of Kramskoy's paintings, the national and tragic spiritual connotation contained in the painter's works can be grasped.

#### A. *The Symbolic System of Kramskoy's Paintings Has a Distinct National Character*

He said in "The Destiny of Russian Art", "I think art cannot be anything other than a national thing." [6] He believed that art should reflect the real form of real life, meet the needs of the nation and express the true feelings of the painter. He strongly advocated that art should be liberated from the ivory tower of the aristocracy so that all the people could have access to art and that art could become a weapon to educate the people and promote progressive ideas. In his portraits, he created many plain and enduring proletarian images with calm modeling, color and composition symbols, such as the works "Head of an Old Ukrainian Peasant", "Head of an Old Peasant", "An old farmer with a walking stick" and "Millworker" etc., which were very rare in the Russian painting circle in the 19th century. The painter spent a lot of time thinking and trying to truly reflect the hard-working, kind-hearted characteristics and rich inner world of ordinary working people, and the portraits he created are full of longing for simple and natural life and pursuit of nationalism.

#### B. *The Symbolic System of Kramskoy's Paintings Is Deeply Tragic*

The famous Russian landscape painting master Levitan (Иса́ак Ильи́ч Левита́н, 1860-1900) once said, "In fact, we are stuck in an inextricable predicament..." [12]. Russian intellectuals in the 19th century were a sad generation. They loved their nation, loved freedom and fought for the liberation of serfs, but could not escape the sadness of the czar's autocracy. The freedom in nature and the bondage in reality give Kramskoy's paintings a dark and tragic tinge and a profound tragedy color. The work "Desolate Grief" is a typical tragic work with the loss of children. The work "Moonlight night" sets off the confused and melancholy expression of the heroine in a beautiful and quiet environment, which makes the whole painting with a kind of implicit tragedy color. In the work "Portrait of unknown woman", dressed in luxury, sitting in the open car proudly, the heroine stares at the audience with cold eyes. This attitude of contempt for everything was certainly not popular with the public at that time, and her character was bound to produce tragic conflicts with the social reality at that time. In addition, this work uses light colors such as yellow and blue as the background, creating a bleak atmosphere in St. Petersburg in winter. Such a bleak environment and the aloof and proud expression of the heroine complement each other, which also makes the whole picture with an implicit tragic color.

### VII. CONCLUSION

In figurative paintings, symbols are the most basic elements of the picture and also the externalization of the creator's subjective feelings. To understand the works of art, one must first understand the most basic artistic symbols of the works. The graphic symbols, indicative symbols and symbolic symbols in Kramskoy's figurative paintings have their own characteristics, jointly constructing a symbol ecological environment with vivid vitality. As the creative subject of this symbol ecological environment, Kramskoy

refers to his nationalist cultural values through the signification and activity of the signification in his works. However, nationalism, as the driving force of Kramskoy's deep spiritual reference to his inner world, is also accompanied by some elements of pessimism and hesitation. This kind of pessimistic and hesitant emotion comes from the spiritual perplexity brought by the social reform in Russia at that time. The symbolic recognition of Kramskoy's figurative painting language can give a closer access to the real history and restore the original creation of artistic works.

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