

Analysis of Picasso's Paintings in Cubism Period -- A Case Study of *Awenon Maiden* (Les Demoiselles D'Avignon)

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Abstract. Cubism is an extremely important turning point in the history of art. Picasso, as an important representative of Cubism, broke the shackle of traditional painting methods to artists and opened up a precedent of Cubism. Based on the understanding of Cubism, this paper takes Picasso's paintings in Cubism period as the starting point, and then analyzes the expression and influence of Picasso's paintings in Cubism period by combining the analysis and research of his specific paintings.

Keywords: Cubism; Primitive Art; Picasso.

1. Introduction

The art movement in the West in the early 20th century still has a great influence on modern design. Especially, the Cubism's creative style and geometric artistic technique have innovated the traditional painting style and its artistic ideas are a breakthrough and a turning point in traditional art, and then later art schools are affected by it to some extent. The progress of modern design is also largely driven by it. Cubism period is an extremely important period in Picasso's creative career. Studying Picasso's paintings in this period will help to explore his creative techniques and expression, as well as the essence and characteristics of Cubism and the impact of Cubism paintings on future generations.

2. The Inspiration of Picasso's Paintings

Awenon Maiden was created by Picasso. As the founder of modern art, Pablo Picasso is the main representative of Western modernist painting. He has never stopped pursuing the creation of various art forms, changing his painting style, and he always injects new vitality into his works again and again, so Picasso is the only artist who experienced so many periods. Among his works, *Awenon Maiden* (Figure 1) opened a new situation of Cubism and was called the first work with Cubism inclination. This painting is huge, measuring 244cm×234cm. The picture depicts naked women, but it is completely different from the graceful figure of girls that people imagined. The whole picture is crooked and consists of some squares, triangles and other figures. This work has broken people's perception of previous paintings.

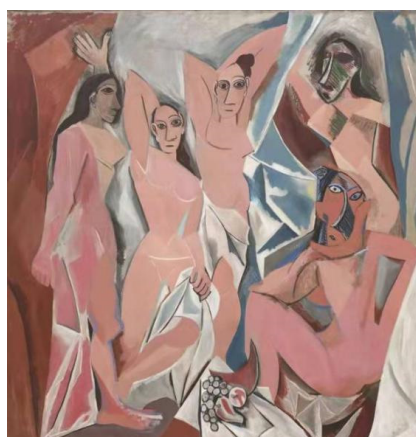


Figure 1. Awenon Maiden

First of all, Cézanne's painting style and technique deeply influenced Picasso, which was the inspiration of Picasso's creation. As a post-impressionist painter in the 19th century, Cézanne had a great influence on later painters, among which Picasso was most influenced by Cézanne's painting techniques. Cézanne was inspired by geometric form and advocated depicting objects from multiple perspectives. Picasso was inspired by Cezanne and deepened his art theory in practice to further perfect this creation form. According to the composition of Cezanne's *Bathers* (Figure 2), it can be seen that Picasso was deeply influenced by this work and then created *Avenon Maiden*. The composition of these two works is both the image of naked women combined with the primitive rough style



Figure 2. Bathers

Furthermore, the creative inspiration of this work comes from African sculptures. In 1902, Picasso collected replicas of tribal sculptures brought by Gauguin from Tahiti. Later, at the suggestion of André Derain, Picasso visited the exhibition of African handicrafts held at the Trocadero Museum of Humanity, where he discovered wild and extensive art forms and fell in love with this kind of creation which is different from western art. The simplicity and expressiveness of African sculptures inspired Picasso and he applied the primitive atmosphere and tension of these African sculpting art to his oil paintings. The distorted facial features, angular body and exaggerated and weird colors of *Avenon Maiden* were deeply influenced by African sculptures, and the appearance of the figures in the painting can even find corresponding African mask.

Last, women were an important element throughout Picasso's creative career and the source of inspiration for his works. In the early stage of the creation of *Avenon Maiden*, Picasso and his lover Fernande were in a sweet period of love. Love inspired him to pursue new forms of painting. Picasso turned his attention to the group of women living in brothels in Avignon Avenue, who became his creative inspiration. Picasso was full of sympathy for these women, but their naked body and graceful posture inspired him to create.

3. The Content and Technique of Picasso's Paintings

As a whole, *Avenon Maiden* depicts five naked women, either standing or sitting. In front of these women is a table or bench with some fruit on it. The figure of these five girls are flat and composed of geometric color blocks. They are not as soft and feminine as ordinary girls, with angular bodies and strange postures. Some of the girl's faces are frontal and some are profiled, but the facial features are twisted, and the eyes are wide open, and the noses are distorted. The front girl's nose looks like a lateral nose, which is very conspicuous in the picture. As Picasso said, "I put the nose out of place, because, after all, I'm trying to force people to pay attention to their noses." The faces of the two girls on the right in the picture are covered by strong lines, making them more brutish and weird, full of the wild characteristics of primitive art, which are extremely like African masks. The background of

the picture is also arbitrarily divided, and there is no sense of distance. The color of the whole picture is exaggerated and grotesque, and the color blocks of the large plane are in strong contrast.

3.1 Creative Techniques: Multiple Perspectives

Although called Cubism, the Cubist works present a flat effect. Traditional Western painting pursues three-dimensional space, and people usually think that such paintings are cubist, but Picasso has a quite different understanding of three-dimensional. The Western painting tradition emphasizes a kind of focused observation. David Hockney once spent a day at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, studying the characteristics of western painting observation methods. Then, he came to the conclusion that the western observation methods are the same as those observed by cameras. It is to observe the picture with one eye still, and the obtained image is what in western painting. But Picasso believed that this kind of observation saw the plane image of a one-eyed camera, rather than what people's organic eyes saw. He believed that the object seen is a flat image, but the human brain overlaps the different images seen by the two eyes, which makes people feel the depth of the object and get a sense of three-dimensional. However, this sense of three-dimensional is relatively limited, so the blocking surface of the object will not be seen. Picasso broke this limitation and presented a three-dimensional effect through different perspectives. The shadow and the same image seen from different angles are used for collage, and finally finished *Awenon Maiden*. For instance, in the painting, the front girl collages the nose from the side view, and the girl in the lower right corner is seated with the front face and the chest from the side view.

Humans in the three-dimensional space sees no dead angle when looking at the two-dimensional space, but when looking at the three-dimensional space, an object always has one side facing away from you or is blocked by an object in front due to the limitation of sight. Therefore, the traditional painting method redraws what our eyes see, and is close to the objective world. However, Picasso's *Awenon Maiden* is quite different, observing the depicted objects from multiple perspectives and angles. Therefore, the works created by the artists always show different perspectives of the object at the same time.

3.2 Geometry

A large number of geometric figures were used in *Awenon Maiden* to summarize the characteristics of women. The whole work looks angular and the simple and rough lines are evident. The interweaving of lines reflects a sense of geometry, and the combination of geometric shapes and surfaces creates a peculiar visual effect. The combination of ovals, triangles, irregular rhombus and asymmetric geometric shapes adds a sense of tension to the picture. Triangular shapes are used for the breasts and joints, and irregular geometry is used for the background. Although the picture is divided into blocks, the female color as the main body is harmonious and unified, which contrasts with the complex background, making the main body more prominent.

Geometry is a very obvious feature in this painting. Geometry of all the girl figures and backgrounds broke the artists' traditional cognition of natural forms, creating new thinking about the image of objects.

3.3 Decomposition and Combination

Although the whole picture is fragmented and abstract, the five young girls and some fruits painted below can be clearly identified in the interlacing of lines and blocks. Although the outline of the figures can be recognized, it is difficult to distinguish the similarity between the real person and the figures in the picture. Picasso has abandoned the reproduction of the original image of the object and integrated his own understanding in his creation, which makes picture more free but not lack of critical thinking. Objects are decomposed into basic elements in cubist works, which is actually a high degree of generalization and form the whole picture by small pieces. Fragmented effects and separated images became the most typical characteristics of Cubism period.

3.4 Exaggerated Deformation

This painting is decorative and full of mystery. These figures seem to have been cut, with distinct edges and corners, and their faces are exaggerated and distorted, especially the two girls on the right, whose facial features are all dislocated and hideous. Bold lines are used to represent the shadows of the face, and the whole picture looks like an African mask is integrated into the face of the young girl.

In the cubist works, strange combinations of deformations are common, taking real objects as a reference, and then using exaggerated artistic techniques of deformation to create pictures.

4. The Original Artistic Expression in Picasso's Paintings

In his constant pursuit of art, Picasso showed special preference to primitive art. The African woodcarving that Picasso admired is an ancient and primitive art. These woodcarvings do not deliberately pursue fidelity, but depict figure's face and body as a whole. Although they are not realistic, they have unique charm. Picasso's *Awenon Maiden* was inspired by African geometric masks.



Figure 3. The face of the girl on the upper right



Figure 4. A woodcarving mask from the Etombi region of Congo, Africa

African primitive art is completely different from the traditional art of the West. This primitive art makes people feel as if they are in the nature, making people feel the simplicity of nature in the fast-paced industrial society. First of all, unlike the focused perspective method used in traditional Western paintings, Picasso's figures are like African sculptures without the proportion of natural laws, using flat painting methods, which can't tell how big they are and how close they are. Secondly, in terms of character depiction, the girl is depicted with simple rough lines, the facial features are simplified, and the body and limbs are in simple geometric shapes, all of which are influenced by African sculptures. For example, the two women on the right side of *Awenon Maiden* are the most obvious. The face of the girl on the upper right (Figure 3) is the facial features of a woodcarving mask (Figure 4) from the Etombi region of Congo, Africa. The face of girl on the lower right (Figure 5) is the facial features of the Zaire wood carving mask (Figure 6), and the face of the first girl on the left

(Figure 7) is the facial features of the Dan tribe mask in Ivory Coast (Figure 8). That the shape of the girl's bodies are hacked with axes is also influenced by African sculpture. Finally, in terms of color, rich colors are rarely seen in African sculpture, so line and shadow matter a lot. In the work *Awenon Maiden*, a large number of lines are used to serve as the facial shadows of the two girls on the right, and straight lines are used to outline the girls. The colors are weird but unified, with only red, blue and white involved. The five girls are in red tones as a whole, which contrasts with a large number of blue backgrounds, making the subject more prominent.

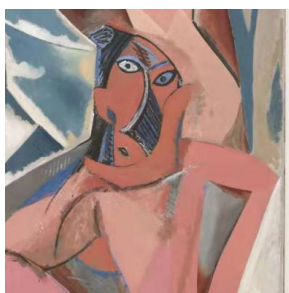


Figure 5. The face of girl on the lower right



Figure 6. The Zaire wood carving mask



Figure 7. The first girl on the left



Figure 8. The Dan tribe mask in Ivory Coast

5. The Expression of Female Figures in Picasso's Paintings

As the most common theme in artistic creation, women often inspires artists. In Picasso's paintings, the subject of women almost ran through his entire artistic career, but Picasso's depiction of women changed greatly during the Cubism period. The five women in *Awenon Maiden* are different from the previous images which are relatively conservative and simple, the outlines of which are clearly visible and they can be identified by the facial features. While, in this cubist work, the female figure is as strong as the original statue, and the features of female figure are constantly enlarged, such as the tight waist and enlarged hips, which highlights the characteristics of women. The hips, which symbolize the female reproductive function, are exaggerated and deformed, which is very expressive. The arms and legs of the five young girls are thick and strong, full of primitive tension. Picasso embodies primitive art in his paintings, showing people a combination of primitive gestures and modern society, impacting people's vision and heart. This way of depicting women expresses the painter's emotions, stimulates the viewer's original appeal, and also arouses the public's reconsideration of artistic aesthetics.

6. Children's Art Expression in Picasso's Paintings

Picasso's painting style changed greatly in the Cubism period. Compared with the past, many details of the painting were replaced by the generalization of the figures, and the object was analyzed into the most basic geometric form, similar to children art. Children's paintings are bold, interesting and casual because they don't have complex thinking, lack of life experience, and their cognition of many things is still in the enlightenment stage, and their actions are not coherent. Children will generalize the objects that they observed into basic shapes. Taking drawing people as an example, adults will grasp the proportion of facial features, face shape, figure characteristics and so on, while children will generalize the head into an oval shape, the upper body into a trapezoid, and the legs into a rectangle, and so on. This generalization is in line with the law, but it is far from the original image. Children's painting will not summarize details, and its style is simple. In general, they don't depict objects accurately, but they use a lot of straight lines, circles, and irregular shapes. Another characteristic of children's painting is that the works are not limited by time and space. In children's paintings, solid figures are not often used but the background and objects are connected and merged with each other to form a plane picture. Picasso's *Awenon Maiden* also embodies these characteristics. A lot of simple straight lines used in this painting, and the shadows of the two girls on the right are also expressed in straight lines. The head of the woman in the painting is oval, and the chest is also square, semicircular or triangular. Even the fruit below is the most basic geometric element. The whole work does not reflect the time and space, but adopts the plane technique to paint. These characteristics mentioned above showed Picasso's expression in children's painting.

7. The Significance of Awenon Maiden

Awenon Maiden, with a unique creative method, opened the precedent of Cubism and broke the Western traditional painting method of imitating three-dimensional space, not limited to the camera type of observation, and advocating observation in a plane from multiple perspectives. Becoming an artistic innovation and original creation of this era, this work broke the traditional way of aesthetics and painting, and surpassed the ideas of predecessors. Cubist artists pursued forms that shatter, parse, and recombine to form separate images. *Awenon Maiden* became the basis for subsequent Cubism schools, so the evidence of its creative and painting method can be found in later works. This work is still being studied by a large number of artists and art theorists today.

First of all, in terms of artistic exploration, as for African primitive art, Picasso experienced a process from exploring it to embracing it with his own art. His spirit of accepting and innovating different cultures and arts has greatly inspired modern art creation, especially in the critical

inheritance of previous art and the tolerance and innovation of different cultures. This eclectic spirit constantly encourages modern art to explore forward.

Secondly, in terms of ideology, the Cubism pays attention to the form of fragmentation, analysis, and recombination, and promoted the development of a concept that focused on the sense of form, making modern artists free from the constraints of form, which provides a new and free creation form and concept for modern art.

Thirdly, in terms of graphic design, the cubist creation method compresses the material into a plane, and simplifies the pattern into the most basic elements. The simple geometric diagram avoids complicated information, making the creative content into a strong visual experience, thus highlighting the subject, making it easier for the viewer to receive information and generate a sense of identity.

Fourthly, in terms of social development, influenced by modernism, modern art design is not limited by space and is more free to create. The advancement of modern society and scientific and technological media have extended the field of creation. The art form, observation method, eclectic attitude and spirit of exploration brought by Cubism will be further developed in the future artistic creation.

It is Picasso's continuous exploration, analysis, and transcendence of tradition that he was able to create the unique artistic creation form of Cubism. Although the Cubism movement has only been popular for more than ten years, the influence it has brought has benefited so far. Many peculiar arts including various concepts and installations are related to the forms extended by Cubism. It is because of these pioneers who continue to break through the limits and explore, that future generations can further explore the possibility of existence on the shoulders of artists. It is exactly what Picasso once said, "Good artists copy, great artists steal."

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