

# A Study of the Development of Expressionism Aesthetics

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## Abstract

As a branch of philosophy, aesthetics has been asking the question "what is the essence of art" since its birth. Especially since the movement of Impressionism Art, all different kinds of new artistic thoughts and schools have constantly challenged people's understanding of aesthetics and the essence of art. Among them, Expressionism, as the first artistic trend of thought in the West in the 20th century, has a very important position.

## Keywords

expressionism, aesthetics, development.

## 1. Social Background and Theoretic Origins

At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, with the economic development brought about by the industrial revolution and the growing of the new bourgeoisie in Europe, great changes have taken place in human society. The emergence of monopoly economy has replaced the economic form dominated by free competition in modern history. The capitalists exploit the laborers by prolonging the working time and increasing the labor intensity. Europe is at the edge of the first World War, while at the other side of the ocean, a new country called America is gradually rising. People are suffering from anxiety, anxiety and despair brought about by various social changes. It is an era in which Nietzsche declared that "God is dead", in which the human soul and the machine fight against each other to death, and in which there is a strong power to rush out of the fence of spirit, to get rid of the shackles and yearn for freedom. In this historic era, there are not only the Salon des Independants in 1901, which was later regarded as the curtain of expressionism, but also the Berlin Sezession which firstly wrote the word "Expressionism" in the preface of the catalogue of its 22nd exhibition. Meanwhile, it also appeared in the book of About the Expressionist by Paul Ferdinand Schmidt, and a monograph on expressionism written by Paul Fechter. Furthermore, there were associations such as Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter.

## 2. Main Representatives

### 2.1. Benedetto Croce

The main representative figures of expressionism aesthetics are Benedetto Croce, Robin George Collingwood, Bernard Bosanquet, Edgar Carrit, Louis Arnaud Reid and so on. Expressionist aesthetic theory is mainly constructed from Croce's intuitive aesthetic theories. At the early stage of expressionist aesthetics, it focused on the exploration of spiritual activities, and believed that art is the artist's own pure spiritual activities, so that intuition is the essence of art, and intuition is the expression. Therefore, intuition is regarded as an opposite concept to imitation and reproduction. Intuition aesthetics believes that art activities are spiritual activities unrelated to all physical realities, utilitarian activities, moral activities and conceptual knowledge. Intuition is expressed through aesthetics, and art is produced in the process of expression, so intuition is the essence of art.

## 2.2. Robin George Collingwood

As a follower and successor of Croce, Collingwood further developed his theories on the basis of intuitive aesthetics. He has developed two more personal views: first, art is only real existed in the artist's imagination, so there is a difference between art and real forms of things. Because these forms of expressionism are just ways to make the viewers to feel art created by the artists, which is the tool of imagination. Therefore, he believes that art is a pure imaginative existence, and all artistic creation activities are the process of self recognition. Collingwood's other point of view is that he believes that the artist's emotion plays an important role in their creation. The artist should first realize that he is influenced by some emotion, and then express it through artistic creation. Therefore, he believes that art or art itself is not necessarily the tangible existence of art which is generally recognized in the real life. Collingwood insists on the uniqueness of art. He strictly distinguishes art creation and art skills, and believes that the purpose of art is not to exchange, but a process of artists' self emotional expression. Furthermore, under the influence of Croce and Collingwood, the successors of the expressionism aesthetics, such as Bosanquet, Carrit and Reid, carried forward the expressionism aesthetics with intuitive aesthetics as the core. They further studied the essence of art, criticized and revised some viewpoints in the framework of Croce- Collingwood theory system, and greatly enriched the theory of expressionism aesthetics.

## 3. Development History

The spread and development of expressionism can be roughly divided into four periods as follows:

### 3.1. The Initial Period of Expressionism Aesthetics

This period is mainly represented by the theory of intuition aesthetics by Croce. Croce defined and expounded expressionism aesthetics from the perspective of philosophy in his Principles of Aesthetic. In this period, expressionism aesthetics is different from Hegel's concept of absolute spirit. Croce took his own intuition as an important part of his spiritual value system, which provided a profound theoretical basis for the development of expressionism aesthetics. At the same time, Croce theoretically determines the concept nature of expressionism by using the theoretical basis of philosophy and from the perspective of the history of western aesthetics as the main time clue.

### 3.2. The System Construction Period of Expressionism Aesthetics

This period is mainly represented by "Croce-Collingwood". This period is mainly based on Croce's intuitive aesthetics, which is further developed by his follower Collingwood. Collingwood perfected Croce's expressionism aesthetics, and established a more complete framework of expressionism aesthetic. Collingwood paid more attention to the exploration of spiritual and spiritual activities. He believed that art is the emotional expression of the artists, and made a detailed demonstration in his representative work of The Principles of Art, and also made a strict distinction between art and non art. Since then, the expressionism aesthetic system with Croce and Collingwood as the main representatives has been established. And considered of the important contributions of the two representatives and the consistency of the main theories, expressionism aesthetics were called as "Croce-Collingwood" doctrine by later generations. However, they have different theoretical emphases. For example, Croce connected the two parts of "intuition and art" and "art and philosophy" together, while Collingwood supplements and corrects the fuzzy points in Croce's theory, and established another unique theory of expression and aesthetics.

### 3.3. The Self Correcting Period of Expressionism Aesthetics

This period is mainly represented by the theory of Bosanquet, Carrit and Reid. Collingwood died five years after his Expressionist aesthetic works were published. In this period, Reid became the main successor and disseminator of expressionism aesthetics, whose theory is still active in the western literary and art circles nowadays. If judged by individual contributions to the expressionism aesthetics, Bosanquet, Carrit and Reid mainly carried out critical correction and improvement process. Among them, Bosanquet corrected some of Croce's points, and put into his own understandings of the expressionism aesthetics at the same time.

### 3.4. The Spreading and Developing Stage of Expressionism Aesthetics

In this period, with the establishment of modern communication system and the all-round development of expressionism art in various fields, the development of expressionism aesthetics has been spread world widely. The works of expressionism aesthetics in different periods have been translated into many languages, which were widely spread in the West and even the whole world. Meanwhile, with the vigorous development of expressionism art, people paid more and more attention to expressionism aesthetics, which makes expressionism become the first and far-reaching aesthetic school in the modern aesthetic trend of thought.

## 4. Art Philosophy of Expressionism

Generally speaking, Expressionism has two different aspects: one is of the existence in the sense of aesthetics, that is, the expressionism aesthetics theories in the western modern aesthetics system; the other is the different presentations of art schools of expressionism, that is, the collection of all art creations and activities including literature, music and plastic arts. It can be surely said that the core idea of "art is expression" has had an important and far-reaching impact on the whole western and even the worldwide art circle in the 20th century through the development of expressionist aesthetic theory. Although expressionism aesthetics and expressionism art has been developing in their own different fields, which they do not correspond to each other completely, but they share the same spiritual essence and commonality. The expressionism art, which shared almost the same period with the theory of expressionism aesthetics, was firstly showed up from the expressionism painting in Germany, and then quickly swept the whole west, and even extended to the whole world, and covered almost all kinds of art forms. No matter what forms or stages of the expressionism art develops, it shares the same essence with the expressionism aesthetics, which develops its theoretical system from the perspective of opposing rationality and traditional art imitation theory. The expressionism art takes the opposite side of tradition, and these works of art are generally considered as abstract, absurd and fanatical, which fully reflect the artists' dissatisfaction with the social situation, their strong desire of the reform and breakthrough. While in the art creation, the expressionist art criticizes the realism and naturalism of the early period. They are against the description of the objective things and the imitation of the objective world. They emphasize that the artistic creation should directly express the artist's subjective consciousness and their inner spiritual world. Art should be the way for the artists to express their emotions.

## 5. Conclusion

Through a comprehensive study of the development of expressionism aesthetics and art, we can conclude that the expressionism has fundamentally turned the aesthetics into the spiritual of modernity. Although the expressionism still has some defects and arguments in aesthetic theories, it still plays an irreplaceable and important role, with its unique and revolutionary aesthetic and art attitude, in the western modern world of ideological trend. Some art

philosophical bates on the modern and contemporary art, which were originated from the Expressionism, are still quite important and indispensable issues nowadays.

## References

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