

Study on the Absurd Beauty of Marc Chagall's "Lovers Under the Eiffel Tower"

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ABSTRACT

The artistic creation of modern painting artist Marc Chagall is full of absurdity and his strong artistic emotion is displayed in his works with unique aesthetic characteristics. On the basis of a comprehensive understanding of Chagall's art, this article takes his representative work "Lovers Under the Eiffel Tower" (《埃菲尔铁塔下的恋人》) as an example to consider why Chagall's art is both absurd and true, and analyze its absurd aesthetic characteristics and the origin of the sense of absurdity, so as to provide an opportunity to enrich the form of modern art creation.

Keywords: Chagall, Absurd, Content and form, Origin.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the history of the development of world art in the 20th century, no one can talk about surreal art without Marc Chagall (1887-1985), a romantic French-Jewish artist whose hometown of Vitebsk is now a city in Russia. Chagall encountered many different art schools in his artistic career, such as impressionism, cubism, expressionism, etc., but he always kept his heart unaffected and created his own unique artistic style. The uniqueness of his painting lies in his artistic expression form and spiritual connotation. His works abandon the pure sense of tableau, and the subject matter comes from the religion that Chagall believes in and the life he loves deeply. The scenes, symbols, and dreamy colors in the painting that do not conform to real life combine everything in the artist's spiritual world that is not part of the logical rules of painting with mysterious and beautiful symbolic forms in a poetic manner. About the characteristics of this master, people are familiar with his dreamy and symbolic techniques and colors, as well as the love for his lover, family and hometown revealed from his works. However, the reason of the absurd beauty in his works is rarely considered. [3]

2. CHAGALL'S ABSURD BEAUTY BASED ON REALITY

Chagall said: "People always say that my paintings are dreams, poems, or even fantasies. I don't think so. I still paint realistically, just breaking through the conventional three-dimensional space and bringing my psychological space to everyone. And that is not a fantasy... Everything in my heart, in my opinion, is probably more real than the existence of the real world".¹ In Chagall's heart, his works are more real than his life, and they are inner truth and come from objective existence. The relationship between objective existence and art provides enlightenment and inspiration for artists in creation. Heidegger believes that "Modern society has bred nihilism and deprived the meaning of human life. Understanding is rooted in history and practice, which is always embedded in the experience of the observer".² [5] Artistic creation is

1. He Zhengguang. The Complete Works of World Famous Painters — Chagall [M]. Hebei Education Press, 2008. From Chagall's Interview and Chagall's speech.

2. Zhang Rulun. Interpretation of "Being and Time" Meaning [M]. Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2012. This book explains chapter by chapter and sentence by sentence in Martin Heidegger's "Being and Time". By putting this "obstinacy" work into the clues of Heidegger's own thought development and the context of the entire history of Western philosophy, it reveals the complexity and depth of Heidegger's original consciousness of question, in order to surpass our limited perspective and fundamentally change our common-sense way of thinking.

carried out in the creative spiritual practice of people and varies according to the ability, role, personal opinion and status of people in the process of practice, that is, artistic creation has the characteristics of subjectivity. The creative motivation and inspiration come from the artist's personal artistic emotional experience in social life, and it is also the embodiment of the artist's personality and emotion. Chagall's unique perspective of observing the things around the world and his special personal artistic emotions contribute to the conversion of absurd existence and the formation of absurd beauty in the objective world in his works that conform to the logic of life.

While people are feeling the absurd beauty of Chagall's works and raving his superb skills and artistic talents, how to define absurd? "Absurd" first appeared in Latin — "Surdus", a word with specific connotations in the history of Western literature, a literary method of the Western absurd literary movement that was born after the Second World War, and a word later used by existentialism to describe the distressed situation of modern people after the "destruction" of God. Sartre expressed it as a meaningless existence of man, Kafka as alienation, loneliness, futile and guilt, and Camus as a Sisyphus tragedy... The sense of absurdity described by Camus in the book "The Myth of Sisyphus" (《西西弗的神话》) first manifests as an indescribable emotion, feeling, experience or atmosphere. The absurd arises from man's attempt to search for his own meaning from a chaotic fate or even a finite world. The sense of absurdity is based on life, and life produces a sense of absurdity.³ Chagall's absurd stems from childhood memories, hometown feelings and belief in love in real life, and is shown in the absurd content and form of his art works.

3. THE ABSURD AESTHETIC FEATURES OF "LOVERS UNDER THE EIFFEL TOWER"

3.1 Romantic and Uncanny Allegorical Content

"As long as I'm by the windowsill, she will fly to me, bringing me breeze, flowers and love. She always wears that beautiful white or black dress, coming to my paintings to light up my artistic path".⁴ Of all the images created by Chagall, it must be said that Bella's image is the most unforgettable. Chagall and his wife Bella were engaged in 1914, and in the same year, the work "Lovers Under the Eiffel Tower" appeared in people's view. Any image representing blessings and beauty in Jewish fables fills the entire picture, creating a unique interpretation of love that belongs to Chagall. [4] What the painting depicts is: At the wedding, the lovers are immersed in the joy of the marriage, drifting far away from the crowd gathering under the lush flowering trees with their happy thoughts. In the distance, villages are arranged in dense huts, with the fiery baking-hot sun hanging in the sky, and elves holding bouquets of flowers, candles, playing violins and even some with sheep faces and human bodies dance in the picture, surrounding the happy lovers who immerse in fantasy sitting on a white cock and flying over the Eiffel Tower together. Not only "Lovers Under the Eiffel Tower", which represents love, the creative inspiration and subjective color of all the works of Chagall in real life depend on each other, and they interact in parallel to reveal strong personal emotions. The direct result of this is that in different painting themes, the viewer feels an extremely absurd and personal extreme romance belonging to Chagall as well as the conveying of the complex emotions expressed like poetry through the artist's distinctive artistic processing style. This is also why it is so moving.

3.2 Symbols Full of Symbolic Meaning

Growing up in a small Jewish village that spoke Yiddish, Chagall inherited the Slavic nature of fantasy, optimism and romance. By trying to interpret the symbols in Chagall's works in Yiddish, one can learn the meaning of the different symbols in Chagall's paintings and understand why these symbols appear. For example, "visiting someone's house" in Yiddish would become "flying over the

3. Camus. *The Myth of Sisyphus: On Absurd* [M]. Sanlian Bookstore, 1987. In this book, Camus has launched a complete and systematic discussion of "absurdity" in the true sense, from the discussion of the sense of absurdity to the study of absurd theory.

4. Same as Note 1.

house", "deeply moved" became "the body turned upside down" strangely, and "the state after sincere praying" turned out to be "that person has become green and yellow", [2] like a kind of witty mistranslation. So it is not difficult to explain why the lovers in "Lovers Under the Eiffel Tower" fly in the air and the yellow-green elves even turn their bodies upside down.

Chagall used his paintbrush to create a symbiosis world for all things in the world. These animals like chickens, cows, sheep and pigs appearing in life in the paintings are closely related to the life of the Jewish people and are full of spirituality. The symbols that appear in "Lovers Under the Eiffel Tower" are: flower, village, partner, sun, violin, cow, sheep, cock, etc. Among them, animals are more obscure symbols. [6] The cow is the son of a shepherd. In the Bible, the shepherd and man represent the relationship between God and human beings. Horses often have vigorous vitality and so on. The combination of these individual symbol elements that truly exist in Chagall's spiritual life is permeated with a mysterious atmosphere and sacred meaning. It is Chagall's inseparable hometown, a devotional religion, and a firm belief in beautiful love. In particular, the symbol of cock often appears in Chagall's works: in addition to "Lovers Under the Eiffel Tower", there are also "Blue Couples" (《蓝色的情侣》) and "Wedding Candles" (《婚礼蜡烛》) and so on. Sometimes he directly portrays the cock itself, sometimes it is an anthropomorphic image, one is a metaphor for sex, and the other is a praise of love. The painter cleverly arranges these meaningful symbols everywhere in the picture. The use of symbols makes the absurd picture content closely fit the emotional theme that the artist wants to express, and has a more romantic and strong emotional expression. The different themes of Chagall's works are connected by these symbols and become a true portrayal of his past life and inner world.

3.3 High-concentration Saturated Subjective Color

Picasso's highest praise for Chagall's color is that "Chagall is the only artist who understands color after Matisse". A certain basis in Chagall's works can be found with regard to this evaluation of Chagall and Matisse. His regular use of the four representative colors of fauvism — red, yellow, blue and green — is one of the constituent elements of Chagall's sense of artistic dreamy sense. Chagall

believes that colors can directly affect the human soul. He is not influenced by the colors of the objective world, and shows completely different color feelings from others. The application of a large number of subjective colors and the technique of dividing the picture by colors are also the embodiment of the absurd beauty in Chagall's works. "Lovers Under the Eiffel Tower" is a romantic work that is both absurd and rooted in reality. In this painting, the yellow and white of the main body occupy most of the colors of the picture, forming a warm and cold contrast together with the blue and green colors of the background. Under the impact of a small area of plump red, there is a very warm and eye-catching power. When Chagall tries to depict the inner world of a couple who are falling in love, the special composition and the absolute impact of the high concentration of saturated colors make the artist's imagination more complete and dreamy, bringing a strong visual and spiritual impact to the viewer. Chagall attempts to use the fragmented scheme of color segmentation to emphasize content and theme. In addition to symbols, his application of color also has a certain symbolic meaning, which is one of the important means for Chagall to express his emotions. [9]

3.4 Free Composition and Form

In "Lovers Under the Eiffel Tower", these elements like the lovers suspended in the air, the gorgeous flowers, the elves with the sheep face and human body, the distant villages, the crowds gathering under the flowering trees, etc. all produce an absurd but pleasant, poetic and happy picture. The combination of the picture with the sun, the tower and the leaves as well as the contrast between the somewhat distorted S-shape and the simplified geometric figure and the largely diagonal composition emphasizes the presence of the main character and enhances the sense of rhythm of the picture; as a result, the movement and vitality of the picture are also overwhelming. Chagall's free will creates the content of his absurd works. The reality reflected from his inner world is projected in the works, so various absurd images appear in the paintings after breaking through the limitations of time and space. He gets rid of the shackles of the previous classical perspective, and borrows the style of cubism in his expression techniques. This mode of composition seems to break all normal things and plots, but it is also better integrated into Chagall's creation. Chagall's unique artistic perspective has become the entrance from the

present world into the absurd art world, allowing viewers to linger.

4. THE ORIGIN OF THE ABSURDITY IN CHAGALL'S WORKS

In Chagall's autobiography "My Life" (《我的生活》), the title page reads "To my parents, to my wife, and to my hometown".⁵ Next, the author of this thesis combines Chagall's self-report and traces his life track, and analyzes the source of the sense of absurdity in Chagall's art works based on Freud's theory of revealing dreams and subconsciousness.

4.1 Viewing from the Personal Point of View of Chagall

4.1.1 The Infiltration of Jewish Culture

Chagall didn't come from a wealthy family, but his Jewish family background had brought him an incomparable spiritual wealth — a large number of folk tales rooted in Russian and Jewish cultural traditions. Infiltrating these tales from a young age had benefited Chagall's artistic intuition a lot. The beauty of absurd and the sense of fantasy had become Chagall's inherent advantages. "The Jews have a firm belief in achieving greatness and this includes becoming a great artist", is the true idea of Chagall, an outstanding Jewish national elite. The Bible and the Talmud are two ancient but long-standing classics that must be read in the eyes of the Jews. Chagall also chose to embrace them for life. Religious culture and Jewish culture have become important elements of his pictures. It can be seen that the influence on Chagall's spiritual world and artistic creation is very significant. It is Chagall's unique way of expressing his passion and is also an important channel for interpreting Chagall's pictures.

4.1.2 Love for His Wife

Chagall creates many series of love works with his first wife Bella in his life. The love for Bella can be seen in Chagall's art. Bella's figure has hardly left Chagall's canvas. "Around Her" (《在她周围》), "Birthday" (《生日》), "Take a Walk" (《散步》) and so on record all the sweet moments of Chagall and Bella from passionate love to wedding to after marriage. Chagall's love for his wife is ingenious

and impressive. In addition to "Lovers Under the Eiffel Tower", the lovers in Chagall's paintings are always intimately leaning close to each other, and the bouquets often appear in the picture. Chagall visualizes the abstract fetters between lovers through plastic art, which is worthy of a surrealist treasure from the content and artistic structure.

4.1.3 Nostalgia That Is Difficult to Part with

"The soil of my hometown nourishes the roots of my art".⁶ Chagall witnessed several stages in his hometown: the period of tsarist rule, the period of war, and the Soviet period. The Continental Europe fell into a turbulent situation during the October Revolution in Russia and the First World War, and people were forced to leave their hometowns without definite residence. During this period, a series of rural themed works such as "Me and the Countryside" (《我与乡村》) and "The Sky over Vitebsk" (《维捷布斯克上空》) came into being, and Chagall's strong hometown complex was vented in art. With Vitebsk's villages, widespread cattle and sheep in his hometown, rivers and many other symbolic images, Chagall reproduced a world full of poetry, childhood memories and fantasies through the simplification of form and the use of lines and colors to divide the picture, breaking the limitations of time and space to make the passage of time frozen in the picture. This fairytale absurd beauty also contains Chagall's feelings about his hometown in the war years, his reflection on society, and his yearning for an ideal society that conveys universal love.

4.2 Seeing from the Perspective of Freud's Theory

Gombrich believes that "Modern artists create things, and creativity comes first, and so are things".⁷ Realistic techniques are often used in the creative process. It is no longer a simple mechanical reproduction, but a hope to present a spiritual world or psychological world that is more real than real life. Starting from the most primitive fantasy and intuition of mankind, the artist discovers the art world in people's subconscious. It is this "psychological reality" based on the world of the human spirit that Chagall depicted, just as he

5. Chagall, Chagall, Yu Zhongxian. My Life [M]. Beijing October Literature and Art Publishing House, 2006.

6. Same as Note 1.

7. Gombrich.E.H.), Fan Jingzhong. The Story of Art [M]. Tianjin People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 1991: p325.

said in his autobiography, "The essence of art for me, is that the soul is a state of mind".

Freud's research on the subconscious in artistic creation shows that, "On the one hand, it comes from the memory of the artist's childhood and later life; on the other hand, it is a copying of pain, including all kinds of painful variants: loneliness, worry, fear of death, etc."⁸ [7] In this way, it is not difficult to explain the absurd, mature, poetic and somewhat tragic style of Chagall's work, which, after the turmoil of two world wars and racial persecution, is full of childhood images and fantasy-like scenes that have a childlike interest different from that of the adult world.

In the theoretical work "The Interpretation of Dreams", Freud pointed out that the creative motivation and source of inspiration are similar to the operating mechanism of dreams. Art arises from the artist's "daydream", which is the further creation of fantasy caused by unsatisfied desires in people's subconscious and presents in works of art. [8] In other words, the characters or objects that impress an artist over the course of a long life play an important role in the selection and development of their individual painting language. Among them, childhood experience is particularly important for their artistic creation. This exactly coincides with the painting image in Chagall's works, such as the rural landscape of Vitebsk, the wedding under the Jewish ritual, the violinist in the street, and the animals that appear in "Lovers Under the Eiffel Tower". The memory of these objects or images contributes to the formation of Chagall's absurd artistic style and becomes the personal label of his unique artistic language.

5. CONCLUSION

Chagall's art belongs to the surrealist school but is distinct from it, being a successor and making a breakthrough in focusing on and reflecting reality. What Chagall pays attention to and what he embodies in his works is precisely the most realistic of all reality: life and the world in which people live. The overall art of Chagall is absurd and the details are true. The plot of the work is absurd, but the image created is consistent with the logic of objective reality and reveals a dream situation that is contrary to the present world.[1] This absurd beauty deeply rooted in reality is Chagall's condensed artistic emotional experience. The

purpose of exaggerated deformation in artistic means is to fully show the connotation of the theme and reach the more essential truth in Chagall's heart. In order to fully and deeply express his love for his hometown, lover and family, the absurd aesthetic characteristics of Chagall's works don't hinder the romantic and fantastic nature of his theme, but rather sublimate the expression of artistic emotion. It is the process of realizing the aesthetic value of Chagall's art by analyzing the interaction between content and form and experiencing the profound connotations that lie deeply within the work and can only be perceived by the mind.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Lei Zhou.

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