

A Study of Painting Language and Symbols in Painting Therapy

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Abstract. This study explores the role of painting language and symbols in art therapy, emphasizing their capacity to address emotional trauma and self-identity challenges in the context of modern societal pressures. Drawing on Carl Jung's archetypal theory, it investigates how symbolic elements in art creation—such as simplified human forms, spirals, and labyrinths—act as bridges between the collective unconscious and individual consciousness. Through case studies, the research demonstrates that symbols facilitate non-verbal emotional expression, self-integration, and psychological healing by resonating with personal and universal archetypes. The findings highlight the therapeutic potential of painting as a medium for navigating inner conflicts, social alienation, and existential anxieties in an information-saturated world.

Keywords: Painting Therapy, Symbolic Expression, Archetypal Theory, Collective Unconscious, Emotional Healing.

1. Introduction

According to the observation for the people around us, with the rapid explosion of information flooding people's lives and the diversification of their lifestyles, people are not only concerned about their own survival, but also the pursuit of the spiritual world and self-knowledge is becoming more and more expansive. Meanwhile, in the process of exploring the self inwardly, it is inevitable that one will notice one's emotional trauma and the lack of self-identity, etc., but a single medication cannot fully satisfy people's psychological needs. Through in-depth understanding of people's needs, I try to use paintings as a language to produce a series of symbols by researching the groups around me to gain an in-depth understanding of people's true inner needs. Further I use these symbols to establish a private and safe communication context, which will gradually guide people to express their true inner emotions as well as their feelings towards the society.

Painting therapy is a method of promoting mental health through visual art creation. The symbols as the core element of painting language and also the carrier of emotional expression, play an important role in psychological projection and expression in the process of creation. I will extract my personal painting symbols as an entry point, combine them with archetypal theory, and explore the role of painting symbols in promoting individual emotional expression and self-integration in the process of painting therapy.

2. Background and Significance of the Study

In *The Expulsion of the Other* (Polity Press 2018), Han Byung-chul argues: “Nowadays, we place ourselves in a comfort zone where digital media make it easier and easier for us to access information, which cuts off the sense of strangeness, lacks mystery, and homogenizes everything.” The fact that the overabundance of communication does not make us feel any less alone, and that people look at everything but nothing that is truly theirs, has given rise to a new type of alienation, which deepens due to the absence of negativity.

In the context of today's social environment, people's relationships have been replaced by fast information connections, from proximity to distance-free, and the psychological need for a sense of belonging and identity drives people to unconsciously assimilate in a subtle way. I have observed that people around me are quickening their perception of time, and it is difficult for them to clearly identify



themselves, and the environment around them is filled with impatience. Modern human beings have been subjected to the discipline of the acquired society and the influence of the framework created by human beings, and gradually formed the "ego". Under the obstacle of the ego, most of the people are unable to connect with their inner true selves, and constantly pursue their own social value, thus ignoring the real needs of the heart, in which case people will have a sense of lack of existence, excessive pressure, anxiety and other emotions, and they are filled up with impatience in the atmosphere of the surrounding environment. In such an environment, people are constantly impatient. And through the painting as a therapy practice with the help of non-verbal language, which will give people a feeling of "a world apart". And through painting therapy with the help of non-verbal medium can effectively establish a safe and relaxing communication context, which is an effective way of communication.

3. The origin and role of painting therapy

In early human history, people expressed their emotions and beliefs through artistic forms such as cave paintings and totems. Art was considered closely related to psychological and spiritual activities. In the 20th century, with the development of psychology, painting therapy was formally introduced into psychological treatment, becoming an important branch of art therapy. The theoretical foundation of painting therapy primarily stems from psychology, particularly Carl Jung's archetype theory.

Jung believed that artistic creation could access the collective unconscious and express deep-seated emotions through symbols and imagery. His archetype theory suggests that humans share a common structure of consciousness that exists deep within the psyche. These archetypes reside in the collective unconscious and manifest through dreams, myths, and artistic expressions. In the process of artistic creation, an artwork is not merely a replication of the external world but rather a product of the interplay between the artist's inner world and external influences. This creative process involves the absorption and integration of the artist's emotions with the archetypes embedded in the collective unconscious. The symbolic elements within the artwork resonate with the viewer, gradually revealing the therapeutic effect of art.

When a viewer appreciates a painting, the symbolic elements within the artwork may evoke personal emotions and imagination. The artist's creation can be seen as a form of language—a bridge between the audience and the collective unconscious transmitting unconscious content to the viewer. Painting therapy, as a method of promoting psychological well-being through artistic creation, integrates psychology with artistic expression to foster mental health. Through art, individuals can release repressed emotions and enhance self-awareness. The language of painting, composed of lines, colors, and composition, serves as a tool for artists to express their inner emotions and thoughts. The development of an individual's artistic language is also a process of exploring inner emotions and perceptions. By using one's perception of the world as a medium, this artistic language becomes something that can be shared with others.

4. Definition and function of symbol

Symbols are visual elements with symbolic meanings, representing emotions, thoughts, and cultural connotations. They serve as carriers of meaning and also have the function of conveying information. Symbols represent universal meanings within the collective unconscious and can directly touch human emotions, evoking an inner resonance in the viewer. In artistic creation, symbols are not only expressions of the artist's personal emotions but can also serve as carriers of collective memory. For example, early cave paintings are among the first forms of symbolic expression by humans, reflecting their reverence and worship of nature. In the Lascaux cave in France, more than a hundred animal images are depicted. These images vividly express the early humans' awe of nature. In my personal work, symbols serve as a medium for emotional expression, through which humans can convey their reverence for nature.

During my art portfolio, the inspiration for creating the symbols comes from ancient Chinese characters and some cave symbols. As shown in figure 1, is a primitive human form or pictogram, resembling the form of a child's drawing, symbolizing the initial sense of self. This simplified human form may suggest the "undifferentiated self", the stage where the individual consciousness is not yet fully formed and is still under the influence of the collective unconscious. In figure 2, the spiral is a universal symbol in symbols, suggesting the process of psychological growth and evolution. The spiral is an ancient archetypal symbol associated with the universe, cycles, growth and feminine energy, and is surrounded by the symbol of "8", which also symbolizes infinity and cycles and eternity in Chinese culture. An abstract form in figure 3, which resembles a neural network, river, fingerprint, or labyrinth, representing the complex interweaving of mental flows, memories, and subconsciousness. This represents the complexity of mental states, or the transition from the collective unconscious to individual consciousness. The labyrinth also suggests the process of self-discovery, the search for self-identity and meaning. In figure 4, the eyes are usually associated with gaze, insight, and conscious awakening. The gaze comes from the Other, there is usually a relationship of power between the Other and the gazed party, the interaction of watching and being watched, of looking in and looking out. In the drawing process guided by symbols, the interviewee explores deeply the personal qualities within the self through secondary creation of symbols and projects them on the picture. Such an approach reveals the inner world of the interviewee and deepens the understanding of the subconscious self.



Figure 1 Primordial Anthropomorph - Undifferentiated Self Archetype

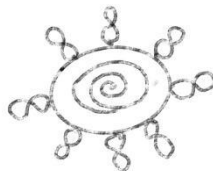


Figure 2 Spiral Cosmogram - Psychological Evolution Matrix

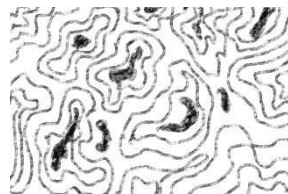


Figure 3 Neural Labyrinth - Consciousness Transition Map



Figure 4 Ocular Dialectic - Gaze Power Dynamics

(Image source: Self-drawn by the author)

Individuals are often forced to work as hard as they can due to the pressure of survival, and are often unable to consider their own emotions and emotional needs, but in a moment of relaxation we may be able to stop and take a good look at our own hearts. As shown below, in the case of the interviewee's work, I gave the interviewee verbal symbols to create and informed her of the meaning of the symbols. The interviewee paints according to the guidance of her subconscious mind, and the images show a deep expression of her unconscious anxieties in the contemporary collective as well as her sense of inner turmoil and personal struggle to grow in consciousness. In these works, many elements appear fluid, distorted and intertwined, as if reality and illusion are intertwined. For example, the use of the eye symbol in figure 5 also represents the social pressure of being stared at and watched, echoing the anxiety in the collective unconscious of contemporary society. As in figure 6 the lack of security is often related to the sense of chaos and conflict in the external environment. In this work, the intertwining of lines and the surging of fluids seem to express uneasiness and instability. For example, in figure 7, the human figure in the centre seems to be surrounded by the black and white fluid outside, and this visual effect is similar to a "vortex", which symbolises the individual's loss and anxiety in the huge flow of social information. As in figure 8, the repetitive and twisted image of "8" represents the repeated cycle of energy, which is difficult to break free from, and the messy lines and knots surrounding it symbolise the creator's inner conflict and anxiety. Her creations combine symbolic figures, flowing backgrounds, interlocking lines, and strong symbolic elements such as the eye, allowing one to intuitively feel the psychological state of contemporary people when they are faced with the deluge of information, social pressure, and self-growth.



Figure 5 Ocular Gaze Pressure Symbol



Figure 6 Fluid Chaos of Insecurity



Figure 7 Vortex of Information Anxiety

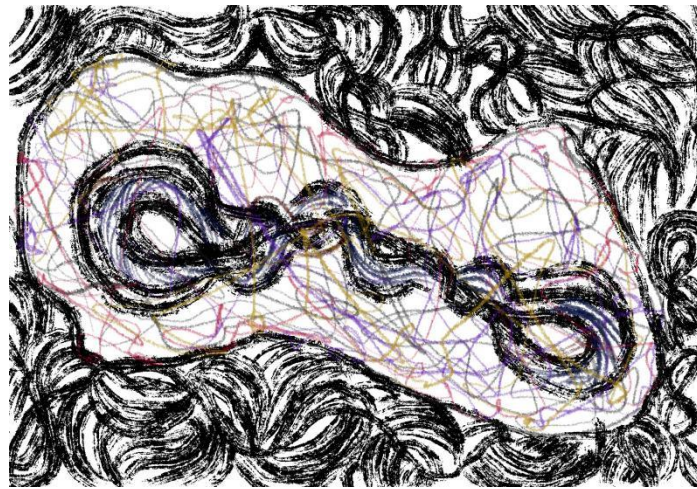


Figure 8 Infinite Knot of Cyclic Conflict

(Image source: From the interviewee)

5. Conclusion

On an individual level, using symbols as a medium of communication, this approach provides a non-verbal space for emotional expression, allowing interviewees to express themselves with the help of images when faced with unspeakable emotions. In this creative process, it not only relieves the inner pressure, but also promotes the enhancement of self-knowledge. In the process of painting, the symbols chosen by the interviewees often resonate with the inner world of the self, which may be a projection of personal experience or a manifestation of the collective unconscious. Overall, symbols play a crucial role in the healing process of painting, not only as a tool for artistic expression, but also as a bridge to the individual subconscious and the collective unconscious, and painting is the visual representation of this process. In the practice of painting therapy, symbols, as carriers of meaning, carry the emotions, memories and spiritual experiences of individuals, and can help creators and viewers to explore their inner world, heal their deep wounds and promote the growth of personal consciousness.

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