

The Influence of Ukiyoe on Vuillard Art

Guihua Liu

Mianyang Normal University
Mianyang, China

Abstract—Ukiyoe was adored by western artists when it was introduced in Europe in the mid-nineteenth century. Many schools of art more or less refer to and integrate with Ukiyoe. Vuillard is also deeply influenced by aesthetic language of Ukiyoe. The color characteristics and expression methods absorb Ukiyoe elements with themes from life, paying attention to beauty in form and weakening three-dimensional space of paintings. With the acute visual way and the softhearted inner experience, Vuillard expresses personal subjective emotion and his painting style has decorative taste. This paper analyzes the transmission of Ukiyoe in Europe and the influence of Ukiyoe on European painting art, and emphatically discusses the relationship of Vuillard's painting style and Ukiyoe as well as the influence factors of artistic features of Ukiyoe on Vuillard's works. Through the analysis on some of Vuillard's works, it further explains the aesthetic features of Ukiyoe in Vuillard's paintings.

Keywords—Vuillard; Nabis; Ukiyoe; artistic expression

I. TRANSMISSION OF UKIYOE IN EUROPE

James Dwight Dana writes in his *Philosophy of Art*, "To understand an artwork, an artist and a group of artists, it is necessary to correctly assume spirit and customs in their era. It is the last explanation of artworks as well as the decisive basic cause." ① We need to know the historical background, influence scope of Ukiyoe in Europe and reaction of social people from all walks of life about why Ukiyoe can appeal to European litterateurs, artists and collectors in the mid-nineteenth century, raising Japanese style fever lasting for more than thirty years in Europe and making many painters and art schools integrate Ukiyoe art language in creation. The subjective and objective causes shall be analyzed for mastering the real scene.

Ukiyo is genre painting and print full of national features in Edo era of Japan. It comes from the special historical period of Japan, closely connecting with social culture and ideology at that time and winning accolades of Japanese people through unique expression form. It has far-reaching influence on western art of painting via showing the art form representing Japanese painting around the world. ② In the mid-nineteenth century, many dumped Ukiyoe prints were shipped to Europe as wrapping paper of porcelain and fillers. When receiving porcelains from Japan, Europeans became interested in patterns with rich colors, exquisite modeling and full of thick oriental style on wrapping papers. Some merchants begin to collect similar prints. Ukiyoe useless in Japan succeeds in attracting artists' attention in Europe and becomes references for European painters to change their painting styles. Ukiyoe

prints are hanged on many painters' studios for artists to appreciate. The artistic expression form of Ukiyoe stimulates their inspiration and provides referenced techniques for them. Unwittingly, Ukiyoe plays a crucial role in culture communication between the east and the west. At the meantime, with scientific and technological progress brought by the industrial revolution, the invention of camera makes artists realize the traditional art is facing innovation, so they make an utmost effort to explore new road of art and try new artistic presentation technique. The artistic expression form of Ukiyoe happens to coincide with the new road of painting explored by them.

The transmission of Ukiyoe in Europe can be analyzed through the following examples: 1. In 1856, French designer and printmaking worker Felix Bracquemond chanced upon the *Hokusai Manga* on pottery paper and recommended it to Manet and Fantin-Latour as well as organized some painters, collectors and critics to establish "Japan—Jinlaer Association", regularly dining together, drinking rice wine and eating with chopsticks. He also gets inspiration from the *Hokusai Manga* and makes name card for member, writing their names on smoke from crater of a painting. 2. In 1862, the Dessoits opened a shop named "Chinese Junk" selling handiworks brought back from the east like hairpins, hand fans, silk fabrics, kimono, prints as well as blue and white porcelain chased after by many young artists. These handiworks are displayed in studios for Paris painters to appreciate. 3. In 1867, Japanese handiworks, kimono and Ukiyoe print were displayed on Paris World Exposition. Exhibits are purchased by Europeans in no time. This expo becomes the beginning for "Japanese Fever" to become fashionable in Europe. Impressionists like Manet, Monet, Gauguin, Degas, Van Gogh and Whistler once were infatuated with Ukiyoe. They directly add hand fan, kimono, byobu and porcelain with Japanese cultural features in their works to create the atmosphere of Japanese culture. For example, Manet's works *Émile Zola*, Monet's works *Mrs Monet* and Whistler's *Rose and Silver: Princess from a Country Producing Porcelain* and Van Gogh's *Portrait of Pre Tanguy* all have obvious oriental artistic style. Therefore, oriental art has begun to facilitate the development of western art from the impressionism. Ukiyoe has significant influence on European art schools in the nineteenth century, providing new artistic horizons for western artists to pursue new techniques and patterns.

II. THE AESTHETIC FEATURES OF UKIYOE

1. The painting themes of Ukiyoe come from civil life and natural landscapes and conform to the public aesthetic features,

distinctly different from the traditional painting themes. After Ukiyoe was brought in Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, western art faced reformation. Impressionists advocate painters to paint from life outdoors, depicting gorgeous natural scenery. The introduction of Ukiyoe further promotes the reformation. 2. The composition of Ukiyoe is different from western precise mode of composition, paying attention to forms of pictures. To avoid patterned composition, painters always adjust relationships between people and scenery to form diversified composition and various character shapes. They use diagonal segmentation to strengthen visual contrast, multi-point perspective to increase intangible effect of pictures. The asymmetric composition mode can grasp the nature more randomly, forming unique painting features of Japanese art. 3. Influenced by traditional Chinese realistic painting, the lines of Ukiyoe have rhythm sensation. The length, thickness and straightness of lines show features of objects with different texture. Compared with western paintings using color accumulation and paying attention to depicting objective entities, Ukiyoe pays more attention to the beauty in form of lines. 4. The colors of Ukiyoe mainly reflect in planar process of large area of colors, focusing on contrast and harmonious relationship between color lumps and forming subtle color changes through adjacent colors, contrast colors and progressive colors. 5. The objective world depicted on Ukiyoe uses cavalier perspective and shows three-dimensional space through following general rules of perspective, removing the light and using lines to divide color lumps. They focus on decorative taste and use virtuality and reality combination to present the objective world after subjective process to audiences.

III. THE INTEGRATION AND CREATION OF UKIYOE AESTHETIC FACTORS BY VUILLARD

Edouard Vuillard is a representative personage of French Nabis in the late nineteenth century, enjoying equal popularity with Bonnard, another representative personage of Nabis in the same period. Most painting themes come from family members, friends, living room, park and street in daily life and he is known as "Family Custom Painter"; the painting languages integrate in the color features and performance techniques of impressionist and absorb Ukiyoe elements. With acute visual way and softhearted inner experience, Vuillard shows decorative taste in painting style.

Vuillard was born in a middle class family of France. His father is a naval officer and his mother is a corsage sewer. After his father's death, he moves to Saint Irea District locating the advanced fabrics and apparel market of Paris. He spent his boyhood in his mother's couture. The colorful cloth gives Vuillard inspiration. In 1885, after graduation from Condorcet Public Middle School, encouraged by his good friend Roussel, Vuillard went to learn painting in painter Diogenes Mayall's studio. He went to Beaux Arts in 1886 and transferred to Julian Academy because of the dissatisfaction about the dogmatic teaching in Beaux Arts. Later, he joined in the Nabis headed by Paul Serusier. He has similar ideals and beliefs with Bonnard, another representative figure of Nabis and they become bosom friend. The Nabis School pursues expressive colors and rhythmic modeling and makes more

abstract symbolic meaning through subjective and objective deformation, embodying mysterious idea, pursuing the decorative taste of line combination and patterning and the utility function of works. Vuillard also follows this rule after joining in the Nabis School. Later, he found this painting technique is not totally suitable for him, so he begins to explore new roads. The Ukiyoe print popular among the Europe inspires him. Artists make progress in continuous exploration and Vuillard is not an exception.

According to the analysis on transmission of Ukiyoe in Europe and the development status of art at the same period, we can know the historical background and creation environment of Vuillard. Artists have been no longer satisfied about following the traditional road. They take the initiative to explore new painting style to express their artistic idea. We can find the elements of Japanese art contained in illustrations and stone engravings created by Vuillard at an early stage. He uses lines to draw the outline of images, weakens the image spacing and flattens the background color. This expression technique is greatly similar to the artistic expression form of Ukiyoe. In the *Self-portrait* created by him in 1892, the color blocks with strong contrast have decorative taste. We can see the influence of Ukiyoe on his artistic style in his paintings, such as the *Mother and Daughter at the Table*, *Walking Girl* and others created in 1891. The scenes based on daily life have plane general appearance. He weakens the volume relation and highlights the decorative effects through color application, obviously showing the deep influence of Ukiyoe. The language characteristics of Ukiyoe are skillfully integrated in his works like fluent and free line drawing, bold and direct content, plane decorative techniques and strong composition form, bright color as well as depiction of people's daily life.

IV. THE EMBODIMENT OF UKIYOE EXPRESSION TECHNIQUE IN VUILLARD'S WORKS

The influence of Ukiyoe on Vuillard's artistic style at early stage is mainly embodied in: 1) themes come from life; 2) flatten the color to weaken three-dimensional space; 3) pay attention to beauty in form. For example, in the works of *A Girl in a Flower Skirt*, several women in the room are busy in their handiwork. The background is disposed into flat surface consciously. Figures are showed as outlines. Volume and space are weakened. The painter skillfully coordinates the picture with contrast color to create a peaceful atmosphere. The woman in flower skirt in front increases the decorative effect of the picture. The perspective of theme selection, composition mode and method of using colors obviously show the embodiment of Ukiyoe aesthetic features in the picture. The works *Sleep* depicts a people is sleeping in bed. The picture takes warm brown gray as the dominant hue. The colors of figures, bed, quilt and pillow in it are expressed in flat coating. The painter uses lines to strengthen the complanation of contour images and weakens three-dimensional space consciously to embody a thick decorative taste. This technique also expresses harmonious and quiet life scenes, like the works *Needlewoman*, *Reading Man* and *Red Background Wall*. When absorbing the Ukiyoe aesthetic principle in these works, the painter puts subjective emotion of

his own in color to give mysterious symbolic meaning to the works.

In the works *Park*, the composition form of byobu type has oriental aesthetic characteristics. Byobu plays a decorative role in Japanese people's life. Obviously, it is a composition form of Japanese cultural features, having characteristics of Ukiyoe. Firstly, he uses scattered perspective to reappear the life scenes of people in the park, paying attention to the form sense of picture. The positions of figures are arranged by the painter skillfully. Although there are many figures, the density is ordered. The sky and the ground are painted with large area of color lumps to serve as a foil to figures' activities in the center. Secondly, he uses large area of flat coating on hue. The large area of cold gray in the sky and the large area of warm yellow on the ground form contrast. The expression technique is greatly similar to that of Ukiyoe. Compared with the traditional way of using colors in western oil painting, it changes a lot. Obviously, Vuillard is deeply affected by Ukiyoe. There are many other works created by Vuillard have large area of colors with flat coating, weakened three-dimensional space and multi-point perspective and subjective decorative taste like *Garden*, *Badminton Game*, *Couture*. The decorative color lumps set against each other to create visual balance through contrast, which is similar to the colors and composition mode of Ukiyoe undoubtedly.

V. CONCLUSION

Vuillard advocates expressing the objective world through subjective thoughts and emotions. Painters put strong emotional color for the humans and things, sentiments and sceneries in our eyes. The rich imagination and expressive force of painters are expressed through the works. With reference and integration of Ukiyoe expression form, from the themes from daily life, the free and tactful composition, and the acute grasp of changeable nature, we can see that Vuillard skillfully seizes Ukiyoe artistic connotation and effectively recombines the elements in that he is interested. The ordinary scenes in life give out the warm and mellow atmosphere in his works. Ukiyoe has profound influence on his art at the specific periods. He ceaselessly explores his painting language in his lifetime and never stops his creation, delivers his deep experience and apperception on the painting canvas, showing a quiet and harmonious attitude toward life.

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