

The Confluence of Art and Cultural Expression: A Case Study of Vasily Surikov's "Portrait of Princess Morozova"

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Abstract: By analyzing the artist (the creator Surikov), ideas (creative concepts), and the cultural shifts (specific historical context) on "The Noblewoman Morozova", one of his Historical Trilogy, this paper explores the relationship between the artist's artistic creation and multiple elements such as social and cultural factors. It aims to understand the individual's emotional struggle depicted in the painting, as well as the depicted tensions and the test of human nature it implies.

Key words: Surikov; The Noblewoman Morozova

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1 Artistic Background

Panofsky believes that artworks are not only visual representations but also a comprehensive reflection of the social, cultural, and philosophical factors of their creation era.^[1] This concept is not only present in Western countries but also in other regions: "A historical painter must understand history, master painting, color, and the ability to connect characters into a whole... The concept of historical pictures is closely related to the ability to convey the psychological connection of characters, organize space, and plan..."

As a member of the Itinerant School, Surikov was deeply influenced by the school's ideas. They recorded grand historical events through realistic brushstrokes, highlighting the historicity and record-keeping nature of paintings, and sought to serve cultural discourse with art, hoping to advance cultural understanding through the social nature of paintings. At the same time, Surikov also pursued a symbolic expression in his paintings, actively exploring the expressiveness and emotional nature of painting. He often used symbolic images and symbols to imply and deepen the themes.

The folk decorations of Siberia have strong artistic characteristics, and these simple and symbolic features subtly influenced Surikov's understanding and application of color, lines, and composition. As В а с и л и й И в а н о в и ч once said: "Siberia cultivated in me from childhood the ideal of historical types, it also gave me spirit, strength and health."

2 Analysis of the Painting

2.1 Composition and Color Expression

2.1.1 The Necessity of Composition and Perspective

The composition of a painting can subtly guide the viewer to the focus set by the creator. Surikov adopted a significantly tilted composition when constructing the composition of "The Noblewoman Morozova", making the entire work present a large trend of tilting to the upper left. Surikov used the composition to continuously draw the viewer's gaze to Morozova's raised right hand and the distinctive hand posture, creating a visual effect of the picture constantly extending forward and upward. This composition with a strong dynamic momentum was also favored by Surikov.^[2]

However, from the perspective of the golden ratio, the composition of the entire picture does not lead the viewer's gaze to Morozova's right hand, but to the passionate words bursting from her mouth.^[3] This composition method also implies the unpredictability of historical progress and the uncertainty of individual fate, enhancing the artistic appeal and ideological depth of the work.

2.1.2 The Significance of Color and Vision

Surikov believed that color should be integrated into the realistic and touching images. The perception and

exploration of color must be within the scope of depicting real life. The overall tone is dominated by dark colors, with two large areas of white sky and snow above and below enclosing the characters and events in the middle section. The gray in Surikov's paintings not only conveys the solemn tonality of depicted narratives but also reflects the unique natural environment and humanistic spirit of the depicted region. ^[4]

Surikov incorporates environmental colors, temperature trends, and other factors into the white. Surikov described "The Noblewoman Morozova" as follows: "...writing in the snow – everything is different. They write strength in the snow. Everything in the snow is filled with light. Everything is reflected in pale purple and pink. " In the details, one can see the worn-out carriage boards passing over the rural dirt road covered with snow. Surikov mixed a large amount of yellow and bluish purple into the white, depicting the fluffy snow enveloping the yellow of the soil and the black of the footprints. The white of the sky above is mixed with a large amount of warm colors, constantly rolling with the warmth of the houses in the environment, which effectively sets off the tranquility of the sky and forms a sharp contrast with the contrasting scene below, enhancing the expressiveness and appeal of the painting.

Surikov uses the compression of the two large white areas in the upper and lower parts of the picture to prevent the complexly colored crowd from making the scene chaotic and disorderly. Through the different clothing characteristics, on the one hand, the confrontation between the different factions in the story is clearly defined, and on the other hand, the originally mixed black crowd is broken up, and the deep colors of the clothes better highlight the facial expressions of the characters.

Amid the crowd in multicolored clothing, Morozova, dressed in black and lying on a cart, is like a black wind sweeping through the entire environment, constantly breaking through and disrupting the black middle section formed by the crowd with a powerful momentum. The noblewoman Morozova visually presents to the viewer not just a character of perseverance in challenging circumstances, but has a strong symbolic meaning. Surikov even claimed that Boyarina Morozova was based on an unrelated visual impression: the memory of a crow sitting in the snow, "like a black dot on white." Morozova, like the most prominent stroke in the painting, forces the attention of the characters on both sides to shift to herself, creating a unique visual center. "I seem to see a crow standing in the snow, a crow with a wounded wing. A black dot in the snow, I can't forget this scene." Surikov recalled.

2.2 The Collision between the Individual and Society

Surikov's paintings invite viewers to engage with the depicted events and reflect on the relationship between the individual and the collective. In the work "The Noblewoman Morozova", one can see the fate of Morozova, an individual, and her followers during this profound cultural transitions.

2.2.1 The Choice of Individual Fate

Morozova, as the center of the painting, has a thin face that makes people tremble. Her wide-open eyes have already burst with anger, allowing people to feel her steadfast resolve. Even though her hands are constrained by external elements, Morozova still makes a symbolic gesture with her hand to acknowledge her followers. This is the power that bursts from her body.

At the same time, Morozova's figure is placed in an extremely uncomfortable position on the cart by the painter, to a certain extent suggesting the struggle of the individual under such pressure. And her thin body's firmness in the face of power reflects the human cost associated with such profound change. Figner later recalled her thoughts when she received a print of Surikov's "Boyarynya Morozova" during a period of seclusion : " Her lips were tightly closed, pressed against a thin, beautiful, and serious face - this was the determination to go to the end... The engraving vividly tells of the struggle of individuals facing adversity, the challenges faced by those maintaining steadfast views of those who were firm and loyal. "^[5]

2.2.2 The Metaphor of Social Collective Dynamics

Surikov often centered the common people in his depictions of historical events, portraying their experiences and responses. The painter himself once said: "It is hard to imagine history without the people. My task is to integrate communal perspectives into historical narratives. "^[6]

In this work, corresponding to Morozova is the group on the right, among which the most obvious are the two beggars.

They display profound dedication, expressing alignment through meaningful motions. He appears weak and powerless, and also represents individuals experiencing hardship in the cultural transitions at that time. Besides the figure demonstrating resolve through actions, among the people on the right, there are also women who express their support for Morozova through small details. They are not as overt as such figures, but the painter conveys the attitude of the crowd through a series of actions such as leaning forward in solemn contemplation.

On the left side of the painting, there are characters with completely different emotions. Their status is marked by distinct status. Figures displaying indifference toward others' plight exhibit detached expressions, implicitly endorsing the protagonist's constrained journey while dismissing traditional perspectives. Dressed in luxurious clothes, they display confidence and arrogance to the extreme, and providing a strong visual contrast to Morozova's individual fate choice.

Surikov's brushstrokes are like a mirror, vividly reflecting the era's features and the complexity of human nature. Through the individual's fate choice, the metaphor of social upheaval, and the exploration of the depths of human nature, he presents a thought-provoking and shocking picture to the viewers, depicting the human dimensions of cultural divergences during that historical period and provoking reflection on significant communal distinctions, ethical frameworks, personal agency, and human nature.

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