

The Review of Primitivism and Approve of Imagination: Research on the Art Criticism of Roger Fry

Liu Siru^{1*}

¹*Northeastern University, Shenyang, Liaoning 110819, China, 408230152@qq.com*

ABSTRACT

In the early twentieth century, the post-impressionist painting exhibition was held at The Grafton Gallery for the first time. With the exhibition of the works of these painters, there were many voices from the public, which inevitably brought voices of opposition. In this controversy, as the defender of the post-impressionists, Roger Fry (1866-1934) left a very important art criticism in the history of art criticism. His critical practice is a classic in the history of art that embodies Fry's unique aesthetic thought with modernism and creates a new research paradigm for modern aesthetics. This is not only of great significance for our understanding of formalist aesthetics, but also a valuable material for the study of formalist aesthetics.

Keywords: *Roger Fry, Primitivism, Imagination, Post-Impressionism*

1. INTRODUCTION

Fry directly faced opposition voices and defended post-impressionist painting in all directions. These voices were concentrated in two post-impressionist painting exhibitions in 1910 and 1912. Fry's articles for defense of post-impressionism includes *The Post-Impressionists*, *The Grafton Gallery-I*, *The Post-Impressionists-II*, *A Postscript on Post-Impressionism*, *Post-Impressionism*, and *The Grafton Gallery: An Apologia*, etc. In these defense essays, Fry conducted a tentative and non-metaphysical interpretation and analysis of post-impressionist paintings. To a certain extent, Fry's defense essays contain his basic artistic ideas and aesthetic concepts, and are important academic bases for studying his artistic outlook, art criticism practice and post-impressionist painting. This article will explore Fry's artistic thought and art criticism from the following three aspects: First, Fry boldly rebelled against the reproduction method of traditional realism. However, it is worth noting that he attached great importance to and approved classical and primitive art resources and tried to implant painting techniques with primitivism into the post-impressionist painting, so as to jump out of the predicament of accurate "reproduction" and finally realize the harmonious state of "representation" and "reproduction" in painting; secondly, as the "father of modern art criticism" as well as "the father of formalism",

Fry used critical discourse with empiricism and case analysis to analyze post-impressionist paintings. Although his critical paradigm was not integrated and theoretical enough, he faced up to the differences in the painters' forms and techniques, and managed to take into account the identity and integrity of school and differentiation and individuality of the painters through careful individual analysis of the post-impressionists; finally, in the criticism of the painter's imagination, Fry pointed out the interactive relationship between the painter and the painting (the subject and the object). That is, while confirming the fundamental status of the imagination in artistic creation, he also indicated that during painting the painter uses imagination with restraint. The paintings not only show the painter's imagination, but also objectively obscure the painter's imagination.

2. THE REBOUND OF "THEORY OF EVALUATION": POST-IMPRESSIONISM'S DOUBLE REBELLION AND FRY'S QUASI-RETROISM TENDENCY

On the ideological level of painting, one of the main characteristics of post-impressionism lay in its "double rebellion" against naturalism and realism. To some extent, post-impressionism opposed the classical and realist painting styles before the impressionism, and it also

opposed the naturalistic painting ideas that the impressionists uphold. For this characteristic of post-impressionism, Fry affirmed this in his art criticism. In the process of affirming the ideological tendency of post-impressionism, Fry showed a strong tendency of retroism. To a certain extent, Fry's art criticism did not follow the linear development of "evolution" logic. On the basis of identifying with the primitive art style, Fry had made a sharp reaction to the idea and logical method of "the theory of evolution" in the field of artistic vision.

The Post-Impressionists is Fry's first defense article during the post-impressionist painting exhibition. Its main contribution was to define the tone of the painting genre of "post-impressionism", point out the difference between it and impressionism and confirm the subversive significance of post-impressionism to the excessive naturalism of impressionism. Impressionists had done their best to challenge the inherent colors of objects. Impressionist artists used natural light and shadow to compose their paintings, quickly captured the momentary changes in the color of objects and showed what the objects like in their eyes on paper. This way of representing things did help in painting creation. However, as the so-called "too much of a good thing", impressionists were always too obsessed with nature. This special feeling gradually evolved into their obsession with analysis of light and shadow. Fry mentioned in *The Post-Impressionists* that in fact this was the first source of their disputes with the impressionists: the post-impressionists believed that the impressionists were too naturalistic. (Fry, *The Post-Impressionists*) Obviously, the post-impressionists first responded to this negative attitude in the process of innovation. The way of record was questioned, and the naturalism that impressionists overemphasized was suppressed and resisted by post-impressionists. Impressionists used a variety of brushwork and framing methods to record nature, placing art under nature, thereby making themselves and their artistic practice slaves of nature. Different from impressionists, post-impressionists no longer simply paid attention to the momentary impressions brought by light and their own records of colors. As a new bellwether, Cézanne showed the changes in the formal composition and color contrast in the practice of post-impressionist painting, leading the artist out of the whirlpool of naturalism and revealing the true essence of artistic creation.

The eyes of early artists and viewers focused on representative art, paid much attention on the display of techniques in the work, and emphasized the use of realistic techniques while the focus of post-impressionists did not lie in this. As Fry argued: "You have explored all aspects of nature, and the glory belongs to you; but your methods and principles of artistic conception hinder the artist from exploring and expressing the emotional meaning of the inner things. This is the most important theme of art." (Fry, *The Post-Impressionists*) It can be

seen from this that post-impressionists strived to truly express the theme of art, and in order to achieve this artistic pursuit of post-impressionists, they must first break through the traditional representative painting methods. Because of the difference in artistic expression, the emerging post-impressionists formed a state of confrontation with the mainstream painters of the time. At the same time in the early twentieth century, when post-impressionism came into being, artists in Paris still created official salon paintings, most of which revolved around the theme of the exoticism of the Middle East. Their brushes still recorded the feasting life of nobles and bourgeoisie, and depicted female nudes and natural scenery, etc. Such conservative themes and representative techniques had long been seen in the eyes of the viewers, but some viewers still enjoy it. As Fry said: "Their passive attitude towards things prevents them from conveying the true meaning of things." (Fry, *The Post-Impressionists*) In the face of recipients who were old-fashioned and unable to explore the profound meaning of art works, the creative practice of post-impressionists against realism was undoubtedly avant-garde and experimental at the time. Fry's recognition of post-Impressionists' efforts to rebel against naturalism and realism not only originated from Fry's own perceptual identification with post-Impressionists, but also coincided with his reactionary and anti-evolutionary thinking.

In his art criticism, Fry often did not follow the "evolution theory" of linear derivation and backward waves. Instead, he revisited and retrospected the primitive painting art, and strived to implant cultural gene of quasi-retroism and primitivism into artistic creations of that time. In explaining the rationality of the techniques of post-impressionists, Fry mentioned the opposition to the evolutionary model of art history. "In fact, changes in reproduction science are nothing more than a change in the expressive function of an artist. Here, the most important thing is not change. The change we should pay attention to is the change in the feelings and emotions in human nature. I firmly believe that if perspective were never discovered, the art of the 18th century would still be very different from the art of the 13th century." (Fry, *Post-Impressionism*) In Fry's point of view, art does not come from the "evolution" itself caused by a combination of objective and force majeure factors. It is not an inevitable progress brought about by technological progress, but comes from the internal function changes of the painter as a living body, which greatly weakens the linearity and inevitability of artistic development and endows artistic creation with more non-linearity and contingency. From this perspective, Fry opposed the inevitability and regularity of art development, and this view almost ran through his art criticism. For example, in response to the academics' blind pursuit of the improvement of painting techniques, in other words, the success or failure of art works were

determined by the perfection of techniques, Fry completely opposed this “technical determinism” that painting is controlled by technological progress. The expression of the artist’s emotions became a key issue for artistic progress. He believed that painters should escape from the imitable and over-exquisite academicism, pay attention to the emotional factors cast in the paintings, and focus on the representation and injection of imagination, the integration of forms and other issues.

Based on his “anti-evolution” ideological foundation, Fry favored primitivism and other past tense painting techniques and ideological trends, which reflected Fry's tendency of retroism in art criticism. Fry mentioned in *The Grafton Gallery-I* that previous attempts such as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood paintings movement on our own side had a kind of conscious quasi-retroism. However, the artists now in front of us seem to have accidentally discovered the principle of primitive forming in their perception of the pure inevitability of the actual situation. (Fry, *The Grafton Gallery-I*) It can be seen to a certain extent that the tradition rebelled by post-impressionists mainly referred to the transgression of reproduction methods and the transformation of artistic functions after the Renaissance. In a deeper level, primitive forming guided the creation of post-impressionist art works. In other words, Fry highly agreed with the positive significance of primitive art for post-impressionist creation, and even thought that this kind of reference and exploration of primitive art was not sufficient. Fry believed that painters should also apply primitive painting techniques more tolerantly, to achieve a certain identity between primitive and current artistic techniques, and to enhance artistic appeal. For example, Fry pointed out that “In fact, these works are similar to the early primitive paintings and masterpieces in oriental art, and they do not excavate a hole in the wall to show other spectacles. They compose a part of the entire wall they decorate and imply some spectacles that can arouse viewers’ imagination, rather than imposing things on viewers’ senses.” (Fry, *The Grafton Gallery-I*) Fry’s statement indicates his view of the identity between artistic creation at that time and primitive art, that is, he believed that there was not an insurmountable gap between the two with a huge time span and if the painters actively reflected on primitivism and adopted the techniques in paintings, they would be able to achieve good emotional performance and arouse the imagination of viewers. This painting style advocated by Fry also profoundly affected the tone of painting creation throughout the 20th century.

As Marx argued that “As for art, as everyone knows, its certain prosperous period is by no means proportional to the general development of society.” In the development process of art, it can never be unidirectional and always linear in keeping with the development of the times and technology. Magnificent artistic wonders can bloom in the backward social development stage, and

sour artistic bitters can also be brewed in a highly developed social environment. If we blindly start from the perspective of “evolution” and bind the development of art with the progress of the times, then we may fall into the context of “vulgar sociology”. From this aspect, although Fry’s tendency to support “quasi-retroism” in art criticism also has the problem of ignoring the progress of the times and blindly making a “rebound” to the history, his challenge to the “evolution theory” and academic effort to recognize the imbalance of art and social development are still commendable.

3. EXPERIENCE AND INDIVIDUALITY: “SEEKING DIFFERENCE IN IDENTITY” AND PERSONALIZED PORTRAYAL IN FRY’S ART CRITICISM

In the tentative criticism of post-impressionist paintings, Fry were more likely to deep analyze post-impressionist painters’ creative achievements from the perspectives of empiricism, and individual cases. That is to say, seeking the individualized and differentiated artistic pursuits and characteristics of each painter from the identity of post-impressionist paintings, and making personalized portrayal for his paintings and artistic techniques was an important feature of Fry’s art criticism.

In his defense, Fry mainly criticized the painting style and memory of various post-impressionist painters. He focused on the individuality and difference after the commonality of post-modernism. *The Post-Impressionists-II* is Fry's second defense published in *National Journal*, in which Fry discussed the artists’ artistic achievements separately. Fry expressed his admiration for Paul Cézanne with a unique perspective. At the same time, he also pointed out the distinctive features of paintings by Paul Gauguin, Vincent Willem van Gogh, Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso. In the defense, Fry wrote the most comments relevant about Cezanne. As a center of formalism art criticism, Fry started to view Cezanne's paintings from the perspective of art form. Fry believed that “Cezanne inherits the general concept of purely visual fragments of natural phenomena from the impressionist painters, but he concentrates his imagination on certain tones and color contrasts so strongly that he is able to establish the form, which seems to be re-established from within.” (Fry, *The Post-Impressionists-II*) This shows to a certain extent that Fry had focused on analyzing the subjects of art from the internal laws of art in his criticism. He pointed out that the most prominent feature of Cézanne was his crude handling of painting form and his pursuit of balance in his paintings. One-fifth to two-fifths of Cezanne’s paintings are semi-finished, and in some even the traces of pencil drafts have not been processed. This rough style of painting can also be regarded as one of the inspiration sources for the Cubism represented by Picasso in the later period. At the same time, Cézanne did not ignore the

treatment of edges and the artistic pursuit of the balance of the picture in his paintings. Cézanne's pursuit of painting balance is different from the artistic pursuit of painters in traditional painting. The pictures he creates are both harmonious and novel, which gives the objects in the paintings inherent vitality. In this regard, Fry cleverly used the word "language" to summarize Cézanne's painting form. He said: "With such a pious and penetrating imagination to deal with the ordinary things in daily life, there is no other painter like him, finds a language that far surpassed their association with the reality of daily use and customs in the depiction of their material texture." (Fry, *The Post-Impressionists-II*) He connected Cézanne's painting practice with "language", which was equivalent to giving Cézanne's paintings the semantics of "speaking", so that his paintings did only exist in the form of flat image presentation, but instead acquired more emotions expressive tension. This explains from the side that Fry's art criticism does not stop at detaching and summarizing the internal laws of art, but actively constructs an interactive relationship between the artistic object and the viewer's perspective.

Although Fry defended Cézanne with a lengthy discussion, he still did not give up the tangible recognition and discovery of painters' differences and unique advantages. In terms of emotional expression and visual impact, he even more recognized Van Gogh, an artist full of romantic temperament and his paintings were full of life tension. If Cézanne's style was relatively stable, then Van Gogh's style tended to be wild. Van Gogh no longer pursued the effect of focal perspective in composition, but pursued the unity of tension and coordination of color contrast in the application of color, and his brushwork settings were also unique. The deep, low and wild soul of Van Gogh was hidden behind all these artistic characteristics of him. When talking about Van Gogh, Fry said: "It is certain that no one has painted flowers like Van Gogh, seeing the arrogant spirit hidden in the sunflower, or the proud and delicate soul of iris." This empiricist discussion also showed that Fry's art criticism did not stop at the formal level, but strived to explore the profound connotation of the painter's "power through the paper" under the picture.

In his discussion of other representatives of post-impressionism, Fry had always insisted on his own insights and analysis of artistic differences. For instance, in his comment on Gauguin, Fry not only highly affirmed Gauguin's grasp of composition and color, but also pointed out that Gauguin's artistic pursuit lies in his pursuit of pure beauty in composition and bright colors, and in the realm of returning back to innocence. At the same time, Fry never neglected to sort out the inheritance and correlation between these painters in his diachronic observations of the post-impressionist painters. For example, when talking about Picasso, Fry mentioned his relationship with Cézanne. He pointed out that "Picasso's style has undergone considerable changes. He already has

a peculiar passion for geometric abstraction and he is using an almost decisive logical consistency to achieve something that has long been seen in the hint of Cézanne's paintings". (Fry, *The Post-Impressionists-II*) To some extent, the Cubists with Picasso as the leading figure inherited Cézanne's rebellion against the artistic technique of spatial perspective at the time, and in this regard, it reflected the identity and inheritance behind the differences in artistic pursuit and techniques of post-impressionist painters.

To some degree, the relative theoretical and systematic weakness is the shortcoming of Fry's art criticism. Fry mainly conducted a personalized and individualized in-depth analysis of post-impressionist paintings from a subjective and empirical perspective. However, Fry did not completely ignore the observation of the integrity and internal coherence of post-impressionism itself, which is a distinct advantage of Fry's art criticism. From this perspective, Fry's "case-based" art criticism had achieved a balance between the identity and difference of artists, which laid a good foundation for Fry's criticism of post-impressionist paintings.

4. PAINTING'S FAILURE IN EXPRESSION: THE SUBJECTIVE PROJECTION OF IMAGINATION AND THE "INTERCEPTION" OF IMAGINATION BY PAINTINGS

Post-Impressionism was a speech given by Fry at Grafton Gallery. It was also the concluding speech of the first post-impressionists. In the speech, Fry said: "The purpose of my lecture is to try to explain what the problem is, and how these artists try to solve it consciously or unconsciously. This problem is to discover the visual language of imagination. In other words, to find out how to arrange the form and color to stimulate the vision, and thus the most profoundly stimulate imagination". It can be seen that imagination was another main focus of Fry's art criticism, and around this focus, Fry's discussed in depth the paradox and interaction relationship between the painter's imagination and the reflection of the painting's imagination in post-impressionist paintings.

Fry believed that imagination is the source of artistic creation. In his criticism of post-impressionism, Fry thought that the essence of art is to discover the visual language of imagination. To a certain extent, the art subject explores his own imagination, and then uses painting and other artistic means that require visual participation to complete the process of "coding" and expression of imagination. The lines, tones and meanings in the paintings can all be regarded as the projection and externalization of artistic imagination of the subject of artistic creation. However, Fry also noticed the

interactive relationship between the painter's imagination and paintings in his criticism. In the creation, the painter's painting process can be regarded as the display of "imagination" on the drawing board. Then the interactive relationship between the painter's subjective consciousness and the object of the painting is formed. In this process, the painter's imagination may not be fully displayed on the drawing board, instead will be consumed, which means that imagination will be "intercepted" by the painting. Through the creation of the artist, objects in the real world which are used as the material of the paintings and the imagination can be displayed in the painting is actually extremely limited. It is restrained. On the one hand, it is restricted by the medium. The objective material is only a medium of our performance. On the other hand, there is an indescribable charm. The world in the artist's heart cannot be displayed solely by expressiveness. In other words, because Fry's exposition on the artist's imagination addressed the universal theoretical problem of "incomprehensiveness" in artistic creation, it was valuable.

At the same time, in addition to the loss of painter's imagination in the painting process, the deviation and distortion of imagination from reality was also concerned by Fry. Painter's imagination is like by no means water without a source or a tree without a root. No matter how unreliable the artistic imagination is, it always has a realistic foundation and direction. In the process of constructing the imagination of the artistic subject, the subject reprocesses the artistic materials from nature and society. However, once the artistic subject does not regulate his own imagination, his imagination will have a distorting effect on the object. In this regard, Fry believed that the artist's imagination should be appropriately controlled. On this issue, Fry did not completely deny naturalism. He pointed out that the similarity between painting and objects in reality can be sought in the process of representation. It is said that in order to evoke appropriate associations in the viewer's mind, a certain degree of naturalism and similarity with actual phenomena is necessary. From this point of view, when painting cannot fully express the meaning and implication, Fry also did not agree to completely abandon the objective reality and wantonly sway the painter's imagination, but chose to approve the concept of "representation" and "reproduction" in naturalism, and express the painter's imagination in a restrained manner. Then the balance of subject and object between the painter and the painting can be achieved.

Post-impressionist painters paid attention to express emotions. Fry depicted the essence of art here: discovering the visual language of imagination. This means that when arranging the form and color of the picture, the post-impressionist painters used special rewritten language of the real world to give visual stimuli and thus deeply stimulate imagination. Fry was trying to explain that for his understanding, art can stimulate

imagination through senses. "I would like to cite the exquisiteness of the pure patterns on the pottery displayed in this exhibition as evidence of the efforts of post-impressionist painters." Fry believed that the exquisite patterns on the pottery implied things in real life and were more effective in arousing the viewer's emotions. "Unique line rhythm and unique color harmony will naturally produce its spiritual effect. It can always produce one emotion for a while, and another emotion for another." The artist uses lines and colors to arrange rhythms on the drawing paper. Different from musicians and poets, painters pay more attention to visually conjure up the impression of perceptual things, which is the requirement of planar vision. This yearning for primitivism art, the appeal to emotions, and the control of abstract lines set up a grounding foundation for post-impressionist works. Fry also pointed out clearly the relationship between post-impressionist works and traditional reproduction art for many times. "Rhythm is the fundamental and most important quality in painting, just as it is important in all kinds of art; reproduction is second, and it can never violate the requirement of the more important and fundamental rhythm." Under the voice of rhythm, "light and shadow" became the enemy of "line modeling and color". Fry cited the ingenuity of Cézanne and Matisse in composition and color and expounds the acceptance view of line forming and pure color as the main performance function. This helped to more vividly establish a space concept constructed by imagination.

5. CONCLUSION

While Fry tried his best to defend post-impressionism, his aesthetics gradually matured. In the wave of traditional and modern art criticism, Fry was a dazzling turning point. In the era of artistic transition, when the narrative of art was weakened, the tide of lyricism was rising, and the artists exuded their individual temperament incisively and vividly, whether as the beginner of modernist aesthetics or an important figure in formalism, Fry's art criticism still showed its unique charm even if it is not very systematic and theoretical. In these two exhibitions of post-impressionist painters, Fry spared no effort to defend them, which provided academic support for the development of formalism. In these defense articles, Fry confirmed the post-impressionists' rebellion against realism and naturalism, revealed the importance of "meaningful form" in the artistic field, and emphasized the subjective factor of imagination and the importance of drawing lessons from primitive artistic form. These critical practices of Fry had made the significance of form in artistic creation and public aesthetic taste unprecedentedly important. This not only made formalism truly step on the stage of history, but also lays a solid foundation for the emergence and development of various schools of modernism. basis. In Fry's art criticism, these words of defense were only the

beginning, but they were of extraordinary significance. If you don't know the history of art criticism, you will not have a thorough understanding of art history. As the beginning of modern art criticism in the twentieth century, Roger Fry's art criticism can take us away from the fog of history and identify more phantom of art fading into oblivion in the wave of history.

REFERENCES

- [1] Roger Fry, *The Grafton Gallery-I*, Shen Yubing trans., *Nation*, 1910.11.19, pp. 331-335.
- [2] Roger Fry, *The Post-Impressionists-II*, Shen Yubing trans., *Nation*, 1910.12.3, pp. 402-403.
- [3] Roger Fry, *The Postscript on Post-Impressionism*, Shen Yubing trans., *Nation*, 1910.12.24, pp. 536-540.
- [4] Xiao haiou, *The Critic Results: A Study of Roger Fry*, PhD Dissertation, China Academy of Art, 2012.
- [5] Roger Fry, *Post-Impressionism Artist*, Shen Yubing trans., *Manet and the Post-Impressionists*, 1910, pp. 7-13.
- [6] Roger Fry, *Vision and Design*, 1920.
- [7] Shen Yubing, *Articles of the Art Criticism of Roger Fry*, Nanjing: Jiangsu Art Press, 2010.
- [8] Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry: A Biography*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1940, pp. 155-156.
- [9] Cf. Jacqueline V. Falkenheim, *Roger Fry and the Beginnings of Formalist Art Criticism*, Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980, pp. 22-23.
- [10] Qin Yunjia, *Breakthrough "Reappearance" and Salute to "Classical"--Fry's early defense of post-impressionism is in two directions*, *Literature & Art Studies*, 2012, pp. 142-149.
- [11] Roger Fry, *Last Lecture*, 1939.
- [12] Chen Yamin, *Roger Fry's on Form--Theory Research of Art Criticism Culture*, Shandong University, 2007, pp. 142-149.
- [13] Roger Fry, *Henri Matisse*, 1930.
- [14] Li Lu'e, *How Did Paul Cezanne Become "Father of Modern Art"-- Roger Fry and His Cezanne and The Development of Painting Style*, *Oriental Art*, 2010, pp. 82-83.