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The Origin, Connotation and Contemporary Educational Value of Liu Haisu's Artistic Expression Thought

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Abstract

Liu Haisu's artistic core concept is the "create-authenticity expression" theory which integrates traditional Chinese painting aesthetics and Western modern art and extracts the connotation of "expression is the overall presentation of life." This idea still has extremely important value in contemporary art education.

Key Words

Expressive theory, life, contemporary education

Liu Haisu, as a prominent historical figure in the development of Chinese modern art, has made significant contributions to the creation, education, and theory of art. This article is a deep exploration of the ideological origins, connotations, and contemporary significance of Liu Haisu's theory of artistic create-authenticity expression.

1. The Theoretical Origins of the Create-authenticity Expression

Liu Haisu believed that "art is an expression, not ordinary painting, which I cannot change. 'Expression' is a self-related word, not objective. I have fully expressed my entire life and personality in art. The changes in the plot of all social life in the era, when touched by my senses, gave rise to consciousness and immediately had an impact. If a painter draws something they saw casually and it's still the same, it can only be called 'photography,' just like taking a photo. The expression must go through the brewing of the soul and the synthesis of intelligence and become a new realm, which is the purpose of expression. Human life is multifaceted and cannot be copied. Only by understanding this thinking, we can talk about art."¹

He opposed the imitative theory of art, believing that realism like photography is mechanical and rigid, and does not conform to the essential characteristics of art. In his view, only creating works that reflect the author's true emotions and feelings are true art, and he called this

method expression.

Liu Haisu's understanding of art was not easily obtained. Still, a comprehensive theory was formed based on the reading of many artworks and theoretical literature from ancient and modern times in China and the West. "Any form of art must have its creative spirit, then it can express its own life; if there is worship and imitation everywhere, and others dominate it, then what it expresses is not its own life."² From this view, it can be seen that Liu Haisu's theory of artistic expression is neither the scientific cognitive imitation theory of Western classicism nor the emotional expression theory of Western modern Expressionism. His "expression" is precisely the presentation of the overall life spirit of the creator. As Zhu Guangqian said, "In art, human emotions and physics must blend to create a complete realm."³

Due to the influence of the binary thinking mode of subject/object acceptance in Western modern Expressionism, its expressionism deviates from imitative theory in depicting external objective objects. Instead, it aims to imitate inner emotions, ignoring the materiality of external objects and treating them as carriers or ways of expressing strong inner emotions. Under the domination of this creative thinking, expressionism often conveys emotion with individual subjective emotions through extreme exaggeration and deformation techniques, resulting in a state of distortion in both the subject and object, such as Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, bringing viewers extreme emotional experiences. As Zhu Liyuan said, "The Western view of truth is shifting from

emphasizing objective truth to emphasizing subjective truth gradually.”⁴

But the expression theory advocated by Liu Haisu is precisely based on the Chinese philosophy of “Nature and Man Are United as One” (天人合一), emphasizing that the aesthetic subject expresses their inner and genuine experiences in the perception of objects in reality. This experience is by no means the subjective feeling of the creator, or a simple description of the image, but the aesthetic state of “I am a friend with Mountain Huangshan” (我是黃山友),⁵ to achieve the goal of “expressing feelings by scenery.” At this moment, the unity of the object and the subject is revealed, and the creator’s entire life charm (生命氣韻) is suddenly revealed with the Ji hua (跡化) of the scene. As Liu Haisu said, “So painters paint from the heart, and if they don’t express their feelings in this way, they won’t be happy.”⁶ “Therefore, I know that painting is the pure expression of one’s life in intuition as the motivation for creation.”⁷

From this, it can be seen that Liu Haisu’s theory of artistic expression cannot be understood as the expressionist school of Western modern art. Rather, he uses this concept to convey his understanding of the aesthetic connotation of Chinese traditional art centered around life charm. At the same time, it is also his insight into the essence of Western Post Impressionist painting. Further, it is the integration and reconstruction of the above two academic origins after reaching a profound understanding of them.

In an article originally published in *Xuedeng* (學燈) on 18 March 1923, Liu Haisu pointed out: “In the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, the works of the Bada Shanren, Shi Tao, and Shi Xi surpassed natural images and carried a subjective and abstract expression. There was a strong emotion that jumped onto the paper. They expressed their fervent emotions and hearts from their own brush pens and ink, which was their life... and unexpectedly coincided with the art of modern generations such as Matisse and Rodin.”⁸ The article “Shi Tao and Post Impressionism” published in August 1923 in the *Shishi Xinbao · Xuedeng* (時事新報·學燈) further elaborated on the shared “expressive” of Chinese and Western art aesthetics, thus laying the theoretical foundation for Liu Haisu’s theory of artistic expression.

Firstly, Liu Haisu believed that the works of Post Impressionist painters are comprehensive rather than analytical, expressive rather than representational. Expressiveness refers to “the integration of subjective personality, individuality, and objectivity, not realism, but like birds flying and fish leaping, just like a genius galloping. When appreciating art, one must adopt a beau-

tiful attitude of observation, not taking the artwork as a real object, but feeling it as a manifestation of personality and individuality, proven by beauty. Therefore, the ability of art to enter this realm unconsciously is due to the expression.”⁹

Expression emphasizes the active role of creators in aesthetic creation, rejecting the rigid realism of mechanical imitation theory. This is true. We can see from the works of Paul Cézanne, Vincent Van Gogh, and Paul Gauguin that these imagery creations are not passive depictions of the objects in front of us, but are filled with the beauty of the subject’s inner temperament, style, and ideal realm, as well as the understanding of the unity and integrity of the world. In Liu Haisu’s view, this is the core proposition of artistic realism. Based on this understanding of the theory of expression, Liu Haisu believed that “paintings that emphasize expression, although drawn from nature, actually express the author’s personality and emotions, making the viewer see them as concrete expressions of temperament. The so-called ‘form’ is not just ‘imitation’ (摹形) but ‘creation’ (造型). Of course, the form and color of paint do not need to aim to match nature.”¹⁰

Due to the infiltration of the active role of aesthetic subjects in creative thinking, a comprehensive approach rather than analytical methods will be adopted in the specific process. Synthesis will omit secondary aspects and preserve and extract the essential characteristics of objects. Thus, an artistic image with a tendency towards simplification is constructed. Liu Haisu believed that the authenticity of this artistic beauty has eternal value that transcends time and space and is very different from the superficial art that pursues novelty in the moment.

Secondly, in Liu Haisu’s view, not only did the Post Impressionist school belong to this type of expressive art, but Shi Tao, the important painter of the Ming and Qing dynasties in China, also belonged to this style. “Observing the paintings of Shi Tao, one can understand that they are based on his subjective emotions. His paintings are all expressions rather than reproductions, purely expressions of his humanity and personality. His paintings are also comprehensive rather than analytical, pure from concepts, and never hindered by the complex appearance of objects... Therefore, it is a permanent art that is not constrained by the aesthetic trends of the time, nor do objective constraints bind it.”¹¹ Liu Haisu precisely extracted the essence of artistic expression theory from the study of the Post Impressionism school and traditional Chinese Wenren painting (文人畫), and used these two interrelated aesthetic concepts, expression and synthesis, to integrate into the understanding of the thinking of excellent artistic creation schools at Chinese

and Western.

2. The Aesthetic Connotation of “Expression Theory”

As mentioned above, Liu Haisu’s expressionism has a different aesthetic connotation from the expressionist school of Western modern art. Liu Haisu’s concept of self-expression has different philosophical foundations and aesthetic pursuits of self-expression in Western modern art. The Western self-expression school is based on a binary thinking model of subject and object, emphasizing the individual’s emotional expression. This subjective emotion is placed in an objective existence in creation, becoming a simulated object. However, Liu Haisu’s theory of expression is rooted in the traditional Chinese aesthetic thinking of “Nature and Man Are United as One.” The self is the realm of true self after realizing the unity of human and nature. The expression is a kind of performance of this human-nature spirit of life.

Liu Haisu gradually realized the inherent logic of Chinese expressionist aesthetics, from his theory of rhythmic vitality (氣韻生動) in classical Chinese painting to his close reading of Shi Tao’s painting ideas—that is, the understanding and expression of the unity of the origin of the universe, which has been the consistent pursuit of true Chinese art masters throughout history. The difference is that masters from different eras use a unique and individualized language to express themselves. “Rhythmic vitality” refers to the ‘liveliness’ (生動) that contains ‘charm’ (氣韻), that is, the liveliness is permeated with charm. In this way, liveliness is the subject. Charm is a necessary addition to liveliness, so it is crowned above liveliness.”¹² He pointed out in “Shi Tao’s Art and Art Theory” that “Shi Tao blends various natural materials into a new life, merging into a complete universe—this fusion is called ‘spiritual synthesis,’ ‘creation,’ ‘expression.’ In summary, this is art.”¹³

It can be seen that Liu Haisu’s understanding of the connotation of artistic expression was based on his questioning of the essence of art and his profound understanding of the “spirit of life” in traditional Chinese art, and elevated the understanding of this realm to the level of all humanity. “The original definition of an artist or poet is the creator of the universe—Dante has Dante’s universe, Qu Yuan has Qu Yuan’s universe, Raphael has Raphael’s universe, Wang Mojie (王摩詰) has Wang Mojie’s universe—artistic activity is the project created by the universe.”¹⁴ “‘People’ in the realm of art, who we cannot distinguish between national borders and nations because these great souls transcend time and space and are forever dedicated to all mankind!”¹⁵

The expression of art is to present a holistic new world in works, breaking the average state of daily life and elevating the human spirit. Only this kind of art can be considered as achieving the true essence of art, as the Western phenomenological master Heidegger said in *Holzwege*. “Therefore, the essence of art is first defined as the self-setting of truth into the work... Art is the creative preservation of truth in the work. Therefore, art is the generation and occurrence of truth.”¹⁶ Heidegger’s concept of truth is not the “truth” in the traditional Western sense of the correspondence between knowledge and things, but rather the mutual openness of humans and things after being uncovered. In this context, human nature and material nature are both preserved in truth and elevated.

The artistic expression discussed by Liu Haisu also has, to some extent, the connotation of Heidegger’s artistic truth, but what Liu Haisu said is clearer and more straightforward. So, as an artistic creator, how do you achieve this level of expressive life? Liu Haisu believed that, first and foremost, there must be a manifestation of the “true self.” The true self means that in creation it is neither bound by the imitation of external scenery, the methods already used by ancient people, nor by its pre-existing concepts to view everything. Instead, it is achieved through a lively and inclusive heart of the universe’s great life, reaching the intersection of meaningful communication and divine unity (意通神合) with all things. At this point, the resulting image is the image of true life.

As Liu Haisu discovered in his study of Shi Tao’s painting theory, “Shi Tao fundamentally rejects the concept of antiquity and artificialism, which is a change from the blind obedience of traditional painters... Shi Tao is self-centered and sharp (鋒芒峻露). And imitation is his least favorite thing... Shi Tao advocates expressing one’s own emotions, does not recognize the surface of imitation nature, and fundamentally opposes the reproduction of artificial reality.”¹⁷

In addition, Shi Tao emphasized the concept of “the people at the end have no way” (至人無法). Liu Haisu also noticed it, so he said: “From Shi Tao’s works and painting theory, it can be seen that Shi Tao is neither involved in the past nor the common, transcendent and extraordinary, with sharp strokes that follow emotions. This kind of spiritual spirit can indeed break through all traps and create something unique!” Shi Tao’s rebellious (不羈) spirit and determination to return to his true self (真我) enabled him to achieve a sense of a divine encounter (神遇) with heaven and nature, where everything is like spring, with his “discern what others don’t” (獨具隻眼) and true heart (本心). “Fifty years

ago, this was not born out of the mountains, nor was it a waste of the mountains that made them selfish. The mountains represented the mountains, nor were they a waste of the mountains that made the mountains private. The mountains were born out of the mountains, and the mountains were born out of the mountains. After searching for drafts of strange peaks, the mountains met with the divine encounter of the mountains, so it ultimately came to true self.”¹⁸

Shi Tao's theory of divine encounter in creating the imagery of mountains is also included in Liu Haisu's theory of expression. As Liu Haisu said in “Shi Tao and Post Impressionism,” “The beauty of natural objects occurs not only in the objects themselves, but also in the author's contemplation of beauty, that is, their contemplation of beauty produces those who express the meaning of beauty in natural objects.” This is the expression theory, which emphasizes the relationship between aesthetic subject and object in artistic creation. “By brewing various impressions through a soul, combining self-discipline, and presenting a new whole world, this is expression.”¹⁹

From this, it can be seen that Liu Haisu's theory of artistic expression essentially emphasizes the ecological aesthetics of creating truth and feeling in harmony (創真感合). Creativity originates from the true self of the aesthetician who “breaks away from dust” (脫塵) and “removes vulgarity” (去俗), and the induction and construction of the physical properties of mountains, rivers, and all things, forming a “demasking” (去弊) super temporal and spatial image. This image is the embodiment of the new true whole life.

In this theoretical system Liu Haisu particularly emphasizes the belief utilized by creators to overcome all obstacles, and that only in this way can they create images with unique vitality. For example, in his book *A Brief Discussion on Poetry, Calligraphy, and Painting* (《詩書畫漫談》), he mentioned that when painting traditional Chinese paintings, he often boldly applied color blocks and lines from the Western Impressionist school without realizing it. When painting oil paintings, he naturally used some of the white space methods of traditional Chinese painting. This fusion of Chinese and Western styles is not a raw and peeling style, but rather allows the two to develop according to the needs of the painting, blending emotions and scenes to form works with national style characteristics.

3. The Contemporary Educational Value of Expression Theory

Liu Haisu's artistic expression theory differs from West-

ern classical imitative theory and modernist Expressionism, and it also differs greatly from the traditional conservative retro school in China; he wanted to advocate to enhance and save the entirety of human vitality in an artistic way. “Humans suffer from utilitarianism, where black and white are indistinguishable and right and wrong are unclear. They sleep soundly in their dreams and wake up in no time. A few artists have the privilege of art, and the public is overshadowed by art. Can they not suffocate and die? We want to popularize the art and hold exhibitions to let the public appreciate the fun of art so that everyone's life can be artistic and understand the meaning of its existence.”²⁰

From this, it can be seen that Liu Haisu's popularization of art aims to enhance human awareness of the beauty of life, thus achieving the goal of cherishing life, supporting peace, and wholeheartedly pursuing truth. From this perspective, his theory of artistic expression still holds significant meaning and value in contemporary times.

After the rise of modern aesthetic subjectivity in contemporary art, there emerged a group of creators increasingly sinking into vulgarity. They ignored the sacred social mission and positive functions of art and used it to satisfy their greed. Some explicitly said that “whatever wealthy people ask me to draw, I will draw it. My goal is to become famous, earn money, and enjoy fun!” In the context of this fast food culture, many artists have lost their forgetfulness of the sublime aesthetics and scoffed at the beauty of the indifferent and distant (淡然悠遠) connotations of Chinese literati painters, only using others' pursuit of novelty (追新驚奇) techniques and following their lead. Moreover, some even resort to inhumane methods such as cutting flesh and bloodletting to attract attention and make the brilliance of art in rescuing humanity become hidden but not visible (蔽而不顯) and concealed but not prominent (隱而不彰).

Liu Haisu shouted nearly one hundred years ago, demonstrating the beauty of the great power charm (力韻) of art which still has extremely obvious value in contemporary times. “The so-called artisticization of everyone's life does not mean everyone should be a painter, musician, or poet, but rather that everyone should cultivate their artistic sensibility. The creation and appreciation of art are beyond utility and can truly make people understand the meaning of their lives, forget their limbs and bones, stimulate their full consciousness, and the power of their entire personality. Therefore, even if everyone enters the fundamental path of life and does good... I hope to enter the art world with all people, without class or race, each with their own life and creativity. Everyone can appreciate the love of the world,

enter the colorful environment of flowers' rain, and then enjoy their life. All the evils are extinguished, the real people and the God is carried out. The world is like heaven!"²¹

Liu Haisu expressed his artistic ideal of romanticism with extremely bold words. He believed that the ultimate task of art is to restore faith to humanity. This ideal still has extremely important value in solving various contemporary social problems. His artistic expression opposes various "isms" such as blind obedience, empty talk, and deception.

Liu Haisu said, "Various Western art trends gradually influence our country, and although there are some active ones, there are three dangerous phenomena. The first is 'those who do not understand a certain ideology and consider themselves believers of a certain ideology, or at the same time sing loudly against a certain ideology.' The second one is 'empty talk about good sounding fresherism, without knowing what good sounding novelism is.' The third is 'using ideology as a catchphrase and a certain ideology to deceive people'."

Liu Haisu believed art expresses the artist's life and cannot be created according to any particular ideology. As long as the artist truly feels a kind of beauty stirring in the embrace of nature, and then elevates it to the realm of spiritual expression, a masterpiece of unity and harmony between man and nature has already emerged. As Shi Tao said, "I am who I am, and I am there. The ancient eyebrows and beard cannot be born in my face, and the ancient organs cannot settle into my belly and intestines. I spontaneously open my eyebrows and beard, even if sometimes I touch a certain master. It is the master who belongs to me. I learn from nature, not just from the ancients but also from myself."

Although simple and without much logical reasoning, this view of expression still has important, enlightening significance in contemporary art teaching. Throughout

Western modern and postmodern art, various ideologies have emerged. As contemporary students should consider their ideas, backgrounds, positive values, and negative aspects. We should not unthinkingly follow them, nor should we have a superficial understanding or even develop feelings of inferiority or worship toward masters, which will hinder the true development of art.

As Liu Haisu said, the emergence of any ideology is a specific historical era, a direct expression of life by specific geniuses, and an opposition to old art forms. However, "if someone wants to promote a new 'Yi Shimu' without soul and life, it is just artificial." Liu Haisu's 'Yi Shimu' means "ism." He advocates for the innovative spirit of art but opposes the "ism" that is meaningless and seeks novelty. Therefore, the essence of Chinese aesthetics, such as "bone method uses a pen" (骨法用筆) and rhythmic vitality (氣韻生動) advocated by Liu Haisu, still plays an important role in contemporary art teaching. This role is not only applicable to China but also has significant value worldwide.

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2. The College of Arts of Sichuan University's Graduate Teaching Reform. The title of the project is "A History of the Ecological Aesthetics of Chinese Art Affect Theory."

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ENDNOTES

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論劉海粟藝術表現思想的淵源、內涵及其當代教育價值

郝文傑，謝敦儒

摘要：劉海粟先生以“創真表現論”為其藝術核心理念，對中國傳統繪畫美學及西方現代藝術給予貫通，並且提煉出“表現即生命的整體呈現”的內涵，這一思想在當代的藝術教育中仍然有著極其重要的價值！

關鍵詞：表現論；生命；當代教育