

Bryson's View on Tradition in Art History: "The Anxiety of Influence"

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Abstract—Gombrich's "schema-correction" theory holds that tradition lends positive steering effects on development of art. While Norman Bryson a representative of the new art historians gives a completely new view in the art history on the tradition -- the anxiety of influence, which subverts the previous thought about positive effects of tradition from the predecessor to the later generations by focusing on the actual human psychology and questioning the positive effects of tradition. This paper intends to point out the uniqueness of his "schema-corrections" theory by interpreting Bryson's view on tradition in art history, so as to provide a new perspective and idea for research on art history.

Keywords—"schema-corrections"; "anxiety of influence"; Norman Bryson

I. INTRODUCTION

Gombrich's "schema - corrections" theory believes that development of art is about repeated matching and corrections between the existent schema in the head and the visual sight of the artist, in which the tradition plays the role of positive transmission. However, Norman Bryson -- a representatives of the new art historians gives a completely new view on the art history-- "the Anxiety of Influence", which subverts the previous thought about positive effects of tradition from the predecessor to the later generations by focusing on the actual human psychology and questioning the positive effects of tradition.

II. GOMBRICH'S "SCHEMA-CORRECTION" THEORY

Gombrich in his masterpiece *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* tells us about why there is a history of art. By answering this commonly seen question he criticizes the traditional theories about art history in the west from Puligny and gives his judgment which holds that an artist can never use the so-called "pure eye" to see the world and move the real sight onto his painting, instead, he must start composing from existing schema and matching it with the observable world by repeatedly correcting it. Thus he concludes that the development of art is a history of "schema - corrections". He understands that development of art history demands "gradual and ceaseless correction on the schema procedure

of image-making under pressure of new requirements"^① Gombrich's idea of schema is more of historical accumulation, it is an integral part of the tradition as well as the pre-existing experience of an artist. It is the "terminology bible" of the artist. Its main purpose is to help the almighty tradition to pass down from generation to generation. Considering this, Gombrich holds that during the process of transmission schema will undergo corrections on basis of varied aesthetics in different times. He thinks the development of art history is about "schema - corrections" and uses this theory to answer why art works have different styles.

In his "schema -- corrections" theory, Gombrich believes that tradition works positively when paintings progress toward the precision of reproduction. In this aspect, tradition gives positive steering effects on the development of art.

III. BRYSON QUESTIONING "THE PROGRESSIVE VIEW"

Are the effects of tradition on new artist always positive? Will the new artist feel anxious or jealous when facing the powerful tradition? When the artist tries to use the existing schema in his mind to paint the objective world or go back to the old time to imitate the ancient styles, will he intentionally turn back on his impulse to fight against compression of the bountiful tradition? Norman Bryson by contemplating on the above questions raises his view on the tradition, completely different from his predecessors', which is "the Anxiety of Influence". Bryson subverts the previous thoughts about positive effects of tradition from the predecessor to the later generations by analyzing paintings from a different angle of the real mind of the people.

Bryson's attitudes toward tradition mainly appear in the 3rd volume of his trilogy of new art history: *Tradition and Desire: From David to Delacroix*. At the beginning of the book, he questions and interrogates Puligny, Vassar and Gombrich, three representatives of progressive historian, on their view about the tradition in art history. He says "when Gombrich stresses art is to prove postulations, he joins the same team with Puligny and Vassar. Painting once again is considered as moving forward and the past will never burden

^① E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* [M]. Hangzhou: Zhejiang Photography Press, 1987:1, Preface to the 2nd Edition, P xi.

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it. ^② It means the art history of Puligny, Vassar and Gombrich indicates optimistic linear development, during which traditions are passed down from generation to generation, younger artists will surely engage in their fathers' cause and work ceaselessly to finish what his father left unfinished. However, Bryson thinks of traditions as "every possibility for a pioneering artist as well as some burden, puzzle or anxiety for the artist who believes he comes late."^③ When describing the world "influence", Bryson says "the ability to distinguish between coverage of different influences is an integral appreciation skill ... but what worries me is once the influence coverage are confirmed, it seems that relevant study will come to its end. The question of why artist A quotes styles of his predecessors B, C and D will become neither meaningful nor integral to the study."^④ The story of art told by Gombrich is about traditions being passed down from generation to generation. He spare no pains in telling the relationship and connection of one art work to another, even when he interprets the revolutionary changes of the art history he makes people feel the artist may benefit more from the tradition. But as pointed out by Bryson, Gombrich does not give us the reason why this predecessor is quoted. Bryson thinks that artists living in later times often feel they are "latecomers". When the artist imitates some points of the tradition he may either respect the predecessor or just mimic his work ironically. The imitating may mean to promote the new work's recognition by borrowing authority from other artists, while the imitating may also want to put up a competitive posture because the artist intends to compare his work with the imitated work with a view to underlining its superiority over , or replacing even surpassing the imitated one. ^⑤ In his preface to *Tradition and Desire*, Bryson explains the meaning of the word "influence" completely different from the usual. On attitudes toward traditions, Bryson conducts analysis from the actual psychological effects brought by traditions to artists and challenges the step-by-step progressive view on traditions of Gombrich.

IV. BRYSON'S VIEW ON TRADITION IN ART HISTORY: "ANXIETY OF INFLUENCE"

Bryson thinks of art history from the influence of traditions over the younger generations. This is not his solo creation. As what he said, he is enlightened by the "Misreading" theory of Prof. Harold Bloom from Yale University.

Harold Bloom in his work *The Anxiety of Influence* discusses poets' attitudes toward traditions. As pointed out by him in the book, every poet has the feeling that he comes late, which is summarized by Bloom as "the anxiety of influence". We cannot separate clearly the history and influence of poems, because the history of poems is about powerful poets trying to defining their own imagination by misreading other poets' poems. New poets living under the shadow of predecessor poets' heritage feel more keenly like a latecomer. In the tradition, pioneers and models have already made a lot of achievements. Various themes and

skills have been used up by great poets in thousands of years' history. They wrote all important words and leaves no space for younger poets to create. The younger poets like sons with Oedipus Complex bear both love and hatred against their predecessors. The "influence" is the shadow deeply bothering the younger poets. They must tackle the problem: how to make their work enter the list of immortal works. Acute sense of history may result in similar anxiety and pose the same question to poets: how make my work qualified for standing said by said by immortal works of predecessors in the list. Thus appeared the anxiety of influence, namely the poet's anxiety over the influence from traditions. When powerful poets face the great tradition of their predecessors they will respect and imitate them at first, reject and replace them later and import new meaning into their works by misreading finally.

Enlightened by Bloom's theory of anxiety of influence, Bryson in his work *Tradition and Desire* discusses how David, Ingres and Delacroix three French artists during their creation feel about and deal with the tradition. Bryson agrees with Bloom on that they all feel anxiety over the influence of traditions. Because these three artists know that a great number of varied artistic styles appeared in the art history which leaves them with little space for creation and they find they are bogged down in a artistic tradition that can afford no creation. Therefore, the tradition not only works as schemas as in previous theories to play a communicative role, it also becomes an impeding block.

Bryson points out that traditional study on art history does not go further than finding the source of allusion used by the artist. "Art history commits itself to finding the source once the source is confirmed it will continue exploring how it will be used to benefit creations of later time. However, views on time feature of the source are mostly transformed into the idea of entelechy, namely what the predecessor sows will become harvest of its later generation." ^⑤ This is also how Gombrich interprets the development of art history. He believes traditions will give positive influence to the later generation. When we feel lucky for being blessed with such profound artistic heritage and dazed by the tradition fraught with treasures, Bryson says this is only what the viewer thinks not the painter. When it comes to understanding traditions, there is no wider gap between viewing and painting. For the viewer great artistic works from the past are like treasure vault while for the painter such a perfect tradition means his say would be robbed. Whatever he wants to say has already been said by others. There is no more need of it. A painter is destined to compose inside the times, the history and the tradition, therefore, a painter during his growth must fight with his heart to transcend the awe-struck and anticipating viewer inside him, find his own position in the art history, negate what his predecessors offer and make his own unique creation. Just as Bryson says: "when a painter wants to record on the canvas what he sees of the world, the scene in his eyes includes many infinities, so he can paint however more he wants. But once he takes the brush the long-gone schema will work on his hand to repeat the past ways of painting. In this aspect, the tradition may give paralyzing effects to the body by impairing vitality of

^{②③④⑤⑥⑦⑧⑨} Norman Bryson, *Tradition and Desire: From David to Delacroix* [M]. Hangzhou: Zhejiang Photography Press, 2003:18. xiv. xiv. xiv. 24. xv. 23. 23. xvi.

the hands and force the hands to paint according to old rules.”⑥

On comparing two works of the same name of *The Image of A Lady*, Bryson points out that Piero Del Pollaiuolo, the author (a famous Italian artist living between about 1443 - 1496) is striving for jumping outside the profile schema of his Gothic predecessors to make a three-dimensional and vivid portrait. The first image is believed to be made by the author of *The Birth of the Virgin* in a castle, in which we see the lady is pictured with simple and rigid lines. The image is flattened which makes the person look serene and mysterious. But the image by Pollaiuolo looks vivid and lively with relative complete details and precise proportion of human structure. Use of perspective makes the image more tridimensional, especially the hair and necklace, which differs from the first image where the person is flattened. Because the first image was made earlier, it is safe for us to take the first image as a prototype on comparing the two works. As for Bryson, these two works are similar in choice of the picture but if we use Gombrich’s schema theory to think of the image-making process, we reach a conclusion going against the positive effects of tradition. It is because Gombrich’s “Schema-corrections” theory only focuses on adjusting details of the schema, and this image by Pollaiuolo transcends his predecessors’ in a radical way by using three-dimension to replace flattening plane and scientific precision to replace vagueness. Pollaiuolo’s correction to his predecessors’ correction is creative and original. Pollaiuolo must disregard the stereotype and actively use his tree-dimension principle to negate that principle focusing on boundaries. He not only takes in the painting skills of earlier times but also says no to his predecessors in their way of painting -- namely over-emphasizing boundaries, therefore, he can make his achievement. This also means that the first thing he must face is to negate what his predecessors offer to him.” ⑦ Pollaiuolo must first destroy the composing principles of the stereotype before he can analyze and improve on the details. “Though Gombrich from the bright side thinks highly of the artistic heritage as a charity support system, he also brings us to the verge of the tragic view on tradition. About tradition there are eternal fights and ceaseless sabotaging waged by the younger generation against their predecessors as Zeuxis steals and takes for his own Oppolo, which further overrules the younger generation’s ownership of the original work.”⑧



Fig. 1. *The Image of A Lady*



Fig. 2. *The Image of A Lady* by Piero Del Pollaiuolo

Bryson believes study on the art history needs not only point out how the younger generation cite their predecessors’ works but also find out why they do the citation. It is apparent in this aspect Bryson ascribes the citation to the anxiety of influence lent by tradition to the younger generation. Bryson holds that tradition and influence are more than bountiful gifts from the predecessors, which may also be a swamp where younger artists may be bogged down and get drowned. The anxiety brought about by influence of tradition forces the younger generation to improve on their predecessors to some extent. The study of art history “is about where the artist should position himself in the history of art and how he connects with past famous artists, rather than where we (art historians) place in the history some certain artistic works according to our professional ways.”⑨

Thus, Bryson thinks outside the linear and ceaselessly progressive outlook on development of past artistic views on tradition and questions Gombrich's theory which describes the art history as the process of artists centering on "schema" to explore and do corrections. According to Bryson, development of art has no preset orientation. "Between the past and the present there is no affirmative and predictable linkage."^⑩ The artist does not have to work on the tradition according to the "logic of art development". Instead, he can do synchronic study and citation on tradition as well as start from any moment of the history. Bryson as one of the representatives of "new art history" has picked out Gombrich to challenge his passive theory. His idea of "anxiety of influence" about traditions in art history is significant to study on Chinese art history.

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