

The Beauty of Color and Its Divine Meaning

Taking the Medieval Clothing Art for Example

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Abstract—As one of emotional materials with formal beauty in artist work, color beauty is given a certain meaning in different situations. It exists as an external manifestation. Starting from such a medieval dominion of theology, the paper has discussed the beauty of color in this period, particularly in the apparel arts. It includes how to reveal God's glory, how to make art reach to sacred temple and how to possess divine meaning.

Keywords—*beauty of color; divinity; Middle Ages; clothing; arts*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the entire history of Western civilization, the Middle Ages is a special historical period. It was a world under the rule of Christian theology. It has a broad and profound impact on Western countries. In order to consolidate its divine right and the ideological foundation of the church's feudal rule, Christian monopolized all education for knowledge and totally rejected ancient civilizations, ancient philosophy, aesthetics and literature and arts. Therefore, there was no literature and arts special for research in this period. For a long time, many Western scholars in the Age of Enlightenment in 18th century considered the Middle Ages as "dark ages". However, this viewpoint is abandoned by modern scholars. Church's real attitude to arts is blurry. The theological system the churches built also reflects some aesthetic ideology. Augustine is a symbol of the spirit and culture of the times. He transformed a number of concepts of classical aesthetics and endowed them with religious and transcendental color, which built the aesthetic building of Christian theology in the Middle Ages. Thus, the medieval Europe was not completely in the dark. There was a lot of creativity in the arts. They have achieved high artistic achievements, and their arts have rich and profound cultural connotations.

II. THE COLOR OF ARTS AND ITS THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Art is an organic product of human's integrated mental activities with knowledge, emotions, ideals and ideas. It is a vivid expression of people's real life and spiritual world. It is a cultural phenomenon that people create to satisfy their comfort needs for subjective defects and behavioral needs for emotional organ, and to give vent to their inner emotions and desires. Either way, it could be confirmed that art is the product of human's emotional world and spiritual world.

Kandinsky ever said: "The internal element of art, emotion, must exist. Otherwise, art works will become fakes. The internal element determines the form of art work" [1]. Human's ideological activities are complicated. Theology, as a product of human's spirit and belief, has a lot of similarities. It most often uses art to manifest its purpose, especially in the Middle Ages with Christianity as the ruling class.

In the Middle Ages, the Western thought is centered by God and theology. Aesthetics was official included in Christianity and theology. God is the highest beauty. He is beauty itself and determines the definition of beauty. Beauty exists as one of God's attributes. Art also exists as one of God's creation. In this period, there were a lot of artistic activities, such as song and dance, painting, sculpture, architecture, etc.. But they were all manifested to highlight divinity of religious activities, rather than simply aesthetic activity. It can be said that the production of all the original art forms are for the purpose of religion. Clothing, as a unique art form, is consistent with other art forms at this point. As Hegel said, "The best thing and the most solemn image are only used for God's ornament, and to advocate the glory and honor of The One. We put them before us, because we only want to celebrate before the Creator" [2]. At same time, "The One is reflected through art and becomes a sensible object, for he has no body and cannot be presented by any limited earthly thing" [3]. Christian clothing is also known as holy garment. The holy garments of Jewish priests are made of the best materials and techniques that Jewish people offer. The gorgeous holy garments of priests are symbols of God's authority, holiness and good characters.

In different religious beliefs, the manifestation forms of their clothing art are also different in many aspects. They may use different materials, styles and colors. As one of emotional materials with formal beauty in artist work, color directly affect people's visual sense, and makes art more lifesome and vivid, so it is strongly associated with people's emotion. Man uses different colors to distinguish and manifest different expressions and symbols. For example, the holy garments for clergies have specific requirements for colors. Golden, blue, purple and vermilion are symbols of nobleness and gorgeousness which has the meaning of holiness. The Buddhist clothing is relatively simple. Monk's garments are forbidden to be colored or use pure color to express the solemnity and their guarding against greed, which is very different from Christianity. Color itself has a unique aesthetic

feature. It is presented directly in arts and affects people's emotion and spiritual world. In the medieval artistic thought, it is considered as an important element.

St. Augustine, as a great theological thinker in the medieval churches, thought the feature of beauty was "united" or "harmonious". The beauty of object is created by "appropriate proportions of each part and a pleasing color". Beauty is sourced from God. God is the supreme beauty, absolute beauty, infinite beauty and the beauty of all beauties. St. Thomas's aesthetic thoughts also had an important impact on the medieval arts. He identified with the beauty of God, besides he said: "Beauty has three elements. The first is a completeness or perfection. Any incomplete thing is ugly. The second is appropriate proportion or harmony. The third is the distinct color that is accepted by people". Plotinus, the founder of the Neo-platonic School, thought the real beauty was God, and he was the highest beauty, the embodiment of the true, the good and the beautiful.

Under medieval theological background, beauty comes from God and light comes from God, so arts should reflect the holy "light" and pursue distinct color. Different colors have different symbolic meanings. It can express people's emotion strongly, and brings people with associations. Color, as a special being, is included in aesthetic thought. These aesthetic concepts produce a profound influence on artistic creation. The emphasis of light and color in church architecture directly comes from the theological aesthetic thoughts in the Middle Ages. Religion provides ideas, artistic conception, image and imagination, and symbolizes religious images and fantasy.

III. THE BEAUTY OF COLOR, AS A MANIFESTATION OF GOD'S GLORY

Eriugena, a famous theologian in the 9th Century, thought: everything in the world has the divine nature of God, so every thing shines with the light of God. If God is the sun, everything in the world is millions of bright lamps. He uses light to describe the existence of God. In John of the Holy Bible, "The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world". God has no specific form, so "light" is considered as God's sensible image. The pursuit for light in Christian art, in fact, is a kind of worship towards God.

In religion, the beauty is the sensible appearance of divinity. Without sensible form, divinity cannot be presented. All forms related to religion needs to be the presentation of divinity and God's glory. Religious clothing is one of the most typical presentations. According to the Bible, the story of Adam and Eve records the origin of clothing. Body is a symbol and expression of lusts. Clothing symbolizes God's salvation for man, which incarnational Jesus Christ would cover them and save them from the binding of lusts. It can be seen that, on the one hand, clothing is a mark of sanctity. On the other hand, the understanding on clothing depends on the understanding on the relationship between human's body and soul. In many cases, clothing is considered as a cover or a packing of body. Religious clothing is thus specified to present beauty. Clothing itself has such a symbolic meaning that could help man communicate with God through dressing. During this period, the main function of clothing is used to shield body. Style and

material were de-emphasized. Thus, symbolic color became an important means to present and distinguish different implications. Since the Primitive Period, color has been given with rich content and different associations, expressions and symbolism. With unique aesthetic features, color is an important presentation means in arts.

The association, expression and symbolism of color are far stronger than the other two attributes of the beauty in form. In "Art and Visual Perception", Arnheim said: "When it comes to the function of expression, color prevails over form. For expressions conveyed in the afterglow of the sunset and the dark blue of Mediterranean, probably any definite form couldn't catch up with their beauties" [4]. There are different requirements for color in different religions. But they symbolize their own purposes and meanings. The elders and masters in Buddhism, or priests in Christianity have special status to convey sacred orders. They are holy spokesmen and represent their gods. The color of clothing has become the most important distinction, to symbolize the existence of God and share the divine meaning. The colors of the holy garments must appear to be noble and beautiful, which is the direct share of God's supreme beauty and the glory of God. In the eyes of Plotinus, things itself don't care about beauty and ugliness. Only when things share with God's glory, they can be beautiful.

Augustine argued that all matters are God's creation. Physical beauty is the reflection of spiritual beauty. All the beautiful are to praise God's divinity and faithfulness. All sense of beauty is given with religious theological value. "When you appreciate the sun, it is more like God's glory than splendid brilliance" [5]. Throughout the medieval period, the beauty of color shared and imitated God's glory because of its symbolic characteristics, and was pervasive in various artistic forms.

IV. FROM THE SYMBOL OF COLOR TO THE SACRED ARTS

In Plato's aesthetic thought, he believed that the essence of art and beauty lies in imitation. "The beauties of art and the world imitate the real world, while the real world is the imitation of the concepts of the world. Therefore, art and beautiful things are separated from concepts by two layers. They are the imitations of imitations or the shadows of shadows" [6]. Plato believed that everything is beautiful, because they share or imitate the concept of beauty. In Augustine's theological aesthetic thought, the beauty of the nature is a symbol of God's beauty. The beauties of all things on earth come from God. Therefore, the praise of these beautiful things is to praise the beauty of the Creator. The mission of art is it. Colors in artistic forms are different from general colors, so this art is also different from general arts. Colors imitate God's beauty and glory, so that the arts become sacred. Augustine thought we needed to understand the presentation and description of color and other sensible factors with our mind rather than our eyes. He also believed that the closer things that we see with naked eyes were to things that we see with our mind, the more they are beautiful and perfect. It is this kind of spiritual understanding that makes the color become the imitation of God's beauty. It is a symbol of divine meaning, so the art becomes a real art.

The use of color sharing God's beauty is very broad and important in the arts in entire Middle Ages. In addition to clothing, it was also used in painting, architecture and other artistic forms. In the Middle Ages, Gothic architecture, such as Notre Dame de Paris, Amiens Cathedral, Canterbury Cathedral of England and Lincoln Cathedral, widely used pointed arch with light lines, graceful pinnacles, airy flying buttresses, slender column or clustered columns, colorful glass window and indoor glass painting. The glass window and glass painting are inlaid by different shapes and colors of glasses with blue as background, with dark green and golden yellow as dominant tone and with violet color as complementary color. It often uses brown and pink to present figures. When the sun shines through these red, yellow, blue, purple colored glass, the religious images on glass window, as if, produce a great power suddenly. The light and shadow stagger indoors, and the atmosphere is more illusory and unpredictable, which would be easy to produce an infinitely mysterious illusion about heaven and a kind of upward sublimation for prayers. The symbolic meaning of color makes the artistic image of the entire building full of mysterious, lofty and awed brilliance, and covers with a sacred coat. Plato believed that this art form is completely created with God's power rather than any special skills. It is God who gives people inspiration.

In the Middle Ages, religious clothing, like other forms of arts, was originally considered as the adornment of religion. What's more, it is a presentation and praise of God's character. God uses clothing to cover man's body. Man uses color and its symbolic meaning to present the beauty of God, and to distinguish general people or worldly people. Clothing, as an artistic form, demonstrates its sacred side because of God's needs.

God is the fundamental theme of medieval arts, and the mission of arts is to praise God and to serve the religious theology. The symbol of art has the meaning of divinity. "Everything in the world is beautiful, because they share the beauty of God, and the art is the presentation of this sharing and the symbol of God's holy beauty" [7].

Arts praise God through praising the natural beauty and form beauty of sun, moon, stars and other visible objects, so that we may see God's beauty from the beauty of nature, the beauty of heaven from the beauty of the world, and the infinite beauty from finite beauty. The formation of this aesthetic concept is inseparable from the theory of Plato and the universals theory of Aristotelian. It also reflects Augustine's pursuit of form in arts. Arts can not meet momentary external entertainment or momentary emotional compensation. Arts should create a meaning for meaningless world and a world of transcendent values for human beings. Color, as an important element in artistic presentation, had a profound impact on the symbol of divine meaning at this period and art creation from the Renaissance till now.

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