

Reconstructing the Narrative of Light-Shadow: A Study on the Interactivity between Composition and Light-Shadow Logic in Modern Watercolor Painting

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Abstract: This article takes modern watercolor painting creation as the research object, deeply exploring the reconstruction of the narrative of light-shadow in the picture by the interaction between composition and the logic of light-shadow. By analyzing the classic works of modern watercolor artists from the West and the East, and combining theories such as phenomenology and visual psychology, it is revealed that the subordinate relationship between composition and light-shadow in traditional watercolor has evolved into a dynamic relationship of mutual influence and joint construction of narrative in the modern context. Research has found that through means such as asymmetric composition, blank space strategy, and color layering, artists have transformed light-shadow from simple object representation elements into independent narrative languages, expanding the expressive boundaries of watercolor art. This article aims to provide a new perspective for the theoretical research of modern watercolor creation and offer references and inspirations for artists in the construction of light-shadow narratives.

Keywords: Modern Watercolor Painting, Composition, Light-Shadow, Interactivity, Visual Language

1. Introduction

Watercolor paintings occupy a unique position in the history of art with their transparent and dynamic characteristics^[1]. In traditional watercolor creation, composition usually serves as a framework to reproduce light-shadow, guiding the viewer's line of sight through rules such as perspective and proportion^[2]. Light-shadow is used to shape the volume and spatial sense of the object. The two present a clear primary and secondary relationship^[3]. For instance, in the 19th century, the British watercolor school depicted natural landscapes with rigorous composition and layout, combined with delicate transitions of light-shadow^[4]. The light-shadow was attached to the structure of the picture, achieving a realistic reproduction of the real scene.

However, in modern society, with the innovation of artistic concepts and the development of creative techniques, the creative logic of watercolor painting has undergone profound changes^{[5]-[7]}. Artists are no longer satisfied with the traditional function of light-shadow reproduction^{[8]-[10]}. Instead, they explore the more complex interaction between composition and the logic of light-shadow, attempting to reconstruct the narrative of light-shadow in the picture through the synergy of the two^{[11],[12]}. This transformation not only embodies the innovation of art forms but also reflects the artists' in-depth exploration of the potential of visual language expression^{[13][14]}. Against this background, studying the interactivity between composition and the logic of light-shadow in modern watercolor paintings is of great significance for understanding the development trend and creative laws of contemporary watercolor art.

2. The relationship mode between composition and light-shadow in traditional watercolor paintings

2.1 The composition method defines the framework of light-shadow

In traditional watercolor creation, composition, as the fundamental framework of the picture, sets a clear framework for the presentation of light-shadow. Classic composition rules, such as the golden section, the rule of thirds, and symmetrical composition, determine the distribution area and intensity variation of light-shadow. As shown in Fig.1, in landscape painting creation, painters often adopt a triangular composition, placing the light source at the top or side of the picture. They use the contrast of

light-shadow to enhance the stability and depth of the picture, allowing the viewer's line of sight to feel the layers of light-shadow along the direction guided by the composition. In this mode, the role of light-shadow is mainly to cooperate with the composition, shape the form and spatial order of objects, to achieve the purpose of realistic reproduction.

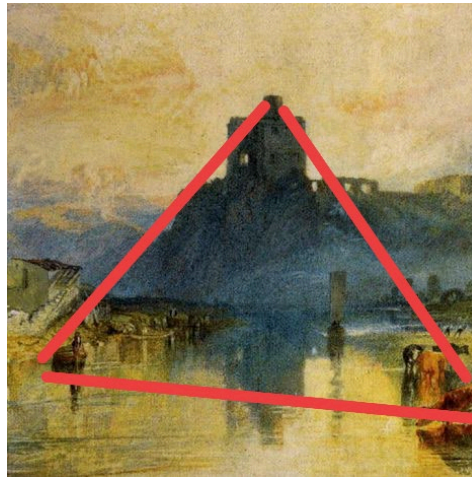


Figure 1: Norham Castle, On the River Tweed.

2.2 The supplementary and reinforcing effect of light-shadow on composition

The light-shadow in traditional watercolor paintings is not completely passive. They supplement and strengthen the established composition framework through means such as light and shade contrast and color tone variation. As shown in Fig.2, by enhancing the contrast of light-shadow in the main part of the picture, the viewer's attention can be attracted, and the key points of the composition can be highlighted. Fill the secondary areas in the composition with soft light-shadow transitions to make the overall picture more harmonious and unified. In the works of British watercolor painter Joseph Marrod William Turner, large areas of light-shadow are often used to enhance the dynamic composition of the picture. Light-shadow has become important tools to set off the atmosphere of the picture and enhance the visual impact, but essentially, they still serve the overall picture structure constructed by the composition.

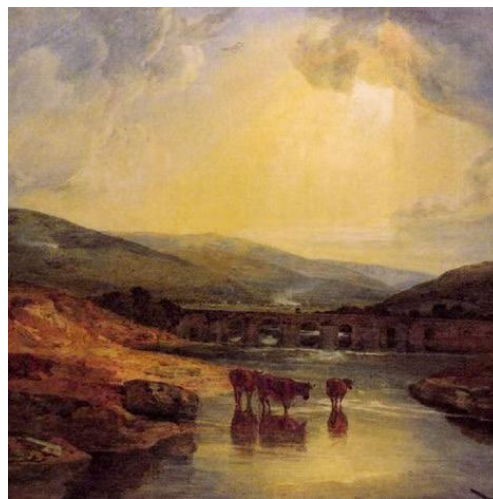


Figure 2: Abergavenny Bridge, Monmouthshire -clearing up after a showery day.

3. The form of expression of the logical interactivity between composition and light-shadow in modern watercolor paintings

3.1 Asymmetric composition breaks the conventional distribution of light-shadow

Modern watercolor artists break through the traditional symmetrical and balanced composition mode, adopt asymmetrical composition techniques, break the conventional distribution of light-shadow, and

create a unique visual tension. As shown in Fig.3, in the layout of his works, Spanish watercolor painter Alvaro Castanet often places the main subject of the picture at the corner, using large areas of blank space and the distribution of inclined light-shadow to create an unbalanced visual effect. The combination of this asymmetrical composition and unconventional light-shadow distribution creates a strong sense of movement and drama in the picture, forcing viewers to reinterpret the relationship between light-shadow and objects. Light-shadow is no longer tools for objective representation, but active elements involved in the construction of the narrative.



Figure 3: Self Portrait.

3.2 The blank space strategy reshapes the narrative space of light-shadow

In modern watercolor painting, blank space is no longer merely a blank area in composition but has been endowed with the function of reshaping the narrative space of light-shadow. Through ingenious blank space design, the artist guides the flow and extension of light-shadow in the picture, creating an artistic conception where the real and illusory interplay, as shown in Fig.4. In his figure paintings, Chen Jian, a modern Chinese watercolor painter, often uses large areas of blank space to represent the surrounding environment of the figures. By blurring the edges of light-shadow, the blank areas seem to be enveloped by light, endowing them with an intangible sense of volume and space. This interaction between blank space and light-shadow expands the narrative dimension of the picture, enabling viewers to fill in the story of light-shadow in the blank space through imagination, and enhancing the openness and interactivity of the work.



Figure 4: Portrayal of the lives of residents in Kashgar.

3.3 The layering of colors constructs the narrative layers of light-shadow

In modern watercolor paintings, artists take advantage of the transparent nature of watercolor materials and construct complex narrative layers of light-shadow through the layering and superimposition of colors. Unlike traditional watercolor which focuses on completing the expression of light-shadow in one go, modern creation places more emphasis on the superimposition and integration of multiple layers of colors. As shown in Fig.5, British watercolor painter David Taylor, in his still life paintings, repeatedly superimposes transparent color layers to create the changes in light-shadow on the surface of objects. Different levels of color not only represent the differences in the intensity of light-shadow but also convey the texture and spatial distance of objects through the contrast of warm and cool colors and the variation in purity. This interaction of color layering and light-shadow logic enables the

picture to present rich visual layers and narrative depth.



Figure 5: The old boat Pin Mill England.

4. The reconstructive effect of composition and the logical interactivity of light-shadow on the narrative of light-shadow

4.1 The transformation from the reproduction of physical images to the expression of emotions

In modern watercolor paintings, the interactivity between composition and logic of light-shadow prompts the narrative of light-shadow to shift from the simple reproduction of objects to the expression of emotions. In traditional watercolor paintings, light-shadow serves the true presentation of objects. In modern creation, artists incorporate their personal emotions and thoughts through subjective handling of composition and light-shadow. As shown in Fig.6, in his abstract watercolor works, Norwegian watercolor painter Edvard Munch employs distorted compositions and exaggerated contrasts of light-shadow to express his inner worries and fears. Light-shadow are no longer merely depictions of reality but have become carriers of emotions, creating a narrative context with a strong personal touch.



Figure 6: The Scream.

4.2 The construction of multi-dimensional narrative space

The interaction between composition and the logic of light-shadow breaks the single narrative dimension of traditional watercolor painting and constructs a multi-dimensional narrative space. Asymmetric composition guides the viewer's gaze to leap within the picture. The combination of blank space and light-shadow creates an imaginative space, while the layering of colors enriches the visual layers. These elements interweave with each other, making the picture no longer confined to the display of two-dimensional planar objects, but forming a three-dimensional narrative space that encompasses

reality and virtuality, vision and imagination. As shown in Fig.7, the urban landscape painting “A sunny corner, Barcelona” by the American watercolor painter Joseph Zbukovic presents the appearance of the city in different temporal and spatial dimensions through complex composition and layout, flowing light-shadow effects, and multi-level color superimposition. Viewers can interpret multiple narrative threads interwoven with the past, present and future from the picture.



Figure 7: A sunny corner, Barcelona.

4.3 The increase in the audience's participation

The interactivity of composition and the logic of light-shadow in modern watercolor paintings enhance the viewer's participation. By breaking the conventional composition and light-shadow patterns, the artist leaves more room for interpretation for the viewers. For instance, the imagination of light-shadow in the blank areas and the visual suspense brought by asymmetrical composition all prompt viewers to actively think about the narrative content behind the picture. This participatory viewing experience enables viewers to no longer be passive recipients but co-constructors of the narrative of light-shadow, further enriching the meaning and connotation of the work.

5. Case Analysis: Taking the works of Alvaro Castanet and Chen Jian as examples

5.1 The interactivity in Alvaro Castanet's works

Alvaro Castanet's watercolor landscape works are renowned for their strong visual impact. In Fig.8, through the interaction of dynamic composition and dramatic light-shadow, the sanctity of the building is integrated with the mystery of the Night: The picture intensifies the vertical tension between the church dome and the minaret with tilted brushstrokes, while the moist watercolor blurring makes the lights leap like flames in the dark blue tone. The reflection and the solid blur at the boundary of reality and illusion, creating a visual “gravitational field”. The contrast between warm and cool light (warm yellow light and cold purple shadow) not only divides the spatial hierarchy but also transforms the geometric order of Islamic architecture into an emotional rhythm through the fluidity of light-shadow, ultimately achieving a poetic reconstruction of the religious field in an “asymmetric balance”.



Figure 8: Hagia Sophia Mosque at night-Istanbul.

5.2 The interactivity in Chen Jian's works

Chen Jian's watercolor figure works demonstrate the integration of Eastern aesthetics and modern creative concepts. As shown in Fig.9, Chen Jian's watercolor work "The Quiet Coast" creates an ethereal and eternal poetic atmosphere through minimalist composition and subtle interaction of light-shadow: the picture is dominated by horizontal lines, compressing the sky, the coast and the sea surface into several soothing color layers, forming an almost abstract geometric balance. In terms of the logic of light-shadow, he employs thin watercolor layering and blank space techniques, allowing the soft light at dawn and dusk to naturally penetrate the paper surface, transforming the ripples of the waves and the texture of the reefs into the breathing traces of light. The "emptiness" in the composition and the "transparency" in the light-shadow reinforce each other - the stability of the horizontal division is broken by the gradual change of light color, and the seemingly casual brushstrokes restore order in the transition of light-shadow. Eventually, in the Eastern aesthetic of "less is more", the silence of the coast becomes a metaphor for the flow of time.

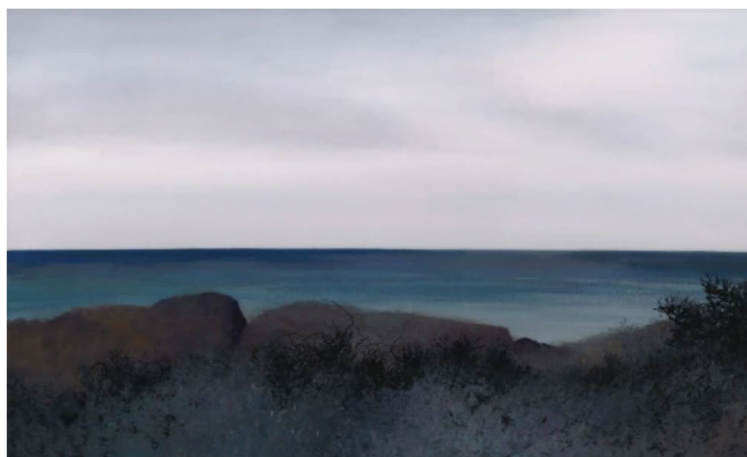


Figure 9: The quiet coast.

6. Conclusion

This study, through the exploration of the logical interactivity between composition and light-shadow in modern watercolor paintings, reveals the reconstructing effect of this phenomenon on the narrative of light-shadow. In the context of modern art, composition and light-shadow are no longer in a simple master-subordinate relationship. Instead, they achieve deep interaction through means such as asymmetric composition, blank space strategies, and color layering, jointly constructing a rich and diverse narrative of light-shadow. This interactivity prompts watercolor painting to move from the traditional representation of objects to emotional expression and multi-dimensional narrative, enhancing the viewer's participation and greatly expanding the expressive boundaries of watercolor art. In the future, with the continuous development of artistic concepts and creative techniques, the interactivity between composition and the logic of light-shadow will demonstrate more possibilities in modern watercolor painting creation, providing a sustained impetus for the innovative development of watercolor art. Meanwhile, this study also provides theoretical references and practical inspirations for subsequent research in related fields.

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