

# The Manifestation of Semiotics in Oil Painting Creation

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the application of semiotics in oil painting creation, focusing on how symbols serve as tools for artists to express their thoughts and emotions and act as a bridge for the audience to understand the artwork. The article starts with the diversity of symbols and the differences in cultural backgrounds, discussing the importance of colors, images, and symbol combinations in oil paintings, and how these symbols reflect historical, cultural, and social phenomena. Semiotics provides profound connotations for artistic creation and prompts the audience to interpret the artwork from multiple dimensions. Finally, the article emphasizes the role of semiotics in art education and creative inspiration, revealing its significant importance in contemporary art creation and cultural exchange.

**Keywords:** Semiotics, Oil Painting Creation, Artistic Expression, Cultural Interpretation, Art Education.

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## 1. Basic Concepts of Semiotics

As an interdisciplinary field, semiotics extensively involves linguistics, philosophy, psychology, cultural studies, and more. Its core research focuses on symbols and their roles and meanings within culture and society. A symbol refers to a sign that represents or signifies a certain meaning, capable of conveying and transmitting information through various forms such as language, images, sounds, and actions. Semiotics not only concerns the composition of symbols but also their generation, dissemination, usage, and interpretation, exploring how symbols play a role in communication and expression in human cognition and social behavior.

### 1.1. Definition and Function of Symbols

Within the framework of semiotics, a symbol refers to anything that can represent an object, concept, or meaning. It is not merely a superficial sign but a reflection of cultural and social relationships. The meaning of symbols is not fixed; it varies with different social and cultural contexts. For example, a single color, animal, or object might carry entirely different meanings in different cultures.

The functions of symbols can be divided into several aspects: firstly, symbols are mediums for conveying information, helping to establish communication and connection between individuals or groups; secondly, symbols also play a role in expressing emotions, beliefs, and values, particularly in artistic creations and literary works, where they not only convey clear information but also touch human emotions and thoughts. Additionally, semiotics emphasizes the impact of symbols on cognitive processes—humans organize, classify, and process world information through the understanding of symbols.

### 1.2. The Multidimensionality and Diversity of Symbols

Symbols are multidimensional; they are not only carriers of language but can also be expressed through visual, auditory, tactile, and other sensory means. In daily life, linguistic symbols are the most common tools of expression. Linguistic symbols are highly abstract, capable of expressing both concrete and abstract meanings. However, besides linguistic symbols, there are image symbols, action symbols, spatial

symbols, and more, each possessing different forms of expression and interpretation methods. Image symbols convey information through concrete imagery and are crucial in fields like art, advertising, and film. Action symbols convey emotions and social norms through body language and behavior, playing an important role especially in non-verbal communication.

For instance, in artistic forms like painting and sculpture, images and colors themselves are symbols. A serene blue ocean painting might signify tranquility, contemplation, and introspection, while a work filled with flames, reds, and golds might symbolize intense conflict, passion, or destruction. These visual symbols, through changes in color, lines, and imagery, touch the emotions of the viewer, inspiring them to interpret the artwork in multiple dimensions.

### 1.3. The Cultural Background and Context Dependency of Symbols

The meaning of symbols is always closely related to their cultural and social context. In different historical periods, cultural backgrounds, or social structures, the same symbol often carries different meanings. For example, the cross in Western culture is a symbol of Christianity, representing religious belief and redemption; however, in some primitive tribes, the cross might be a symbol in sacrificial rituals, entirely different from its Christian connotation.

The polysemy of symbols is a core characteristic of semiotics. A symbol might have multiple meanings in different cultures and contexts, and this diversity of meanings makes semiotics an important tool for understanding cultural differences and cross-cultural communication. For instance, red in Chinese culture is typically associated with good luck, celebration, and wealth, whereas in some Western cultures, red can sometimes symbolize danger, anger, or warning. Through the interpretation of symbols, people can deeply understand the values and belief systems behind different cultures, thereby achieving an understanding of global diversity.

### 1.4. The Transmission and Evolution of Symbols

The generation and dissemination of symbols are key areas of study in semiotics. Symbols do not emerge in a vacuum; they are products of social interaction and cultural

accumulation. Symbols are transmitted and propagated through language, literature, art, religion, and other channels, gradually forming specific cultural norms and identities. Over time, the meanings of symbols may evolve, reflecting cultural transformations and social evolution. For example, emblematic symbols in certain social movements, such as the peace dove and the clenched fist, may undergo shifts in meaning or acquire new layers of interpretation as history progresses.

Concurrently, the channels and methods of symbol transmission have undergone profound changes. From traditional oral transmission to written language and now to modern networks and visual media, the means of symbol dissemination have become increasingly diversified, with unprecedented speeds and breadth of information dissemination. The evolution of symbols is not merely a linguistic update; it also reflects changes in social ideology, cultural cognition, and technological development.

### **1.5. Interaction between Symbols and Socio-Cultural Contexts**

The role of symbols is not unidirectional; there is a reciprocal relationship between symbols and socio-cultural contexts. While symbols shape social culture, they are also shaped by it. For instance, the evolution of political, religious, and cultural symbols at different historical stages is often closely linked to the prevailing political, economic, and cultural conditions of the time. Artists, writers, designers, and other creators use symbols to express their understanding and critique of society, and their works, in turn, influence society's reinterpretation and re-evaluation of certain symbols.

Social groups establish identity through symbols and deepen their understanding of self and others through the dissemination of symbols. Cultural differences, social strata, gender differences, and other factors are also manifested through symbols. For example, gender symbols not only represent biological distinctions but also profoundly reflect societal expectations and constructs regarding male and female roles. Thus, the study of semiotics not only aids in understanding the composition of symbols but also reveals the cultural, social, and psychological factors underlying them.

### **1.6. Summary**

The study of semiotics provides a framework for understanding and interpreting various phenomena in culture, language, art, and everyday life. As carriers of culture, symbols convey human emotions, thoughts, beliefs, and values in diverse forms and through various means. In the creation of oil paintings, literary works, advertising, and other fields, symbols not only help artists and creators convey information but also prompt audiences to gain deeper cultural experiences through the interpretation of symbols. The research of semiotics enriches our understanding of art and offers new perspectives for cross-cultural communication, social change, and human cognition.

## **2. The Application of Semiotics in Oil Painting Creation**

Semiotics is a discipline that studies signs, sign systems, and their use, widely applied in linguistics, cultural studies, art studies, and other fields. In visual arts, the application of semiotics is particularly important as it helps artists express emotions and convey information through symbols, allowing

works to transcend the surface and deeply resonate with the audience. As a significant artistic medium, oil painting, with its rich visual language and expressiveness, becomes an ideal carrier for semiotics in artistic creation. By utilizing colors, shapes, lines, and symbolic signs, artists can convey complex emotions and thoughts to the audience while reflecting deeper cultural, historical, and philosophical meanings.

### **2.1. The Use of Color Symbols**

In oil painting creation, color is one of the most fundamental and commonly used symbols. Each color is not merely a visual effect; it often carries profound emotional and symbolic meanings. For example, red is frequently associated with intense emotions such as passion, power, and love. In many artworks, the use of red can evoke emotional responses from the audience and enhance the visual impact of the piece. In Vincent van Gogh's *Café Terrace at Night*, the use of red and orange conveys the warmth and vitality of the night, while also reflecting Van Gogh's unique understanding of loneliness and interpersonal relationships. In contrast, blue is often linked with calmness, tranquility, and melancholy. It is used in many paintings to depict the inner world of characters or the serene landscapes. Common Impressionist works, such as Claude Monet's *Water Lilies*, use blue tones to represent the peaceful lake surface and soft light, conveying a sense of peace and tranquility.

### **2.2. The Symbolic Meaning of Shapes and Lines**

In addition to colors, shapes and lines are also significant elements of semiotics in oil painting creation. Shapes and lines not only play a role in composition and spatial division in a visual sense but also carry symbolic meanings, helping artists convey deeper emotions and thoughts.

In semiotics, shapes have strong symbolic functions. For instance, circles are often seen as symbols of perfection, harmony, and eternity. In many religious artworks, halos around saints are often circular, symbolizing divine radiance and perfect existence. The soft lines of circles, with no sharp angles, give a sense of warmth and inclusiveness. In contrast, angular shapes often convey a sense of danger, conflict, and unease. Sharp lines are frequently used to depict tense emotions or conflict scenes, especially in depicting intense actions or emotions, providing a strong visual impact.

The use of lines is not merely structural; it can also convey different emotional tones. Curved lines often give a sense of softness and relaxation, symbolizing fluidity, vitality, and change. Straight lines, on the other hand, often impart a sense of seriousness and stability, commonly used to depict structure or to convey rationality, order, and authority. For example, in Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's *Street Scene*, the straight and sharp lines convey the anxiety, loneliness, and alienation of urban life.

### **2.3. The Expression of Symbols and Culture, History**

The application of semiotics is not limited to the expression of emotions; it also helps artists incorporate history, culture, and even philosophical thoughts into their works. Many artists choose specific symbols to express deep-seated themes and values in human civilization.

Oil paintings often integrate a vast array of cultural symbols. For instance, in traditional Chinese art, symbols like dragons, phoenixes, and flowers are not only aesthetic

elements but also carry rich cultural significance. In ancient Chinese art, dragons symbolize power and nobility, while flowers represent beauty and harmony. In Western art, angels, biblical figures, and other motifs frequently appear in religious paintings, symbolizing sacred and eternal values.

## 2.4. The Expression of Personal Views and Philosophical Thoughts

As a highly personalized art form, oil painting also provides a unique platform for artists to express personal thoughts and philosophical views. Many artists use semiotics to transform their worldviews, life philosophies, or philosophical thoughts into visual art symbols, thereby conveying their unique ideas and values to the audience.

Taking Van Gogh's Sunflowers series as an example, sunflowers are not merely a natural flower; in Van Gogh's works, they symbolize vitality, hope, and spiritual resilience. The growth process of sunflowers and their pursuit of sunlight reflect Van Gogh's profound insights into life, nature, and inner pain. By using these symbols, Van Gogh not only demonstrates his reverence for nature but also expresses his exploration of his inner world.

## 2.5. Summary

The application of semiotics in oil painting creation greatly enriches the expressiveness and depth of art. Through the ingenious use of colors, shapes, lines, and cultural symbols, artists can construct worlds full of emotions, thoughts, and symbolic meanings on the canvas. This use of symbols is not merely a piling up of visual effects; it represents the artist's understanding and expression of the world and serves as a bridge for deep communication between the audience and the work. By adopting a semiotic perspective, artists can endow oil paintings with more significance, making them a medium for cultural exchange across time and space.

## 3. The Various Forms of Semiotics

As a crucial academic tool, semiotics is widely applied in artistic creation, particularly in oil painting. Through semiotics, artists can convey emotions, thoughts, as well as cultural and historical meanings in a more precise and profound manner.

### 3.1. Color Symbols

Color symbolism is one of the fundamental elements in oil painting creation. Colors are not merely carriers of visual perception; they bear rich emotional and symbolic meanings in oil paintings. Each color has its unique symbolic significance, and through the use of colors, artists can express emotional fluctuations and convey specific cultural and historical information. Therefore, color symbols hold a very important position in oil painting creation.

#### 3.1.1. Red Symbolism

Red, as an intense color, is often associated with emotions such as passion, power, love, and danger. In Western culture, red typically symbolizes love and passion, especially in festivals, celebrations, or romantic occasions, conveying a lively and vibrant emotional atmosphere. For example, Romantic painter Eugène Delacroix used a lot of red in his work "Liberty Leading the People" to express the passion and power of revolution. In this piece, red symbolizes the pursuit of freedom and rebellion against authority.

Conversely, red is also often seen as a symbol of danger

and warning. In many scenes of battle, conflict, or violence, red, as a warning color, enhances the tension of the work. For instance, in Picasso's "Guernica," the use of red adds to the sense of pain and destruction brought about by war.

#### 3.1.2. Yellow Symbolism

Yellow is usually seen as a symbol of sunshine, warmth, hope, and joy. It is a bright and attention-catching color that can convey a feeling of vitality and positive energy. In oil painting creation, artists often use yellow to express warm, pleasant emotions or depict scenes filled with sunshine and hope. For example, in Van Gogh's "Sunflowers" series, yellow is extensively used to represent the vitality and liveliness of the sunflowers, symbolizing the exuberance and hope of life.

Yellow can also represent wealth and glory. In traditional Chinese art, yellow, as the exclusive color of the emperor, symbolizes nobility and authority. In some oil painting works with historical and cultural backgrounds, yellow is often used to signify the meanings of nobility, glory, or power.

#### 3.1.3. Blue Symbolism

Blue often symbolizes calmness, tranquility, and safety. In many works, blue is used to depict natural landscapes such as the sky and the ocean, giving a sense of tranquility and peace. Impressionist painter Claude Monet's "Water Lilies" series uses a lot of blue to represent the calmness and clarity of the water surface, creating a quiet and serene atmosphere.

Additionally, blue is often associated with feelings of melancholy and loneliness. In many works expressing inner emotions, blue can convey the contemplation and loneliness of the characters. For instance, in the poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin, there are many descriptions symbolized by "blue," hinting at a profound sense of loneliness and introspection.

## 3.2. Image Symbols

In oil painting creation, besides color symbols, image symbols also hold significant symbolic meanings. Image symbols refer to specific shapes or objects in the painting, which not only form part of the visual elements but also bear the function of symbolizing and conveying information.

#### 3.2.1. Sun Symbolism

The sun is one of the most common image symbols, usually symbolizing life, energy, light, and enlightenment. In many works, the image of the sun is used to represent the vitality of nature and human hope and struggle. For example, in Van Gogh's "Sunflowers" series, the sunlight symbolizes the vibrant vitality of life, reflecting the brilliance of nature and representing the artist's love for life and passion for existence.

In some religious artworks, the sun is often associated with sacred, enlightenment, and transcendental meanings. The rising sun symbolizes the revelation of truth or the presence of God, especially in Christian art where the sun is often related to the radiance of Jesus, symbolizing divine redemption and hope.

#### 3.2.2. Tree Symbolism

Trees, as important symbols in nature, symbolize life, growth, resilience, and stability. In many oil painting works, trees are used to represent the power and beauty of nature, as well as the continuity and change of life. Artists use the symbolic meaning of trees to express reverence for nature and contemplation of life. For example, in Prussian painter Caspar David Friedrich's "The Lonely Tree" series, the isolated tree symbolizes human existential loneliness and inner emptiness.

In some religious or mythological-themed oil paintings,

trees often have deeper symbolic meanings. In the Bible, there is a "Tree of Knowledge," symbolizing human wisdom and fall. In these works, trees are not merely representatives of nature; they are often filled with philosophical and moral symbolism.

### 3.2.3. Bird Symbolism

Birds, as symbols of freedom, lightness, and beauty, also hold an important position in oil painting creation. Artists use the image of birds to express the pursuit of freedom and life, as well as the longing for beautiful things. For example, in common oil painting works, flying birds are often associated with freedom and liberation, expressing the human pursuit of free spirit.

For instance, in Italian Renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli's "Primavera," the birds in the painting symbolize the arrival of spring and the revival of life. Birds are not only part of nature; their free flight also symbolizes the freedom of thought and the infinite possibilities of life.

## 3.3. Symbolic Combinations

Symbolic combinations refer to the organic integration of different symbols within oil paintings to express deeper meanings. The combination of symbols can create a more complex and rich emotional and symbolic significance compared to a single symbol. Through symbolic combinations, artists can merge multiple themes or emotional layers, presenting a multidimensional artistic effect.

### 3.3.1. Combination of Life and Freedom

For instance, combining the sun, trees, and birds can convey meanings of life, growth, freedom, and beauty. The sun, as a symbol of energy and light, trees as symbols of life and stability, and birds as symbols of freedom and liberation, together can express an admiration for nature and life, as well as a longing and pursuit for freedom. Such symbolic combinations are very common in naturalistic and romantic art, reflecting the artist's insights into nature and life.

### 3.3.2. Combination of Danger and Destruction

Combining flames, swords, and skulls can convey meanings of danger, death, and destruction. Flames symbolize destruction, swords symbolize war and violence, and skulls represent death and finality. This type of symbolic combination is often seen in oil paintings depicting tragedy, conflict, or social turmoil. Artists use these elements together to enhance the tension and conflict within the work. For example, in war-themed oil paintings, artists often use such combinations to depict the violence of war and the devastation it brings to human life.

## 4. The Significance of Semiotics in Oil Painting Creation

The significance of semiotics in oil painting creation is multifaceted. It not only aids artists in conveying deeper emotions and thoughts but also assists viewers in interpreting artworks, thereby endowing the works with higher artistic value and cultural significance. The application of semiotics is particularly important in the following aspects of oil painting creation:

### 4.1. Expression of Thoughts and Emotions by Artists

The use of semiotics provides artists with a rich array of tools and languages to express personal thoughts and

emotions. Through the selection and combination of symbols, artists can convey complex emotions and profound thoughts in an intuitive manner. For instance, using specific colors or image symbols to convey particular emotions, or presenting philosophical or social issues through the combination of symbols, makes the artwork not only visually impactful but also intellectually profound. This application of symbols helps artists transcend linguistic and cultural limitations, communicating with the audience in a more universal manner.

### 4.2. Interpretation and Interaction by the Audience

Semiotics is not only a tool for artists to express their thoughts but also a key for the audience to understand artworks. When viewing oil paintings, the audience, by recognizing and interpreting the symbols within, can perceive the emotions, historical, and cultural significance behind the works. For example, certain symbols may carry different meanings in different cultural contexts. In the West, a white dove often symbolizes peace and hope, while in Chinese culture, it holds similar symbolic meanings though the underlying cultural symbol system may differ. When viewers from different cultural backgrounds view such works, they may interpret the symbols uniquely based on their own cultural contexts. This cultural diversity makes semiotics not just a language of artistic creation but also a bridge for communication between different cultures.

### 4.3. Cultural and Historical Transmission

The use of semiotics in oil painting creation also contributes to the transmission of culture and history. As a long-standing art form, the choice and expression of symbols in oil painting are often closely related to specific cultural and historical contexts. Through the use of symbols, artists can convey not only personal emotions but also reflect and transmit the spirit of the times. For instance, many 19th-century oil paintings use image symbols and color symbols to reflect societal changes, the impact of the Industrial Revolution, and political movements. These symbols not only reveal the personal sentiments of the artists but also profoundly mirror the social realities of the time.

## 5. Conclusion

This article deeply analyzes the importance of semiotics in oil painting creation. Firstly, semiotics provides artists with a rich array of expressive tools, enabling oil paintings to be not only visually appealing but also to convey profound emotional and intellectual messages. Through the use of symbols, artists can transcend linguistic barriers, presenting personal emotions, philosophical reflections, and social viewpoints in a more universal manner. Secondly, semiotics helps the audience better understand artworks, offering a diversified perspective for interpretation, especially under different cultural backgrounds, where viewers can interpret the works based on their own experiences and cultural contexts. This possibility of multiple interpretations brings more layers and depth to the artworks.

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