

A Preliminary Discussion on Watercolor Creation and Emotional Expression of Female Themes in the 20th Century

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The history of watercolor painting spans over three centuries, and the study of watercolor creations focusing on female themes have been a hot topic in the subfield of art studies. Watercolor originated in the Age of Exploration, initially serving as a practical tool for natural history, and later evolving into an art form for the aristocracy. In the 20th century, creations featuring female themes flourished and reached their peak. Compared to early works portraying female theses in mythology and religion, these paintings exhibit significant differences in expression, color, and texture, reflecting the gradual rise of women's status and the artists' reflections on modern society. This article delves into the development, emotional expression, creation, and inspiration of watercolor paintings with female themes. By analyzing representative works, we explore the artists' portrayal of women and the reflection of women's living conditions, social status, and ideological consciousness in contemporary society. This article also examines the profound influence and artistic value of these works on contemporary female-themed paintings from the perspective of art studies.

Keywords: female themes, watercolor creation, emotional expression

The Evolution of Watercolor Creations Featuring Female Themes

The origin of watercolor can be traced back to the Age of Exploration and the Victorian era. In early watercolor works, women were often depicted as the protagonists in mythological or religious themes. As time progressed, watercolor painting flourished in Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries, becoming a popular art form among the British aristocracy. By the end of the 19th century, watercolor painting had developed into a complete and independent system.

Between the late 19th century and the early 20th century, during the First World War, many artists began to focus on women's roles and status in the war. Artists such as the Russian painter Ginada Serebryakova and the British painter Amy Catherine Browning started to pay attention to women's position and role in society. Their works emphasized women's independence and autonomy. Watercolor paintings featuring female subjects during this period began to focus on expressing women's inner world, showcasing their unique charm and vitality through delicate depictions and profound emotional expressions.

The trend in watercolor paintings with female themes in the 20th century was towards diversification. Elena Cixous proposed the theory of "androgyny", which refers to a cultural rather than physiological positioning that respects the characteristics of both sexes. It represents a celebration of differences rather than opposition, and diversity rather than monolithism, neutrality, or asexuality. The goal is to break the established gender hierarchy

and establish a new type of relationship between the sexes (Lin, 2001). As a cultural form, painting requires not only the presence of male artists but also the collective efforts of female artists. In past centuries, women were often constrained by traditional gender roles, but watercolor paintings with female themes in the 20th century broke these constraints. They no longer confined women to traditional images of gentleness and virtue, but instead portrayed them as brave, strong, independent, and confident. In terms of technique, artists began to experiment with new artistic languages and skills, such as the use of color, variations in brushstrokes, and the expression of texture, to capture the inner world and emotional experiences of women. This personalized form of expression reflects women's pursuit of self-worth and exploration of humanity, as well as their status and value in society.

Emotional Expression in Watercolor Paintings With Female Themes

Emotional expression plays a significant role in artistic creation, serving as an important way for artists to express their inner feelings and ideological concepts. In watercolor paintings with female themes, it specifically includes the application of color, the use of lines, and the rendering of light and shadow. These techniques can effectively convey the inner world and emotional state of women, making watercolor paintings with female themes more vivid, realistic, and infectious.

Application of Color and Expressiveness

Color is the most crucial expressive technique in watercolor paintings with female themes, and it is also the way artists perceive the world. Artists often incorporate their subjective emotions into color, giving the painting new meanings and feelings.

Mary White is a renowned American watercolor painter who was diagnosed with cancer and underwent lengthy chemotherapy. Facing such a significant life change, White began to reevaluate her life and decided to use her brush to showcase the diverse beauty of life and convey deeper meanings. After recovering from her illness, she traveled to Johns Island in South Carolina, where the residents' lives still retained traces of the Gullah culture. The charm of the longstanding African traditional culture deeply touched White. "Like many cultures, this island's culture is being eroded by mainstream American culture. I felt a sense of urgency. I had to do something before it disappeared..." It was this realization of the imminent disappearance of the island's culture that quickly determined White's creative direction—the lives of the Gullah residents.



Figure 1. The world of Alfreda series, Mary White, 2003, watercolor, 660 * 971 cm, solo exhibition collection.



Figure 2. The world of Alfreda series, Mary White 2003, watercolor, 660 * 938 cm, solo exhibition collection.

The objects depicted in Figure 1 and Figure 2 are the same black female resident on the island, but the two shades of processing make the temperament of the characters appear to be completely different. The woman in Figure 1 is sunbathing leisurely in the sun, gazing into the distance, as if waiting for the return of her loved ones. The warm tone of processing creates a relaxed, pleasant, and relaxed atmosphere. The change in the cool tone of Figure 2 makes the picture serious and cold, and the woman seems to be still silently praying after leaving the church, being pious and nervous, with a strong realistic style. White combines the delicate and rigorous portrayal of the characters with the loose and unrestrained flow effect of water color, making people unconsciously attracted by the local culture and residents, and bringing the unique, delicate, sensitive, and warm characteristics of female images to the extreme.

Compared to Mary White's realistic style, the women depicted by South African-born female artist Marlene Dumas are more absurd and bizarre. The subjects she paints are mostly women, children, and people of color. When representing vulnerable groups in society, she often implies some metaphorical artistic expressions, subtly prompting people to reflect and convey her own spiritual thoughts.

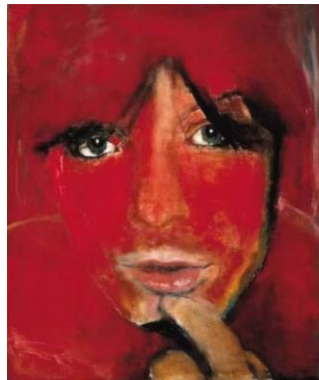


Figure 3. Jule—the woman, Marlene Duma, 1985, watercolor, 125 * 105 cm.



Figure 4. Het Kwaad is Banaal (evil is banal) Marlene Duma, 1984, watercolor, 125.5 * 105.5 cm.

In the first portrait painting with a close-up perspective, only the eyes and lips show gender characteristics, while the rest of the image is completely immersed in a large, thick, and deep red color scheme, symbolizing both female gender and passion, instinct, violence, and bloodshed. In 1993, she said, “If painting is a kind of mental disorder of female diseases, then all women are crazy painters, and all male painters are women”. Her brushstrokes have a conscious questioning of the fate of women, the world, and death. She also emphasizes the simplification of details to minimize the use of brushstrokes, depicting vivid characters with minimal details, and using intuitive methods to express the imbalance of psychological and mental states of characters.

The second painting depicts the artist herself, sitting backwards on a chair, with a strange light in her eyes. The orange and yellow colors depict the curly hair like Bernard Bonnard’s mimosa, and the thinly applied colors cannot hide the background color, which gives the hair a halo of blending light, creating a cold and strange texture. The contrast between black and yellow expresses her embarrassment as a white South African girl and her disgust with racial discrimination. The beauty of women is an eternal theme in Marlene Dumas’ watercolor paintings. When appreciating Marlene Dumas’ watercolor paintings, it can be seen that she has a profound foundation in form, structure, and modeling, and is adept at deforming and reshaping the form to achieve both form and spirit.

Lines and Brushstroke Effects

In watercolor creations with female themes, the female body and posture often require the outlining of lines, enhanced by the texture, thickness, and intensity of brushstrokes to enrich the female image. When depicting a female’s body, gentle lines can be used to express her elegance, while for her posture, fluent lines can be employed to convey her self-confidence.

Judy Chicago is the pioneer of “Feminist Art”. In the process of developing female artistic creations, she has continuously created “unique female images” to challenge traditional artistic concepts.



Figure 5. The birth of the Trinity, Judy Chicago, 1985, watercolor, 24 * 20 cm.

“The Birth of the Trinity” is Judy Chicago’s masterpiece, where the affirmative and robust lines embody female strength and courage, emphasizing the fertility function and endowing gender with powerful symbolic meaning. “When the female body becomes the center of visualization, women are the body, and the body becomes the carrier of beauty, and women become the carrier of the body” (Yao, 2013). “Seeing oneself actively is different from being seen passively, and this power comes from having an understanding of one’s own gender and knowledge of oneself as a woman”. Judy Chicago’s call has gradually raised awareness of women’s status, leading to the rise of feminism.

Egon Schiele, an outstanding Austrian Expressionist painter of the early 20th century and a representative of the Vienna Secession, was deeply influenced by his young struggles and unstable emotional life to pay more attention to women from society’s lower classes. His works are adept at capturing the most essential human desires, life and death, pain, unease, and fear. They directly and unapologetically articulate the inner emotions of people in the contemporary era, with all the figures in his works appearing in a state of extreme panic and unease, where the intersection of life and death, desire, and extinction always surrounds them (Feng, 2020).



Figure 6. Seated woman in violet stockings, Egon Schiele, 1917, watercolor, 40 * 30.5 cm.



Figure 7. The woman kneeling in an orange red dress, Egon Schiele, 1910, watercolor, 44.6 * 31 cm.

The figure in Figure 6 has a cold and straight outline, with hair composed of chaotic lines. The woman’s gaze reveals anxiety and helplessness, always on the edge of collapse and tearing. This may be the author’s innermost monologue and portrayal of his own confusion and painful emotional struggle when the end of the world was approaching before World War I. Human nature cannot be perfect, and through Schiller’s works, we can feel reality more deeply.

Figure 7 shows a female body with some cuts, abandoning the rigorous lines of traditional western painting and adopting a line expression similar to that of Chinese painting. The flattened cuts integrate the pain of one's own heart and the struggle of real life into the female body in the picture, conveying a strong sense of attraction. This technique breaks traditional concepts, making painting creation more authentic and reflecting a reflection on life.

The Expression of Light, Shadow and Space

The superposition of light and shadow and space can create rich visual effects in female-themed images, making them more vivid and three-dimensional. Through the changes in light and shadow, different spaces are created, giving the images a more three-dimensional and deep sense.



*Figure 8. Mother-in-law, Micheal Zarowsky, watercolor, 24 * 20 cm.*

From the comparison between photos and paintings, it can be seen that the author Micheal Zarowsky cleverly utilized the transparent characteristics of watercolors to process the more heavily illuminated areas on the left side of the photo, creating a visual balance that differs from the feeling of imbalance where the left is heavier than the right. The sunshine sprinkling creates many changes in color in the shadows of the painting, making the overall effect more exciting and full of emotions compared to the photo. Under the shadow of light, the female figure in the painting has rich colors and textures, easily leading people into the author's emotions, as if they were standing in the scene experiencing the story unfolding. Andrew Wyeth is an American master of nostalgic realism painting, who uses realistic methods to depict his familiar rural landscapes, combines visual experiences with imaginative organization, and has strong regional colors.



*Figure 9. Christina on the threshold, 1947, watercolor, 83.8 * 63.5 cm.*



Figure 10. Christina Olson, Andrew Wyeth, 1952, watercolor, 63.5 * 73.4 cm.

The models for these two paintings are Wins's most common subjects—his neighbor Christina Olson. In the first painting, she sits solemnly at the doorway, with a light breeze blowing through her hair, outside the doorway are withered grass, and the light accentuates her loneliness, evoking nostalgia for the homeland and nature, with a faint sense of melancholy and a moving poem in the air. As he said, that day is so far away, so far away that it has wings. Even if love is still, still let memory flow, you carry your own small bag, you walk into places that others cannot reach, you gaze at the purple violets across the river from the wind. You pick through the ancient sadness in the fields. I know that is where your heart belongs... The second painting is of Christina Olson at the age of 59. She is noticeably different from her previous works in this genre, with the entire painting completely transforming the early gloom and loneliness. The style of the painting shifts to a celebration of humanity and an elevated approach to life from a more emotional level to a more rational one. The light emphasizes the softness of the figure's contours, with a peaceful demeanor and relaxed posture. The image is calm, simple, and pure, as if to contemplate the true meaning of life and recall past times.

Inspiration and Innovation in Emotional Expression Methods From the Above Images

We can see that Marlene Dumas uses bold colors to highlight women's personality, Judy Chicago uses lines to express women's characteristics, and Andrew Wyeth uses light and shadow to portray women's postures. However, I prefer the emotional expression methods of Egon Schiele in portraying women, using a flat and symbolic language to vividly show the resilience, struggle, and contradiction of women from the lower classes. Using metaphorical brushwork explores deeper meanings in women's souls, such as the pursuit of self-value, freedom, liberation, and other emotional expressions. On the basis of using color, lines, symbols, metaphors, and white space, environmental rendering is also one of the factors that constitute women's subject matter in paintings, such as Frida Kahlo's "Henry Ford Hospital". The desolate scenery of Detroit in the background symbolizes the industrialization of the city. What floats around him are symbols of suffering she has endured, such as fetuses, models of female reproductive systems, pelvises, snails, etc. These environmental images break through traditional forms and symbols, creating vivid allusions and contrasts, and the woman lying on the bed is not a symbol of desire, but a source of pain and loss (Barbezzatini, 2021). This painting is shocking and profound, leaving a deep impression on me to this day.



Figure 11. Henry Ford Hospital, Frida Kahlo, 1932, watercolor, 30.5 * 38 cm, Dolores Olmedo Museum, Mexico.

At the same time, painting has certain opportunities and contingencies. “Dufrenne said: ‘The world implied by aesthetic objects is a kind of emotional radiation, an urgent and fleeting experience, an experience in which people fully immerse themselves in the sensation and discover the meaning of their fate in a moment’”. We can try to use two unrelated media to express women in a different way, and perhaps we will make unexpected discoveries and gains.

In the 20th century, women-themed watercolor creation became an important field of art, reflecting not only society’s understanding and attitudes towards women, but also women artists’ pursuit of self-expression and artistic exploration. Through in-depth research on women-themed watercolors, we can gain a deep understanding of women’s status and role in various social, cultural, historical, and other levels. This research can also further promote the artistic exploration of women-themed watercolor creation, making it an important component of social and historical context in the 20th century.

Women-themed watercolor creation reflects women’s self-expression and self-awareness in the field of art. Through research in this field, we can see the gradual awakening of women’s consciousness, understanding and respecting women’s roles and status in various aspects of society, culture, and the arts. In the field of art, diversified development is an inevitable trend. Through research on women-themed watercolor creation, we can see the diversified development of the arts, promoting innovation and progress in the field of art. Through research on women-themed watercolor creation, we can enhance our understanding and respect for women from different cultural backgrounds, promoting cultural exchange.

For art educators, research on women-themed watercolor creation can help them guide students pay attention to and appreciate diverse artistic works in their teaching, cultivating their aesthetic sensitivity and humanistic accomplishment. For the art market, research on women-themed watercolor creation can help increase the recognition and influence of female artists, promoting diversified development in the art market.

Research on women-themed watercolor creation has high academic value, which not only helps us understand history, understand culture, and promote artistic diversified development, but also helps enhance cultural exchange and understanding, increase the recognition and influence of female artists, and promote the healthy development of the art market.

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