

An Analysis of the Significant Form in Modern Design

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Abstract

The concept of “significant form”, suggested by Clive Bell, has a great impact on modern western art and design. China has a long history and splendid culture, and also lots of wonderful thoughts in the aesthetics. This paper analyzes the concept of “significant form”, suggested by Bell, by combining with Chinese traditional aesthetic thought, expecting to find some laws to guide our design practice. Meanwhile, that is a thought for the inheritance and development of Chinese traditional cultures.

Keywords: Significant form, Aesthetics, Chinese traditional aesthetical thought, Design, The unity of the heaven and humanity, Neutralization beauty

“Significant form” is a concept concerning “the beauty of form”, suggested by an English aesthetician Clive Bell. This concept has generated a great impact on the world, which is helpful for our understanding to “post-impressionism” art and design art. In *Art*, Bell said: “In different works, lines and colors make up certain form or certain relation of forms in certain way, arousing our aesthetic emotions. These lines, colors, and forms, and these aesthetic moving forms are the so-called significant form. ‘Significant form’ is the common nature of all visual art.” (Clive Bell, translated by Jinhuan Zhou & Zhongyuan Ma, 1984) From Bell’s point of view, we realize the importance of lines and colors of these “beauty of form” in visual art. But he denied representation. To emphasize on the pure form made him lost in the cycle theory and idealism. In this regard, as we criticize and learn lessons from the concept, we have to look for more scientific theories.

In *The Path of Beauty*, as Zehou Li demonstrated the evolution of decorative patterns, he said: “Some geometric patterns in Yangyao and Majiayao have already proved that they have gradually become abstract and symbolic from realistic drawing of animals. From reproduction (simulation) to expression (abstract), from realism to symbolism, it is an accumulation process from contents to forms, and also the original forming process of beauty as the “significant form” (Zehou Li, 1984). “In other words, the abstract geometric patterns what seem to be only ‘beautiful’ and ‘decorative’ but no meanings and contents in modern people’s eyes have had very important contents and meanings at the old times.” The geometric patterns that seem are pure forms are not only balanced symmetric forms which can generate a sense of happiness for the primitive, but holding complex ideas and imaginative meanings.” According to the idea of Mr. Li, forms are from “the natural bodies with accumulated social contents”. In China, what are the “accumulated social contents”? In my opinion, the “form” can be divided into two parts, namely the “lines, colors” and “combination, relation”. Here, I name them as “elements” and “relations”.

“Elements” are lines and colors. They have forms. The forms what derived from “natural bodies with accumulated social contents” (words from Zehou Li) are also “elements”. *The Path of Beauty* displays the evolution process of all patterns and decorations in artifacts and architectures designed by the ancients clearly, reflecting peoples’ life, ideas, beliefs, and other contents and information. The evolution process is the accumulation process of elements. These patterns and decorations are “elements” in fact.

“Relations” are combinations and relations. They are certain laws or ideas of organizing elements. They are invisible and intangible. In the course of plane composition in college, the teacher shows us many excellent works of European, American, and Japanese students. Today, I still remember that we can easily identify which work is drawn by a European student, which one by an American student, and which one by a Japanese student, though their works consist of basic black or white “basic shapes” and “forms”. All the time, we believe that it is because of the difference of style. Now I think that it should be the difference of “relations” formed by national cultures. In China’s five thousand years of history, ideas and thoughts are very abundant, which also contain profound aesthetic ideas.

“The unity of the heaven and humanity” is an ancient Chinese philosophy, as the core of Taoist philosophy. In the Taoist view, the heaven is the nature, and the human is a part of the nature. Lao Zi said: “Man follows the law of the earth, the earth follows the law of the heaven, the heaven follows the law of Taoism, and the Taoism follows the law of the nature. (Lao Zi, translated by Zhongping Chen, 2006)” Zhuang Zi said: “The birth of man is determined by the heaven, and the birth of the heaven is also determined by the heaven.” “Coming into being with the heaven and earth, I am in one with nature.” It means man belongs to the nature, involve in the nature, follow the law of the nature, and in harmonious unity with the nature. “The one who is in a harmonious relation with the heaven is happy.” “The one who is plain and modest can not be confronted by the world. (Zhuang Zi. The Heaven)” “The unity of the Heaven and humanity” is the essential principle of Confucian aesthetics. Meng Zi agrees that the nature of the heaven and man has internal communality and unity. “People who are kind can know the nature of man; people who know the nature of man know the heaven. (The Mencius)” Xun Zi regards the “heaven” as the inevitable natural rules. He thinks that “the heaven has seasons, the land has properties, and man has the ability of governing the nature and society.” “We should control the heaven and use it rather than following and admiring it. (Xun Zi)” In his opinion, man should recognize and use the nature, making it more suitable for human existence and needs. Both the Taoism and the Confucian think that man and the heaven are not in conflict, and they are one unity, mutually connected and living together. The idea of “the unity of the heaven and humanity” runs through thousands of years Chinese culture, which also deeply impacts Chinese traditional aesthetics. This “harmonious unity” between the heaven and humanity is also a kind of “significant form”.

“The beauty of self-restraint and control” is an early aesthetic category in ancient China. “Self-restraint is to hide happiness, anger, sadness, and pleasure and does not express the inner emotions. Self-control is to show emotions but with limits. Self-restraint is the base of social stability. Self-control is the rule of living.” “Being self-restraint and control makes everything right in the position and grow. (The Four Books and Five Classics: Moderation)” This aesthetic category also includes strong political and ethical ideas. If we regard “kindness” and “politeness” as the moral rules of Confucian, “self-restraint and control” should be the epistemology and methodology of the idea. It embodies Chinese consideration and recognition to the society and nature. “Preciseness” and “too-much equalizes with insufficient” illustrate this point. In perspective of aesthetics, “Complaining but no anger”, “sadness but not hurt”, and “pleasure but no sex” are sensitive activities, which serve as basic rules for self-restraint and control in aesthetics. The Confucian admire these rules and make them fully developed. “The beauty of self-restraint and control”, as the aesthetic spirit admired by the Confucian which has controlled the thought of Chinese for thousands of years, is the form with strong oriental colors.

In fact, by further analysis we find that “the rules for beauty of form” has been identified in Chinese traditional culture. The Confucian focuses on “the golden mean”. “The golden mean” is to insist on the mid, adhere to the principles, no partiality, no over much, and no seldom. In dealing with contradictions, we should make best use of the golden mean, pursuing for stability, harmony, and balance. “Impartiality is mean, unchangeable is ordinary. (Yi Cheng, the Northern Song Dynasty)” If we take the “symmetry” in modern aesthetic form as “medium”, then “ordinary” means “balance”. That is the form of “symmetry and balance”. In China, most buildings are symmetric. And the layout of gardens reflects the idea of “balance”. It also embodies the thought of “the unity of the heaven and humanity”. “Humanity” is symmetric, and “the nature” is balanced. Individual symmetry and whole balance are united together perfectly. As for the “repetitive” form, the decorations in vessels, window patterns in classic buildings, and arrangement of special windows in walls use the repetitive form. But the “repetitive” form is mostly for part, just like the society consisting of individuals. The nature is one “single” whole. That is another kind of unity of “humanity” and “the heaven”. “Rhythm and Rhyme” form is prominent in building clusters. Not matter what it is the Royal Palace, the Summer Palace, or Suzhou gardens or other local residential areas, there are subjects and objects, ups and downs, ordinary description and climax. Hegel said, the building is frozen music. A classic Chinese ancient building cluster, like a soothing song, can perfectly involve into the theme of nature.

As Bell proposed the concept of “significant form”, the western modernist design rose. European modernist design developed from the 20s in 20th century. Its form is concise, anti-decorative, functional, rational, and systematic. “In perspective of ideology and motives is a kind of social engineering effort of intellectuals in post-war Europe. The motive is to provide social people with affordable design, thoroughly changing the former position of design as a privilege of the nobles, and making the mass enjoy good designs” (Shouzhi Wang, 2002, p315). In order to make an industrial product be accepted by the public, the primary prerequisite is to reduce the cost. In order to reduce the cost, producers have to make choices in design. Guaranteeing the functional value of the product has the priority. The utility is only an assisting function, generating small impacts

on costs. Then, the key to reduce costs falls into the decorations. But humanity has aesthetic needs. How to reduce costs and satisfy people's basic aesthetic needs? At this point, Bell's theory of "significant form" consisting of combinations and arrangements of lines and colors is rightly satisfying this need. To advocate concise non-decorative geometric shapes is one of important characteristics of modernist design. Using concise geometric shapes can greatly reduce the complexity of production and the costs directly on one hand. On the other hand, it is easy to realize standardization. Only by standardization, can it achieve manufacturing. Large manufacturing is also an important way to reduce costs. Opposing decorations and any kinds of reproduction and agreeing that only the moving significance produced by combinations and arrangements of lines and colors is the real aesthetic emotion, which is the "resonance" of Bell and modernist design. Here we do not discuss whether it is Bell's "significant form" impacts the design of the era or the special era gives the birth of "significant form". But Bell's concept of "significant form" is revolutionary. This kind of form gives people a sense of modern, which does satisfy peoples' aesthetic needs during certain period.

After the World War II, modernist design has realized vigorous development in the United States, thereby affecting the whole world, and finally forming "international design". However, the original ideal thought of "design popularization" became pure commercial style due to its impracticality. With the economic development, people are not just content with rich functions and useful utility. In aesthetics, if we emphasize too much on forms and oppose to decorations and reproduction, people's natural attribute will be ignored seriously. People feel that they are separated from the nature more and more. The world is full of dull, cool, and indifferent geometric forms. The decline of international design movement again proves that man is a part of the nature. Human can not leave the nature. And it also proves that the form should be "natural bodies with accumulated social contents" but not pure lines and colors.

Since the sixties and seventies of last century after the modernist design, many styles that try to change the modernist and internationalist design, such as "post-modernism", deconstruction", "new modernization", "high-tech style", and "new pop style". But generally speaking, they do not get rid of impacts from modernist and internationalist design. The functionalism core and the democratic popularity nature of modernism could not be denied completely. After all, ornate decorations and expensive materials are unaffordable for ordinary people. Popular design is still one of directions for designers in the future.

In China, during the thirty years of reform and opening up, we have experienced a long process of study and reference. Today, world politics, economy, and culture are in a pluralistic era. Each country and nation is exploring the space for future development. China also needs to open up a suitable development path. Chinese designers should think about the future development of design system. In my opinion, the development of cultural stuff should follow national history and inheritance, at same time taking references from foreign countries' historical experiences and lessons. China has rich traditional aesthetic thoughts that deserve inheritance and development, though they were only for the nobles due to the noble character, which should be reformed now. Modernist design is the product from industrialized production after the western industrial revolution. Its functionalism core and democratic popularity nature are in accordance with modern productivity development and should be inherited critically. But the cold lines and abnormal aesthetic forms of modernism should be changed. In other words, under the premise of inheriting and developing Chinese traditional culture, we should make designs more popular. Or, with the premise of ensuring the popularity of design, we should change the form of modernist design.

Then, we should focus on the decoration of design. Speaking of decoration, we must discuss the form.

The form is nothing but combination and arrangement, so it does not play a key role in the issue of popularity of design. But it should be a key for digging out formal aesthetic taste. In perspective of relation, Chinese aesthetic thoughts have a unique advantage under the tendency of opposing to the "coldness" and "indifference" of modernist design, and admiring and back to the nature. In exploring the popularity of design, we should fully understand and develop the effects of Chinese traditional aesthetic thoughts on "relations", which is undoubtedly the shortcut to improve the aesthetic and decorative nature of designs.

The "elements" of form are lines and colors. "Elements" can be rich and complex, or pure and concise. So, "elements" should be the key to control costs of popularity of design. Rich and complex elements can reproduce the nature and be close to the nature more, but cost more. But excessive purity and conciseness will be the extension of modernist design. Where is the starting point for "elements" shaping? In my opinion, there is not a fixed point. From the popularity and economical point of view, it is determined by social economic development and people's consumption level. However, from the aesthetic point of view, no matter what they are rich and complex, or pure and concise, we always have wide space for creation, because we can find incomparable

resources from national culture. Different nations have different totems worship and cultural origins, and experience different processes of knowing the world. So, the “elements”, as the “natural bodies with accumulated social contents”, will inevitably have their national and regional colors. Therefore, as we discuss and study aesthetics and design, we must consider national traditions and cultures.

The Chinese nation has a long history of over five thousand years. Chinese ancestors have left a rich cultural heritage. No matter what they are elements of form or relations of form, we can find rich resources and theories from national culture. That is the driving force and source of modern design development. We should follow the footsteps of ancestors to explore the development process of Chinese nation, finding the essence of national character by following the path of language formation. Take full advantage of the valuable resources of national culture, develop the theory of design to support the practice, make it conform to economic development, and thus become the driving force for economic development. Catch up with the tide of the world, so that Chinese culture influences and promotes world development. Integrate China into the world, and the world into China.

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