

## Visual Narrative in Northeast Industrial Theme Oil Painting Creation

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**Abstract:** This paper conducts a theoretical analysis of the oil paintings on the theme of Northeast industry using the principles of semiotics, examining the historical evolution of relevant modern and contemporary artworks. It explores the symbiotic relationship between industrialization and artistic representation. By employing semiotic theory to dissect the artistic creation process, the paper aims to elucidate the cultural and symbolic dimensions within the artworks, offering a semiotic interpretation of the visual narrative of Northeast industrial development through the lens of oil painting.

### 1. The three levels of Erwin Panofsky's Iconology

In the late 20th century, Chinese artists began depicting industrial scenes, capturing the transition from an agrarian to an industrial society. Themes included factories, workers, and urban landscapes, showcasing China's rapid modernization and providing a visual narrative for its industrial development. Building on Erwin Panofsky's iconology, this paper categorizes artworks into three levels: the first level is the primary or natural theme, further divided into factual and expressive themes, representing the depiction of natural objects and the expression of artistic "motifs." The first level is referred to as the pre-iconographical description of the artwork, depicting the pure form of nature within experiential boundaries. The second level is the secondary or conventional theme, associating artistic motifs with artistic form and themes, termed as the image, and the conceptual world recognized by the image's meaning and story is known as the iconography. The iconography of the secondary or conventional theme involves exploring and analyzing the story and meaning behind the image. The third level is the intrinsic meaning or content, analyzing the value world that constitutes the "symbol," which is the iconological interpretation of semiotics. Semiotics analyzes cultural symbols or the historical symbolism of symbols based on pre-iconography and iconography, insightfully revealing the fundamental inclinations of the human mind and the expression of specific themes and concepts under different historical conditions.<sup>[1]</sup>

### 2. Pre-iconographical Descriptions of Northeast Industrial Theme Oil Paintings

The Northeast region, historically referring broadly to the northeastern provinces and the northeastern part of Inner Mongolia, became a significant industrial base in China.

In the early 20th century due to its abundant mineral resources (such as coal, oil, iron ore) and relatively well-established industrial infrastructure. In the initial 50 years after the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Northeast accounted for 98% of China's heavy industry base. The term "allocation" during the planned economy era referred to the low-cost or gratuitous supply, and the Northeast consistently bore the responsibility as the country's eldest son. However, a crucial turning point in the fate of the Northeast occurred during the reform and opening-up period. While the Northeast continued to bear the responsibility of supplying resources, it failed to undergo the transformation and upgrading of heavy industry during this period. Due to problems such as overcapacity, imbalanced industrial structure, and high operating costs, the Northeast's economy approached collapse. As the once proud industrial facilities in the Northeast gradually turned into

ruins, a psychological ruin formed in the minds of the people in the Northeast. With the implementation of policies to revitalize the old industrial base in the Northeast, the economic situation in the region is gradually improving according to economic data analysis for the year 2023. These shifts in industrialized economies have a direct impact on artistic works, urging us to preserve and commemorate history in a rational way.<sup>[2]</sup>

### **3. Semiotic Analysis of the Iconography Between Industrialization and Artistic Representation**

There exists a complex and mutually influential symbiotic relationship between industrialization and artistic representation. Taking Northeast industrial-themed oil paintings as an example: when industrialization actively drives economic prosperity, artistic creations also reflect the progress of industry and the positive production enthusiasm of people when presenting the same content theme. Conversely, they depict ruins, remnants, and the negative and melancholic state of people when industrialization faces decline.

During the period of Northeast industrial prosperity, artworks predominantly documented industrial processes and portrayed the spiritual outlook of laboring people. The painter Guang Tingbo, who graduated from the Oil Painting Department of Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts in 1964, had a firsthand experience of the industrial development at that time. His oil painting "Steel and Sweat" is a representative work of industrial painting from that period, using hyper-realistic techniques to depict a scene of four laborers resting. The overall color tone is brownish-yellow, and while it does not directly depict a smelting furnace, the scorching heat seems palpable. The central position in the composition portrays a worker in a monumental manner. The worker is drenched in sweat, with rough hands and tattered clothes, embodying the hardships of labor. Yet, the worker's expression is calm and resolute, with eyes full of hope and anticipation. Behind the worker, others are chatting and laughing, displaying no complaints about such strenuous work. The painting truthfully records the hardworking and resilient character of the laboring people at that time.

After the reform and opening-up, light industry and the tertiary industry gradually became the main directions of China's economic development, leading to significant social changes. In the process of China's modernization and commercialization, for cities in Northeast China where heavy industry held significant weight, it can be described as a "fractured society." People's psychology endured tremendous pressure, and artists were attracted to the "ruins" – a dual symbol of destruction and yearning. Artists began to focus on contemplating these societal issues, initiating creative narratives about their own memories. Zhao Xiaojia's "Lonely Factory" series presents us with an industrial landscape covered by ominous clouds. The color atmosphere in the paintings is dim and melancholic, portraying the former glory of vast industrial scenes and conveying a tragic emotional undertone. Wang Jiazeng's work "Industrial Diary No. 224" conveys a sense of confusion in a solemn composition, depicting scenes that seem to have just been burned by fire, presenting an atmosphere of ruins and desolation.<sup>[3]</sup>

Northeast industrial-themed oil paintings hold a significant position in the history of modern Chinese art, documenting historical moments in the industrial development of the Northeast. They showcase the relationship between labor and people's lives, as well as the humanistic care and social responsibility of the artists. Simultaneously, the uniqueness and autonomy of art are closely linked to industrial development, possessing a strong sense of the times and social significance.

### **4. Semiotic Interpretation of Northeast Industrial Theme Oil Paintings**

In times of transition, there are always those who feel lost. From the prosperity of industry to its decline, factory closures, and rising unemployment rates, people's psyche experienced a tremendous gap. During this period, artists used industrial-themed oil paintings to express the trauma and visual homesickness within people. Industrial "ruins" became objects of nostalgia, symbolizing the yearning of artists.<sup>[4]</sup>

If we regard "ruins" as a concept in time and space, from the perspective of aesthetic experience, it is the elevation of the traumatic experience of the artistic creation subject into social memory. The

individual's "ruin" consciousness rises to become the historical consciousness of society. [5]Cui Guotai, an artist whose hometown is Shenyang, Liaoning Province, mainly depicts industrial buildings such as factories, locomotives, and large chimneys in his works, aiming to record, nostalgize, and mourn his own memories. The series of works titled "Ruins" are presented on large canvases with a silent and melancholic atmosphere. Cui Guotai's works portray a "portrait" of the bygone industrial era, expressing the artist's inner feelings of sorrow. From his self-description, we can discern that this is also a humanistic concern for the loneliness and decadence of the public's feelings at that time. "Demolishing the Smelting Plant" uses a monumental composition to depict a surviving abandoned factory. The artist expresses awe for industry, mourning for the ruins, nostalgia for the past, and guidance for the future. "Red Locomotive" with a predominantly red-toned scene manifests a tragic and majestic atmosphere, displaying an unstoppable momentum, showcasing the glorious past of the Republic's eldest son. Cui Guotai's works resonate with viewers while expressing personal emotions, making it a questioning reflection on social reality. With the development of industrialization, a new and bright future will emerge from the ruins of the past.

## 5. Conclusion

Northeast industrial-themed oil paintings demonstrate various aspects of the industrialization process in the Northeast region:

Firstly, scenes of laborers' hard work depict their diligence, courage, and dedication. The artistic creations portray the construction and modernization atmosphere during the industrialization process, such as factories and mechanical equipment, praising and commending this historical moment.

Secondly, the societal transformation from agriculture to industry and from tradition to modernity during the industrialization process is depicted. Artistic works mainly showcase the large-scale production process of giant machinery, conveying the confusion and insecurity brought about by rapid modernization.

Thirdly, the personal views of artists and the change in their aesthetic process, the humanistic connotation symbolized in artworks, and the aesthetic value. Artistic works predominantly present the grand scenes of industrial "ruins," symbolizing people's loneliness and homesickness.

Currently, as Northeast industrialization experiences a renewed development, economic recovery and structural upgrades in industrial industries provide new content for artistic creation. The continuous development of artificial intelligence, the evolving forms of artistic creation, the divergent thinking of artists in the information age, and the upgrading of creativity will lead to a variety of expressions in Northeast industrial-themed oil paintings, infusing them with unlimited vitality and vigor.

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