

Symbols, Artistic Creation and Aesthetic Appreciation: on Susanne K. Langer's Art Semiotics

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Abstract: Semiotics is a general science that studies various symbols and their communication functions. The American philosopher Susanne K. Langer has had a significant impact on the art field by applying semiotics to the study of art. Her art semiotics involves important artistic propositions in artistic creation and aesthetic appreciation, providing profound and innovative interpretations of certain issues in the arts. Her contributions to the art world have been far-reaching. This paper discusses Langer's art semiotics and its significance, focusing on three aspects: the basic concepts of symbols, how to create art symbols, and how to understand art symbols.

1. Introduction

Susanne K. Langer is a renowned female aesthetician in the history of aesthetics. She is the major representative of art semiotics. Her thought of art semiotics was first put forward in *Philosophy in a New Key*, and it was fully developed in *Feeling and Form* and *Problems of Art*, covering various art forms such as music, painting, novels, and movies. Her art semiotics theory has had an important impact on the art field, making it significant to study her aesthetic theory. On the question of the nature of art, Langer believes that "art is the creation of the symbolic forms of human feeling." She once raised a question, "If readers can understand what the poet is trying to say, then why doesn't the poet say it clearly first?" [1] In fact, this question involves both artistic creation (how the poet says it) and aesthetics (how the reader understands the art). Therefore, this paper discusses Langer's art semiotics and its significance from three aspects: the basic concepts of symbols, how to create art symbols (artistic creation), and how to understand art symbols (aesthetic appreciation).

2. Symbols: The Basic Concept of Langer's Art Semiotics

Langer first studied symbols from a philosophical perspective before extending her research to the entire field of art. Therefore, before exploring Langer's discussions on art, it's necessary to clarify the concept of "symbols" in her art semiotics.

Ernst Cassirer defined humans as "symbolic animals", which was the philosophical starting point for Langer's art semiotics. Cassirer's philosophy of "symbolic form" stated that our entire culture is

a symbolic form. These symbolic forms aren't developed rationally or established through pure cognitive relationships with the world. The human mind exists not only in scientific conceptual systems or logical symbolic forms but also in other symbolic forms such as mythology, language, religion, and art, etc. [2] Building on Cassirer's ideas, Langer believed that humans have the ability to create symbols because of their "need for symbolization", which inspires human imagination, value consciousness, completely non-practical passions, and a sense of the "afterlife".[3] Cassirer's theory distinguished symbolic forms into "logical symbols" and "non-logical symbols". Influenced by Cassirer, Langer also divided symbols into "discursive symbols" and "presentational symbols". Langer saw discursive symbols as the symbols we use to think, remember, and express ourselves, with well-defined meanings that clarify the relationships between surrounding things. Presentational symbols, on the other hand, express human subjective feeling. These two symbol systems represent human life and experience. [3] Their division paved the theoretical foundation for Langer's view that "art is a special type of presentational symbol."

Langer clearly points out that "art symbols" aren't equal to "symbols in art". When discussing their differences, she believed that symbols in art have semantic meanings that linguists fully recognize. Their role is to construct art pieces (or expressive forms). That is to say, "art symbols" is constructed by "symbols in art". As shown in Figure 1, Solar Disk as an art symbol in ancient Egypt. Initially, the Solar Disk had only wings. Since the Fifth Dynasty of Egypt, a new symbol, the circular disk, was placed between the wings. Later, during the end of the Old Kingdom, sacred snakes were added to the left and right of the circular disk. In this art symbol, the wings, circular disk, and sacred snakes are symbols used in artistic creation and have well-defined meanings in the ancient Egyptian cultural context. The conveyed meanings still exceed the symbols' limits, for instance, the wings symbolize the wings of the falcon-headed god, Horus, a symbol of divinity that provides protection. The circular disk symbolizes the sun, while the sacred snake symbolizes Wadjet, the protector god and defender of the pharaoh of Egypt. From Langer's perspective, the "art symbol" constructed from these "symbols" with defined meanings is a construction method or design method.



Figure 1: Solar Disk, (Photo credit: Li Ling, Li Ling's Collection of Archaeological Art History, Ever-Changing [M], Beijing: Life ·Reading New Knowledge Sanlian Bookstore, 2016.10).

3. Langer's Discourse on Artistic Creation

The above summary of Langer's artistic theory regarding certain rules of "symbols" helps us to understand her explanation of artistic issues. What is art, and what makes something art, has been a question that Langer has consistently asked. She once used the example of mourners at a funeral to

show that although their wails express emotions, it is not music, and therefore, she denied that art is an expression of human emotion. Because “the history of music has become more and more complete, more and more regulated, more and more defined,” music “has no relationship with the expressive cries that appeared in ancient times.” [4] In fact, Langer demands that artists express the concept of human feeling. From her perspective, what artists express is not actual feeling but the feeling that they understand as concept. However, the issue is how an individual’s “actual feeling” are transformed into “the concept of feeling”. That is to say, how do artists demonstrate the concept of feeling in their work? This involves the problem of artistic creation because the process of feeling abstraction is the process of artistic creation, which is accomplished through artistic abstraction. In this regard, Wassily Kandinsky’s abstract painting is a powerful demonstration of Langer’s feeling abstraction theory. Kandinsky once said that his painting is “a slow shaping of an inward feeling, which is gradually crystallized by means of constant testing, correction and almost deliberateness.....Rationalism, consciousness, and will play a large part therein. But under this kind of calculation, only sensation emerges.” [5] For Kandinsky, “a painter who is not satisfied with representation (whatever its artistry), but desires to express his inner life, cannot fail to envy the lightness with which music, the most immaterial of all art today, achieves its purpose. It was natural for him to apply musical methods to his art. The result is the rhythm of painting, the mathematical and abstract structure, the polyphony of color, giving color the modern desire of movement.” [6] As seen in Figure 2, color, form, and structure no longer depict the appearance of the world; they become a form of expression that evokes a kind of resonance. This is what Langer refers to as the symbol form that can convey the artist’s subjective experience and feeling.

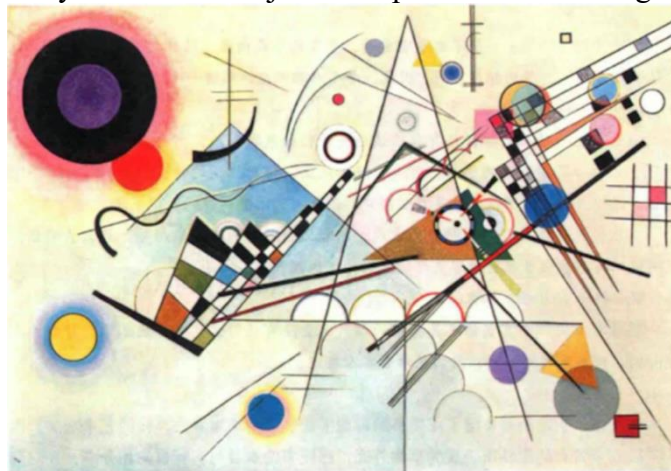


Figure 2: Kandinsky, Composition VIII, (Photo credit: Lu Peng, Visual Shock: A Brief history of modern Western painting [M], Shanghai: Shanghai Painting and Calligraphy Publishing House, 2020.1).

Langer believes that the process of artistic abstraction is the process of intuitive abstraction, which is different from the abstraction commonly used in the fields of logic-based thinking such as science, mathematics, and physics. It is achieved by creating “illusion”. Langer compares illusion in the painting with the reflection in a mirror, the space seen in a mirror is an indirect representation of real space; whereas, the illusory space in a painting is created—an illusion of space created through the existing canvas and colors. Therefore, Langer believes that art is different from the actual existence of time and space. This imaginary time and space have no connection to real life. In addition, Langer also discusses various forms of artistic expression and their basic illusions. Painting, architecture and sculpture are illusory space. Music is illusory time. Dance is illusory force. Poetry, drama are illusory experience and history. Furthermore, Langer also explores the

principles of artistic creation as well as the scope and possible material materials of art from the perspective of artistic practice. Langer believes that each type of art has its unique principle of creation, and its creation is limited to a certain prescribed material. For example, paper is used as a base for painting, but it cannot be used as a material for artistic creation of music. The reason why art can be distinguished from each other is that each art has its own unique creation.

Langer believes that “illusion” is an important artistic principle, “with which, art abstraction can be obtained without going through the generalization process of scientific abstraction.” [7] Langer’s discussion of “illusion” emphasizes the difference between the world created by works of art and the real world. Thus, the realization of “illusion” requires first the separation of form from reality and the meaning of “otherness” and “self-sufficiency”. The “otherness” mentioned here refers to the fact that art as a symbol is detached from reality due to its own degree of abstraction, and directly appeals to human feeling and perception in the form of deformation, while at the same time having ideographic function.[8] Langer describes “otherness” in terms of “transparency” and “self-sufficiency”. In her opinion, “otherness” represents the essence of art and also points to the problem of artistic creation. Through this analysis, Langer links emotions and forms together organically and attempts to outline the process of the artist’s creation: illusion creation—artistic abstraction—feeling abstraction—express the concept of human feeling.

4. Langer’s Discourse on Aesthetic Appreciation

Langer classified art symbols as presentational symbols, which share some characteristics with ordinary symbols in that they require a formal correspondence with the feeling they represent. However, art symbols cannot replace a certain thing; its meaning can only be valid within the scope of the artwork. Therefore, Langer further interprets presentational symbol as perceptual symbol, that is, the perception of the expressiveness of the artwork, this makes art symbols transition from artistic creation to the stage of aesthetic appreciation. According to the figure 3, although the Boat-shaped painted pottery pot’s ornamentation is non-presentational, it has the same artistic expression as the historical religious paintings which represent human activities, because they all have a kind of significance. This is what Langer called “the significance of life”, and what Clive Bell called “significant form”. The so-called form refers to a pure relationship between the various parts and the quality of an art work. In different works, lines and colors combine in a particular way to form some sort of form or formal relationship, which stimulates our aesthetic emotions. Bell called this relationship and combination of lines and colors “significant form”. [9] However, how do appreciators experience this significance? If art symbols are non-discursive, and the significance they present cannot be expressed in language, then how do appreciators experience the “self-sufficiency” significance endowed by the form?



Figure 3: Boat-shaped painted pottery pot, (Photo credit: Chinese Ceramics Series I Neolithic Age [M], Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Fine Arts Publishing House, 2019.3).

Regarding the aforementioned question, Langer’s answer is “through the most basic rational activity, which is intuitive rational activity.” [1] Langer connects intuition with rational activity and inherits and develops the artistic intuition theory by criticizing the intuition theories of Croce, Locke, and others. In some ways, Langer’s artistic intuition theory is closest to Locke’s “light of nature” theory. Locke believed that with the “light of nature”, “the mind does not need to prove and test anymore and can directly see the truth, just as the eyes can directly see light. Through this insight, the mind sees that white is not black, that circles are different from triangles, three is greater than two, three plus one is not equal to two, etc. In this perception of truth, the mind directly grasps the whole concept, a perception that does not require the assistance of any other concept.” [10] Langer believes that intuition activities lead to a logical or semantic understanding, including various forms (or appearances of things), but intuition cannot be separated from human experience. Because intuition is based on the entire human spirit, unlike reasoning, does not rely on concepts, but also involves feeling, imagination and understanding. If artistic creation is human feeling activity, then how can the feeling in artistic works be felt by the help of intuitive rational activity? For Langer, feeling is the concept of feeling, and the feeling abstraction completed by artistic abstraction is also a kind of intuitive rational activity. Therefore, if this interpretation is reasonable, people can indeed understand art symbols containing human feeling through intuitive rational activities.



Figure 4: Ni Zan, Maple dropping on the Wu river, (Photo credit: Ni Zan [M], Shijiazhuang: Hebei Education Press, 2006.9).

Langer believes that perception of artistic significance is a kind of intuition. When we appreciate a work of art, “those intuitions that are constantly involved in understanding and form the basis of discursive activity will immediately become artistic intuition.” [11] If artwork is a unique symbol, just as Langer acknowledges that any artwork is an individual and special presentation of what it

wants to express, then how can the appreciator understand this individual and special presentation? Langer proposed that when the artist abstracts subjective experience into symbolic form, the appreciator can use these forms to imagine feeling and understand the nature of feeling.[11] That is to say, when the artist creates symbolic forms, the appreciator can understand the artist's feeling through these forms. To achieve this goal, Langer requires that art "cultivate people's eyes to become the eyes of artists", so that what the artist sees, the appreciator can also see.[11] Langer also points out that aesthetic appreciation requires comprehensive observation first, and then the observation of the partial significance of the work. As can be seen from the figure 4 above, if we want to understand the Chinese painter Ni Zan's *Maple dropping on the Wu river*, we must first have an overall feeling for the artistic conception of the painting, and then we can understand the meaning of a particular image such as trees, mountains, and rocks, and finally understand the spirit of seclusion within. On this point, the author also agrees with Langer's argument that appreciating artwork should not be equated to understanding academic papers, because "in an academic paper, meaning is synthesized from a series of intuitions; but in art, what is first seen or envisaged is a complex whole." [11]

5. Conclusions

The basic foundation of Langer's aesthetic thought comes from Cassirer's semiotics. On the basis of criticizing and inheriting the essence of existing theories, Langer extended her study of symbols to artistic issues. This cross-analysis also provides another solution to answer the question of what art is. Art is a symbolic form that expresses the concept of human feeling. Therefore, the process of artistic creation involves transforming an individual's actual feeling into a symbolic form that expresses the concept of human feeling through art abstraction, while the process of aesthetic appreciation is to understand the artistic symbols that contain human feeling through intuitive rational activity. Langer's art semiotics has far-reaching influence, but there are also some areas for reflection. Firstly, if art is a symbol, then symbols always refer to objects, but as Langer believes, the content of art as a symbol is within itself, and cannot indicate others. Even the so-called feeling can only exist within art work's reference. Therefore, Langer's analysis of art symbols has surpassed the narrow scope of semantics. Secondly, Susan Langer's entire problem is based on the question of what art is and how it becomes art. This questioning method determines that Langer pays more attention to the creation of art, and lacks research on the subject of receiving (i.e. the appreciator of the works). Although some works are called symbols, we do not know how to observe the objects of the symbols. We can certainly say that Kandinsky's abstract painting is feeling abstraction completed by artistic abstraction, but we do not know how these "artistic symbols" constructed by dots, lines, and planes are related to the appreciator's personal experience. Langer's solution is to require the appreciator to cultivate the same eyes as the artist. However, even if we have the same eyes as the artist, will we produce the same aesthetic appreciation when faced with the same work? Therefore, we can only understand some of Langer's arguments and their rationality by returning to the theoretical context of her thought. As Li Zehou commented in *Anglo-American Modern Aesthetics Described*, "Langer's semiotic is well adapted to 20th century modern art and it is also a natural destination for various theories, such as expressionist and formalism aesthetics. Although the essence has not changed.....Langer's semiotic and Collingwood's expressionist aesthetics, and Clive Bell's formalism aesthetics are still three important and influential theories in modern Anglo-American aesthetics." [12]

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