

Signs and Symbols: A Study of Pictorial Language in Bosch's Earthly Paradise

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ABSTRACT

Hieronymus Bosch is known as the greatest painter in the Renaissance of the Netherlands. He not only created many works with social themes and folk proverbs as the theme, but also had a very imaginative and transcendent painting style, which deeply inspired the creation and expansion of later generations. This paper uses Peirce's semiotic theory and combines the second tripartite method, such as image, index and symbol, to comprehensively explore and analyze Bosch's art form, and tries to re-explore its artistic connotation from different perspectives and reveal its hidden meaning. Finally, it proves that the three kinds of symbols in Bosch's works are closely related, interweaving and influencing each other, and their process constantly produces logical explanations, thus stimulating the viewer's conceptual consciousness, making the symbols interpret infinite meanings and delaying meanings.

Keywords: *Semiotics, The rule of thirds, Bosch.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Hieronymus Bosch is an extremely important painter in the Renaissance of the Netherlands. The symbolic elements in his works are an important means to express the profound connotation of his works, which not only has aesthetic value, but also can arouse the audience's thinking and resonance, making his works more ideological and philosophical. Through literature review, it is found that most of the papers on Bosch are analyzed and interpreted based on Panofsky's three-level theory, and relatively few papers explain the symbolic meaning of Bosch's works from the perspective of semiotics. Therefore, this study tries to analyze the symbolic meaning in Bosch's works from the perspective of semiotics, broaden the application dimension of Bosch's research, so as to understand the meaning and value of his works more deeply, and provide a new way of thinking and inspiration for the study of Bosch's art.

2. PIERCE'S RULE OF THIRDS AND ITS SCOPE OF APPLICATION

Peirce is one of the founders of modern semiotics. He put forward the sign tripartite method of "sign-object-interpretive item" by studying the referential

relation and the mechanism of representation of signs. His ternary semiotics can not only classify symbols from the perspective of ontology, but also analyze the different meanings expressed by symbols in dynamic ternary relations from the perspective of symbolic representation. This theory provides a broader space for the research of various disciplines, so that it can be further developed.

To learn from Peirce's theory here, it is a must to first explore its scope of application. According to Peirce, a complete symbolic activity involves three elements: representation, symbolic object and interpretation item. In this ternary relation, a sign can be regarded as a sign only when these three elements exist simultaneously. On the problem of symbol classification, Peirce divides symbols into different categories from multiple dimensions, which are mainly presented in three forms: image, index and symbol. The second "rule of thirds" is widely used, mainly because it concerns the connection between objects and objects. For example, the first rule of thirds holds that the existence of a symbol is entirely determined by the symbol itself; A third division holds that the symbol is only related to its effect on the interpreter. The second division emphasizes not only the internal characteristics of the symbol itself, but also its relationship with external objects and

interpreters. Therefore, it is relatively appropriate to use the second method of thirds to carry out the symbolic analysis of artistic works.

The images, indexes, and symbols included in the second "trichotomy" here do not refer to three separate art forms, but to the three separate symbols contained in each work of art. The proportion of these three types of symbols also varies with different visual styles. For example, in this system, most realistic works use image symbols, most expressive works use index symbols, and the third type of conceptual works use symbolic symbols more frequently. The theme of this kind of works is mainly about the related content of Christianity in the Renaissance. On the surface, it adopts realistic expression techniques, but in fact, it is mainly symbolic symbols, mainly trying to present the Christian teachings to illiterate believers through images. For example, doves are symbols of love and peace, while owls and snakes suggest evil beings such as Satan. As Peirce proposed the "third nature" of the world, these symbols operate regularly through such laws. The work of the 15th-century Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch falls into what Peirce calls the "third category of conceptual works."

3. ORGANIC UNITY OF TWO SYMBOLS -- BOSCH'S PAINTINGS

In Bosch's works, the image, index and symbol of Peirce's semiotic tripartite correspond to each other, interweave and influence each other, and gradually form a dynamic intertextual relationship.

3.1 Image symbols

Peirce pointed out that the object referred to by the image symbol is a symbol, and even if it does not exist in the real world, it does not affect the objective fact that it is a symbol. This means that even if what the image represents does not exist in the real world, the essence of the symbol is eternal. There are many image symbols that can be observed in Bosch's works, and through the similarity of these images the viewer can obtain a deeper meaning.

Lacan once referred to Bosch's work as "an atlas of aggressive images that afflict all mankind, with many fragmented bodies permanently frozen in its paintings". One of the most notable examples is Paradise on Earth, in which Bosch draws on illustrations of animals from many medieval books, both real and fictional, with specific symbolic meanings given the belief systems of the time. Fictional animals do not exist in the real world, but

often appear in myths and legends. Under the social background at that time, its ideological connotation had to be expressed through symbolic meaning. The unicorn in Paradise is typical in Western mythology, symbolizing purity and beauty, and the horns on the head can help people resist disease and heal wounds. Hence the unicorn in the painting



Figure 1 Medieval Bestiary Collection.



Figure 2 Fictional animal unicorn.

It symbolizes the holiness of the original pure water in the Garden of Eden ("Figure 1", "Figure 2"), and its existence brings people infinite hope and other meanings. This is precisely conveyed through the symbolism of the fictional animal unicorn.

In addition, the synthetic animals in Bosch's paintings are also unique. These synthetic animals are a mixture of multiple animals with different characteristics, which have both symbolic significance and unique visual effects. The most obvious example is the "tree man" figure in the right center of the painting "Paradise on Earth" ("Figure

3”), in which Bosch's face is integrated into the tree trunk to gaze at the viewer, where the branches Pierce themselves, which is a symbol of internal conflict. Here "gaze" constitutes "symbolic identification". "Tree Man" compulsively pulls the viewer into a strange and depressed world through "staring", and the viewer has anxiety and anxiety in the process of being watched. Driven by the gaze of the "tree man", he issued an invitation, making the viewer enter the "imaginary world" of seeing from the "real world", and then enter the "symbolic world", so that the viewer can join the carnival paradise in the painting, so that the viewer can realize that they are a member of the carnival paradise. In this sense, people observe themselves and others naked through "gaze" and "counter-gaze." Here Bosch's act of gazing through self-portraits is an interactive mode between the viewer and the painting. In addition to the tree man example, people can also see a strange creature on the left side of the panel that combines the head of an eagle, the body of a lion, and the legs of a deer. The creature has the prowess of an eagle, the strength of a lion and the grace of a deer, but also symbolizes fusion and perfection.



Figure 3 Tree man.

These elements created by Bosch blur the boundary between the real and the false, making people feel familiar with the uncertainty in the process of watching, and the confusion about the paradise on earth makes people feel confused about the moral and rational self-identification of human beings. It is precisely because these image symbols are usually related to similarity that the viewer gradually accepts the internal logic of these image symbols. To sum up, image symbols in Bosch's works can guide viewers to accept information more intuitively.

3.2 Index symbols

Peirce pointed out that the index is not highly similar to something in similarity, but it can prove their existence and appearance. The original character of the symbol will disappear with the disappearance of the objective existence of the index symbol, but not with the disappearance of the interpretation of the index symbol. It can be known that the "index symbol" is an objective existence, and there is a certain connection and causality between it and the object it refers to, but it does not directly represent the object.

For example, such images of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden represent a kind of index symbol when the viewer is viewing the Paradise on Earth ("Figure 4"). When the viewer first encounters the painting, they are initially attracted to the images of a man and a woman, but when they examine them closely, they associate them with the images of Adam and Eve that they already have in their minds, allowing the viewer to subconsciously better match and understand the two characters. This image is deeply reflected in their minds, and will become the model for their next re-identification of the image of Adam and Eve in the Bible story. In other words, when the viewer sees these two characters, they will match them with their own awareness of the character of Adam and Eve. The matching process is subconscious, and the viewer may not be aware that he or she is comparing the two characters to the images of Adam and Eve in the biblical story, which are the alleged objects in the Garden of Eden. If the viewer does not have the original memory and basic understanding of Adam and Eve, it will not be able to obtain the information of the referent object, and it will not be able to form an index symbol, so its symbolic characteristics will disappear. In this way, when the viewer sees other characters who are similar to Adam and Eve, they can compare the new characters to the known models, and thus more accurately understand the meaning of the work.



Figure 4 Adam and Eve.

3.3 Symbolic symbols

Symbols are related to interpretive items. Peirce pointed out that the nature of symbols does not lie in their own similarities or causality, but depends on the social conventions of interpretation activities, their existence gives them a unique character. Therefore, there is a close relationship between symbols and interpretive items, and such interpretive activities are usually determined by cultural traditions or social customs. This is why the understanding and interpretation of symbols often needs to take into account specific cultural and social contexts.

For example, Bosch's artistic creation is mostly inspired by the traditional culture of the Netherlands, such as folklore, proverb stories and literary works, which contain multiple symbols and gradually constitute the central idea and tone of his paintings. Therefore, the "object object" of the social environment that Bosch is exposed to indirectly affects the symbols presented in the picture. As a local saying goes, "Happiness is like a bubble that will soon burst." Although the relationship between the lovers in the bubble is pure and beautiful, it is inevitable to break the ending, describing the fragile and short relationship. In the middle part of the picture, the offspring of Eve and Adam are enjoying the carnival with

the animals in the world. Some of them hugged each other, some of them carried fruit on their heads, some of them roosted in beautiful giant strawberries, and some of them longed for the bird to feed them berries that symbolized desire. In this scene, the fruit becomes a synonym for greed, and Bosch exhorts humans to control their unrestrained desire and greed.

In addition to socially accepted symbols, Bosch's frequent use of symbols in his paintings is also a reflection of his past personal experiences or emotions. For example, Bosch frequently used the elements of burning buildings and eerie creatures struggling in his scenes of "disaster", and according to the municipal archives of his childhood residence, there was once a fire in the Cathedral of St. John of Bosch.

It is reported that at that time, the St. John's Cathedral near where Bosch lived was nearly destroyed by the sudden fire, so the symbolic symbol of "hell fire" left a deep imprint on Bosch's memory from a young age. Notably, the cathedral is famous for its Gothic style, with rows of strange figures, monsters, and workers on its buttresses ("Figure 5"), all reminiscent of the creatures that appear in the hellish scenes in Bosch's works. The high similarity between the two shows that the childhood fire became the underlying direction of Bosch's artistic conception, and subconsciously influenced many of his later works.



Figure 5 Decorations of St. John's Cathedral.

To sum up, in *Paradise on Earth*, Bosch uses allegorical means to imply the behavior of the people in the world, in which he borrows a large number of conventional symbolic artistic symbols to persuade people to abandon evil thoughts and pursue goodness. The whole process of Bosch transforming such abstract concepts into concrete through the above means is a symbolic language expression in the field of art.

4. THE DELAY AND RESURRECTION OF THE MEANING OF THE THREE SIGNS

Through the comparison of the above three symbols, it is easy to conclude that the most profound and complex way of expression is dominated by symbolic symbols. In the face of so many conceptual works, how can people judge the true validity of such symbols?

Peirce pointed out that since the interpretation itself is a symbol, it needs a supplementary interpretation to combine with the previously expanded symbols to form a richer symbol; This repetition will eventually affect the symbol itself. It can be seen that the operation of thought is a dynamic process of symbol production, which is constantly changing. Theoretically, it has the possibility of "infinite derivation", which emphasizes the infinite derivation of symbol and the ambiguity of interpretation.

What is valuable about Bosch's work is that it can delay the disappearance of symbols and allow their meaning to continue. Taking "Ship of Fools" as an example, Bosch chose the fool as the representation, and in order to explain the meaning of the representative item, he also added the owl and other symbolic symbols to testify. Therefore, the work "Ship of Fools" is the explanation of "fool", and the whole painting can be regarded as the representative work of Bosch's condemnation of the Christian Church at that time. Therefore, the Ship of Fools is a new symbol, and the interpretive terms of the symbol gradually form a new representation, forming a series of new interpretive terms... From this repetition, Bosch's works further produced "logical explanations" on the basis of "emotional explanations" and "energy explanations", so that symbols can explain infinite meanings and meanings can be replaced with new possibilities.

5. CONCLUSION

For visual art, using the semiotic theory represented by Peirce to analyze Bosch's paintings can better sort out the understanding logic of image meaning. In Bosch's works, people can see the interweaving influence between symbols, forming a dynamic intertextual relationship, so that the interpretation of symbols can be infinitely extended and the meaning delayed. Therefore, through the above analysis of symbols, Peirce semiotics can help viewers to understand Bosch's painting language from a new Angle and better interpret the

metaphorical connotation of Bosch's works. At the same time, due to the ambiguity and uncertainty of the symbols of Bosch's works, the research done in this article does not have universal significance, and only provides another interpretation perspective for the study of Bosch's art.

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