

A Study on the Expression of Subjectivity in Pierre Bonnard's Scene Oil Paintings

WANG Honggan DU Tingting

Tianshan District, Urumqi City, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, 830002;

Abstract: Pierre Bonnard was one of the painters of the Nabi School, deeply influenced by Futurism, Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and Symbolism, forming a unique style of scene oil painting. Based on the theoretical origin and life experience of Bonnard's scene painting creation, this paper further analyzes the individualized painting language that the painter presented in his scene oil paintings. The study also interweaves the philosophical concepts of Bergson, the phenomenology of Husserl, and the theory of Expressionism. On this basis, combined with the author's own reflection on scene oil painting practice, it further explains the subjective expression of the picture based on the phenomenon of consciousness itself.

Keywords: Bonnard; subjectivity; oil painting language; scene painting

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Introduction

From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, under the influence of transformations in art and philosophy, Italy entered a stage of social, economic, and cultural transition. Artists began to boldly combine real life with constant innovation and exploration, and various art schools gradually emerged. Pierre Bonnard received systematic training in traditional painting concepts in his early years, but he was not satisfied with traditional ways of expression. He advocated breaking the conventional and habitual concepts of art creation, using scene oil paintings to express the life and spiritual state of urban people in the new era, attempting to explore a new artistic direction in which subjectivity is superior to objectivity. The author hopes to reproduce the painter Bonnard's subjective painting language, allowing art creation to realize the collision and integration between the present and the past, so as to highlight the new social vitality and the inner spirit of individuals in contemporary art creation.

1 Theoretical Origins of the Oil Painting Language in Pierre Bonnard's Scene Works

The subjectivity in Pierre Bonnard's oil painting language can not only be traced to the aforementioned artistic schools, but is also closely connected to the industrial (mechanical) aesthetics and Expressionism of his time. With the help of Bonnard's scene painting *The Workers*, the author will interpret how the painter's subjective consciousness reflects the influence of these theories.

1.1 Primitive Tracing of Industrial Aesthetics

The Second and Third Industrial Revolutions promoted the transformation of aesthetic thought and urged artists (including Pierre Bonnard) to observe the life of workers and the scenery of factories from an objective and realistic perspective. Meanwhile, the industrial revolution during this period also brought about innovation in painting materials and techniques. For example, the improvement of painting pigments enriched the research and application of colors in artworks. In Bonnard's oil painting *The Workers*, the scene of contemporary factory construction is used as the foundation. The female figure on the left side is dressed in red-toned clothing, which strengthens the visual impact of the image and conveys the main principle of the Futurism school, symbolizing the rapid development of modern industrial civilization.



Figure 1. The Workers, Pierre Bonnard

1.2 Expressionist Theory

Futurism, Symbolism, and Post-Impressionist schools all emphasize the revelation of the inner essence of both subjective and objective things by the artist. They mainly reflect the artist's subjective expression of the spiritual appeal of the subject or object. Therefore, Pierre Bonnard's creations coincide with the theoretical framework of Expressionism. Expressionist theorist Edmund Husserl believed that through the reflection on artistic activities and their objects, one can intuitively grasp the universal and necessary essential characteristics of things. In *The Workers*, Bonnard mainly depicts the dynamic posture of the figures in labor, deliberately blurring the facial expressions of individuals. The picture implies a kind of tension between the encroachment of industrial revolution on human thought and the desire for spiritual freedom and openness. It is a concentrated presentation of the artist's emotional intuition.

Apart from the above theoretical perspectives, the background of Pierre Bonnard's artistic creation can also be traced back to his personal life experiences. For example, in his youth, he studied painting techniques at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, and visited various art studios in Japan and Paris. These life experiences can be linked to Henri Bergson's philosophical concepts, which emphasize the fusion of time and life as well as artistic intuition under specific temporal-spatial forms.

2 Specific Elaboration on Bonnard's Oil Painting Language

For an artist to successfully complete a creation, the determination of the theme is a very crucial step. In the creation of scene oil paintings, Bonnard's approach to subject selection is unique and unconventional. He did not simply focus on depicting industrial or everyday life scenes, but rather chose themes based on his own memories of life and small daily sketches. His oil painting style contains a strong sense of decoration. This paper will analyze the subjective expression in Bonnard's oil painting language from three levels within the category of intentional consciousness (based on Husserl's phenomenology): sensual intuition, imagination, and symbol. The analysis will focus specifically on the composition, color and brushwork, and the use of light and shadow in the works of Pierre Bonnard.

2.1 Subjective Consciousness Constructs Dynamic Composition

Pierre Bonnard's compositional methods are distinctive and unique, mainly including decorative planar composition, segmented composition, and blurred composition. These approaches provide the public with a very comfortable viewing experience.

In his early years, he was influenced by the planar and decorative characteristics of Japanese Ukiyo-e. In the composition of his own oil paintings, he deliberately weakened the sense of three-dimensionality and spatial depth of the scene, instead pursuing the ontological effect of positional arrangement to create a strongly decorative planar visual effect. For example, in the work *The Table in Front of the Window* (Figure 2), the positioning of lines in the window frame and tablecloth conveys a strong sense of order, rendering the picture highly decorative and stable. Pierre Bonnard also adopted

an asymmetrical segmented composition, using straight lines, diagonal lines, or curves to divide one picture into multiple dynamically developing fragments. However, he still maintained a harmonious and unified rhythm and tone across the entire scene. In many of his paintings, windows and tables serve as the main structural references, dividing the painting into upper and lower parts—separate yet mutually corresponding. This approach skillfully demonstrates the uniqueness of his compositional design. Moreover, he intentionally blurred the boundaries of images during composition. A common technique is to outline objects only partially, leaving imaginative space for the viewer and thereby creating a sense of mystery. In the previously mentioned painting *The Workers*, the details of the figures are treated in a blurred manner, supporting this idea.

Through the above analysis, it can be observed that Bonnard's compositional method has a certain connection with Futurism and Symbolism. He was skilled at applying segmentation and reconstruction of real-life scenes to reshape the overall layout of the picture. This allowed his two-dimensional construction to maintain independence in parts while remaining closely interconnected as a whole. Although the composition seems casual, it is full of emotional appeal and visual power.



Figure 2. The Table in Front of the Window, Pierre Bonnard

2.2 Intuitive Consciousness in the Expression of Color and Brushwork

By consulting relevant materials about the life of Pierre Bonnard, we can summarize several reasons for the formation of his unique color usage. Throughout his life, Bonnard was introverted, sensitive, and shy, which gave him an extraordinary sensitivity in observing things. This unique perceptiveness allowed him to capture details in color and brushwork that differed from other artists.

In Bonnard's oil paintings, the purity and brightness of color are relatively high. This is specifically reflected in the vivid beauty of nature and a kind of dream-like beauty that transcends nature. For this reason, he has been praised as a "magician of color" and "a belated Impressionist". The brushwork in his paintings often appears lively and relaxed. His use of color and brushstroke was influenced by Paul Gauguin and Japanese Ukiyo-e, while also inheriting the Impressionists' techniques of color expression. He combined the objectivity of Impressionism with the spiritual tendency of Symbolism. In his scene painting *Woman in the Garden (The Third Industrial Revolution)* (Figure 3), Bonnard applied bold innovations to the natural colors of the scene. The dreamy combination of purple and yellow stimulates a strong inner emotional resonance. While the Impressionists were still fascinated with imitating the colors of nature, Bonnard had already entered another world of color. Regarding brushwork, the texture of elements such as grass and trees is clearly emphasized, allowing the viewer to feel the real existence of surrounding things. At the same time, he adopted the short, lively, and rhythmic characteristics of Impressionist brushwork, combined with his own uniquely dynamic and flowing strokes, bringing a sense of relaxed and free dynamic beauty. Therefore, these two visual languages—color and brushwork—together construct a vivid and joyful atmosphere in the garden scene. They also express the painter's deep love and continuous exploration of life.



Figure 3. Woman in the Garden, Pierre Bonnard

2.3 Subjective Construction Based on Light and Shadow Techniques

When speaking of light and shadow techniques, it is certain that they complement the color expression mentioned above. The objective representation of warm and cool tones and light-shadow contrasts will not be elaborated here. In terms of subjective construction of light and shadow, it mainly manifests in three aspects:

First, Pierre Bonnard also made bold deformations and exaggerations in light and shadow processing. He would deliberately enlarge or shrink the area covered by light and shadow within the painting. Second, he applied the same strategies used in composition and color to treat light and shadow in a dream-like and blurred manner. This created a hazy atmosphere of vagueness and ambiguity, as if something appears and disappears, thereby enhancing the mysteriousness of the picture. It guides the viewer to continuously construct their own “dream” at both the conscious and subconscious levels. Third, the painter enjoyed using light and shadow to express his innermost emotions and thoughts. The use of warm and gentle light creates a relaxed and joyful ambiance.

Taking *Woman in the Garden* again as an example, all three of the above aspects are present. According to visual common sense, the light and shadow cast by sunlight through gaps in the leaves should be circular or elliptical. However, Pierre Bonnard used irregular shapes, breaking away from conventional painting logic and increasing the viewer's visual impact. He treated the light and shadow on various objects in the garden with a scattering technique, as if covered by a light veil, producing a strong sense of haziness and dreaminess. The soft, warm light that shines upon the garden makes the woman in the painting appear relaxed and comfortable, reflecting Bonnard's love for life and his longing for a beautiful world. Pierre Bonnard's unique expression of light and shadow constructs a strong sense of depth and mystery in his paintings.

Through the specific analysis of Pierre Bonnard's scene oil painting language, it can be found that he broke the constraints of conventional oil painting language with subjective consciousness, forming an artistic style rich in romantic sentiment. Viewers are immersed in the dreamlike scenes he creates, where the extraordinary charm of ordinary life is fully revealed.

3 The Influence and Inspiration of Pierre Bonnard's Oil Painting Expression on My Creative Practice

Outstanding artists are able to provide creators with inspiration and spiritual guidance that transcend time and space. Likewise, excellent artworks are never mere reproductions of scenes under the banner of imitation; in essence, they serve as a direction for the soul and spirit.

Pierre Bonnard has broken my inherent understanding of composition, color, and brushwork in scene oil paintings, compared with my previous ways of thinking in creation. Among all aspects, what influenced me most was his expression of color. In my own work *The Night Rider*, I applied a hazy and dreamlike method in color performance. I used exaggerated bright yellow and deep bluish-purple as complementary colors. The cyclist, who rides with his back to the viewer, is set against these complementary hues, which transforms a sense of desolation into warmth and a deeper layer of mystery. This treatment provides viewers with infinite room for imagination. In addition, this painting also adopted a segmented composition by cutting the figure and the trees on both sides of the road, which instantly gave the picture a sense of order.

As for brushwork, it still follows the basic techniques of traditional flat painting and impasto.



Figure 4. The Night Rider, Wang Honggan, 2022, 120×80 cm. Oil on canvas

By comparing the subjective expression of Pierre Bonnard, it can be seen that my own works such as A Corner of the Campus and Afternoon still lean too much toward realism in the expression of brushwork and light-shadow. However, the essence of artistic creation is not to reproduce the real scene exactly as it appears, but to subjectively capture the inner, essential “truth”, rather than merely the “likeness” in a formal or representational sense.



Figure 5. A Corner of the Campus, Wang Honggan, 2021, 30×40 cm. Oil on canvas



Figure 6. Afternoon, Wang Honggan, 2023, 100×80 cm. Oil on canvas

4 Conclusion

The painter Pierre Bonnard successfully freed himself from the constraints of traditional artistic concepts and, on a subjective level, explored and established his own unique painting style. By drawing inspiration from multiple styles, he developed an extraordinary oil painting language, endowing his works with rich emotional expression.

Professor Zhong Han, an oil painting artist and art educator at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, once made an authentic evaluation of Bonnard’s oil painting creation: “When looking at Bonnard’s paintings, the visual experience is very pleasant—it first brings a satisfying sensual enjoyment. His subtle elegance, research into decorative painterliness, and the exclusion of sentimental and emotional burdens from literary narration make his painting language relatively pure. It brings a sense of happiness in aesthetic appreciation, like the intoxication of ‘fine grape wine in a luminous glass cup’.” This evaluation needs no further elaboration. The painting style of Pierre Bonnard has profoundly inspired the author’s journey

in oil painting creation.

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