

Analysis of the Structure of Chinese Ink Installation Art Through the Triadic Relationship in Peirce's Semiotics

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Abstract: Chinese contemporary art has evolved into a significant cultural phenomenon and a symbol of national identity while also providing a vivid representation of contemporary Chinese culture. Some Chinese artists have incorporated the globalized perspective of Western contemporary art into their creations, resulting in multicultural works. This study uses the triadic relationship in Peirce's semiotics to analyze "Chinese ink and wash installation art." Firstly, the theoretical framework of Peirce's semiotics is established, and the law of the triadic relationship is summarised. This law is then applied to the decoding of two-dimensional works. The results show that the traditional decoding model needs to be revised when analyzing three-dimensional art. To overcome this limitation, the 'researcher' constructed a structural model of the double "triadic relationship." This model was applied to the analysis of 'Backstory 7', a famous Chinese ink installation. It was found that the model effectively revealed the surface, hidden, and symbolic content of traditional Traditional Chinese Art. This study demonstrates the application of classical Western theory in decoding traditional Chinese culture and provides a reference for future research in this field. This study chose the perspective of semiotic decoding of artworks to uncover the cultural connotations of traditional Chinese culture and promote a better understanding of a wider audience.

Keywords: Peirce's Semiotics, Triadic Relationship, Contemporary Art, Decoding

1. Introduction

The twentieth century was a time of change, and art took on a diverse and new appearance. Cubism, Futurism, Surrealism, Pop Art, and other contemporary art forms challenged classical aesthetic principles while appearing bizarre - a phenomenon that drew widespread attention from all walks of life. In the 1960s, the emergence of Marcel Duchamp's Fountain overturned the public's perception of traditional art concepts, and new artistic styles were also emerging around the globe. One of the countries whose forms of art have broken through conventional art is China. Since the 1980s, the emergence of contemporary Chinese art in the West has been marked by the relocation of artists like Xu Bing, Ai Weiwei, GU Wenda, and others to cities in the West, such as New York and Berlin, where they sought greater artistic freedom for their experimental works[1]. Over the past 20 years, the influx of Chinese art into the West has garnered significant attention through media coverage and the display of works in galleries and museums. For example, Ink and wash installation art has formed a unique system that perfectly integrates Chinese and Western art forms. The ink and wash language application

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in installation art has become a subject of great significance for contemporary art studies. One essential characteristic of Chinese ink installation art is tapping into the humanistic sentiment, as exemplified in "Background Story 7". Interpreting an artwork is not only a decoding process but also a process of transmission and continuous regeneration.

Among the scholars who have evaluated the series the "*Background Story*," Daniel, in his article "The Vivid Nature of the Past," makes two specific points. First, Xu Bing's works inherit the traditional Chinese aesthetic style; second, Daniel believes that the key to the series is shaping the disordered medium materials into an orderly aesthetic form, changing the natural state of matter into an unnatural state, and finding the artistic beauty of traditional landscape painting unconventionally[2]. Moreover, Miguel Angel's concern with the tension between the landscape at the front and the miscellaneous objects at the back of the work is consistent[3]. Furthermore, Timothy treats the light effects in this work as "a call for the reader to interpret the work"[4]. In the exhibition site of each piece, the front of the work emits a white glow, which becomes the visual center in the darker exhibition hall. Its visual effect beckons the viewer to look at it. The frontal image draws the viewer into the visual experience of Chinese painting, which then evokes the aesthetic experience of classical painting. After viewing the "chaos" behind the work, the clutter instantly destroys the viewer's aesthetic experience. The viewer marvels at the author's ingenuity in the aesthetic disparity between the before and after.

In 2018, Chen Gongbo published the paper "Semiotic Reflections on the "Story Behind" series," which uses association and isomorphism in symbol theory to observe the signification process of this work and argues that ink and shadow are isomorphic in composition.

Regarding the above views, scholars' discussions focus on two points: first, the discussion of the works' landscape painting images, and second, the discussion of the gap between the works' foreground iconography and the materials behind their production. From the series presentation, the current commentary focuses on the introductory visual presentation of the works. From a semiotic point of view, no research content analyzes the relationship between signs and produces meaning. This paper attempts to decode the ink installation art through the triadic relationship of Peirce's semiotics.

On November 3, 2020, China's Ministry of Education held a conference on "New Liberal Arts Education" at Shandong University, making the construction of "new liberal arts" a "strategic tool" to build a powerful nation. To realize the plan of "promoting people to cultivate their souls in literature, history, and philosophy, helping to govern the country in economics, management and law, cultivating talents in education, and transforming people into beauties in art," and "to persistently dig new materials, discover new problems, propose new ideas and construct new theories, and strengthen the systematic summary of practical experience" the essential instructions[5].

On May 5, 2022, Professor Niu Hongbao of the Renmin University of China gave a lecture by a video conference in the series of preface lectures on art entitled "From iconology of iconography to iconology of semiotics." In the lecture, Professor Niu said, "Western iconography iconology is good at explaining Renaissance works, historical and religious paintings, but it cannot explain most Chinese works because most Chinese artworks are abstract, such as ink art and calligraphy. The iconographic analysis of iconography cannot satisfy the interpretation of the meaning of abstract art." Professor Niu answers China needs to construct an iconography method for Chinese academic contexts[6]. The lecture provided strong confidence for researchers and ideas for turning to semiotics, which is worth exploring for studying Modern Chinese Art.

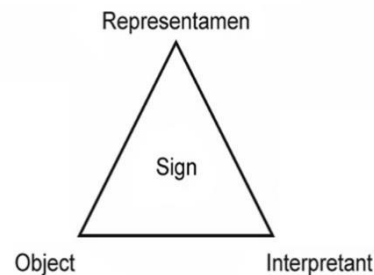
This thesis adopts an interpretive research approach, relying on the interpretation and analysis of theories and concepts to conclude. To this end, with a sense of the problem, the researchers choose Peirce's semiotics, compose the theory, summarize the laws of symbol use, draw on typical structural models, decode contemporary artworks, explore the relationship between symbols and signs, and observe the multiple ways of expressing meaning between symbols and images. This research aims to use Western theories to interpret traditional Chinese art so that more people can understand Chinese

culture. Using the research results, this study's research value hopes to contribute a reference value to "constructing a method of iconography in Chinese academic contexts."

2. Theoretical Research

2.1 Philosophical Basis for Peirce's Semiotic Theory and the Triadic Relationship

It is widely acknowledged that Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure are the founding fathers of semiotics. Peirce was an American philosopher who studied logic, semiotics, and religions, with semiotics as the most important part of his extensive research. He started his philosophical thinking after reading Kant's *The Critique of Pure Reason*. He accepted Kant's conceptual analysis method and critically transformed Kant's theory of the categories of reason. Peirce reflected on Kant's philosophy and proposed three categories of firstness, secondness, and thirdness that are used in semiotics. The theory of categories is the foundation of Peirce's semiotic theory. Peirce's semiotics is characterized by the triadic relationship[7]. Triadic relationship, which refers to the relation comprising the representamen, the object, and the interpretant that produces the meaning of a sign, connects to the world. "The sign can be defined as something that stands for something else (its object) for something third (its interpretant), or alternatively as something that mediates between its object and its interpretant. The most obvious mark of a sign is its structure, which distinguishes it from monadic and dyadic relations"[8]. Thus, there is a triadic relationship between a sign, its object, and its interpretant[Fig.1].



[Fig. 1] The Sign Triadic Relationship

The division of the three sets of relations between representamen, object, and interpretant is the foundation of Peirce's work before entering the symbolic ontology field. Three groups should be used to operate the sign. The sign can function only through a mental sign, i.e., the interpretant, the representamen, and the object, which are three groups of relations, one of which is indispensable. In Peirce's view, the meaningful effect of a symbolic interpretant has three ways of expression: the first is an Emotional interpretant, such as a musical symbol that brings an emotional charge to the audience; the second is an Energetic interpretant, such as a command symbol that makes people obey the command; the third kind is logical interpretant, which is a symbol of thought.

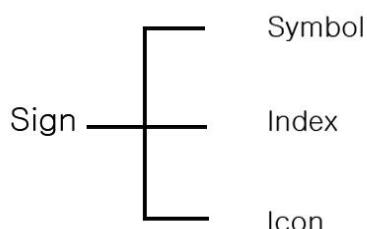
2.2 Explanation of the Binary Relation of Object

"By object, Peirce referred to something represented by a sign. He argued that a sign must be associated with or represent an object"[9]. The reason is that Peirce disagreed with German philosophers' division of the subject and object. The meaning of the term object varies in semiotics. In Saussure's system, the meaning of an object is close to the notion of the signified. In contrast, in Peirce's semiotic system, an object corresponds to two parts: the representamen and the interpretant,[10] the two parts belong to the scope of an object, but in the process of signs spreading

meanings, interpretants become new signs. Thus, semiotics is essentially dynamic[11]. In Peirce's opinion, each sign has two objects. One is the immediate object, the object represented by the sign. In other words, they consider this object the representation of the original thing, which is only representatively present. At the same time, the actual object genuinely determines the meaning of the sign, also known as the dynamic object[12]. It can be seen from Peirce's explanation that the dynamic object affects the interpretation of the meaning of a sign. However, it is outside the semiosis process, which points to the "collateral experience" or "interpretative experience" of the one interpreting. The site interpreter becomes the new symbol, and the symbolic meaning is infinitely interpreted.

3. Icon, Index, and Symbol — Three Categories of Signs

Peirce divided signs into three triad relations. The second one is the relation between icon, index, and symbol [Fig. 2]. This triad relation is related to the one between representamen, object, and interpretant. Both Margaret Iversen and Norman Bryson, two world-famous artists, used this triad relation when discussing visual artworks through Peirce's semiotic theory. Before interpreting a painting, the audience needs to distinguish between icons, indexes, and symbols. According to Peirce, an image is a sign whose role as a sign cannot be affected even in the absence of an object represented by it[13]. This remark shows the relationship between an image as a sign and its object. A character can stimulate some nonexistent things that are similar to the surface. The relationship is a mode of interpretation based on the assumption that characters and objects are identical. Therefore, when we look at a portrait of a famous person, we do not doubt the iconicity between the painting and the natural person at all. We respond like this because we accept the inherent logic of icons that are always associated with "iconicity." Semiotics aims to solve problems related to meaning by identifying the forms of meaning[14]. Therefore, icon signs, index signs, and symbol signs can be understood as forms of expression of different signs' meanings.



[Fig. 2] Three Categories of Signs

3.1 Icons

"Icon" is similar to what they represent, which is most obvious in pictures. For example, a photo of a star is an icon, and so is a map. Icons are based on "iconicity." Peirce divided icons into two subcategories—diagram and image. A diagram reflects the relationship between the elements within the icon (internal). An image is mainly the external characteristic of "iconicity," illustrating the clear signification relationship between the textual sign and the original object[15]. Realist works represented by those of Jean-François Millet are typical examples of this category. The same is true of landscape paintings, still-life paintings, and portraits of people. These works represent reality and allow viewers to associate directly with the objects represented by the works through the works. For example, a landscape painting is an icon, and the natural scenery is the object. In contrast, people's understanding that the painting is a representation process of natural scenery is the interpretant. As an icon is explicitly signified, people's understanding of it is an interpretation of the "immediate object"

without a need to analyze thoroughly the cultural meaning behind the work.

3.2 Index

"Index" is not based on iconicity or similarity. Instead, these signs have a dynamic (including spatial) connection with some objects on the one hand, and they connect with the sensation or memory of those who see them as signs[16]. Peirce used the example of a bullet hole and shooting to explain the meaning of indexes as signs. A bullet hole is a sign of the act of shooting, which does not exist without shooting. However, the bullet hole still exists even though the viewer does not attribute the hole to the act of shooting. In this example, the bullet hole is the Index, the act of shooting is the object, and the attribution of the bullet hole is the interpretant.

In visual art, "index" can be divided into two categories. One exists between the elements within a work, which can also be understood as the part of the work that has index meaning. For example, a figure in a picture points in a direction with his or her finger, and viewers will focus their eyes on this direction—the other category points outside the image. For example, the brushstrokes on a painting signify the artist's behavioral tendency when he or she was creating the work, and a signature of an artist signifies the existence of the artist during the creation of the work. Margaret Iversen sees an index as an "existential" link between the sign itself and the object, and indexes and objects are causally linked in most cases[17]. It can be seen that indexes remind us that everyone should explain not only the origin and production of images, but also study their interaction with viewers.

3.3 Symbol

According to Peirce, a "symbol" is a sign, and its property as a sign disappears when the interpretant disappears. It is like the words used by a speaker in a speech, which can only be meaningful when correctly understood[18]. Unlike the above two categories of signs, symbols depend more on the subjects who make interpretations—human beings. Conventional rules exist between symbols and their meanings. A viewer can form a mental image because he or she knows the meaning of an image as a symbol in the overall cultural context. In other words, the cultural conventions of the viewers, rather than viewers, define the meanings of symbols. From this perspective, symbols are more akin to the arbitrariness of linguistic signs in Saussure's theory. Symbols rely on social and cultural "conventions" to relate to meanings, and interpreters and senders of signs rely on social "rules" to develop the relationship between signs and their meanings.

For example, among traditional Chinese patterns, bats have positive cultural meanings because of the term's pronunciation (In Chinese, the bat is pronounced as baneful, and fu can also mean good fortune). Therefore, bats can represent longevity and wealth, which was called a "sound symbol" by Chinese literary scholar and writer Qian Zhongshu. However, these symbols can be non-arbitrary in Peirce's point of view. In Western culture, a bat is an evil symbol that represents blood, darkness, and death. In interpreting an artwork, a bat is a symbol; the two words with the same pronunciation of fu (bat and good fortune) are the objects; the interpretation that a bat symbolizes longevity and wealth is the interpretant. In Western culture, the image of a bat is a symbol. blood, darkness, and death represented by bats are the objects; the "evil" meaning is the interpretant. Therefore, the interpretation of symbols relies on the conventional rules chosen by the interpreter.

Summary: The above study shows that when analyzing artworks, classifying them according to "Icon," "Index," and "Symbol" requires examining the relationship between the viewer and the artwork. In the case of two-dimensional flat artworks, the viewer only needs to stand in a fixed position to see the artwork, and the relationship between the artwork and the viewer is one-to-one.

This is the original model in Peirce's semiotic theory. For three-dimensional artworks, the viewer must walk around the work and view it from different angles. The viewer sees the picture from multiple angles, and the relationship between the artworks and the viewer is many-to-one. Therefore, this three-dimensional work does not belong to any of the three types of "Icon," "Index," and "Symbol."

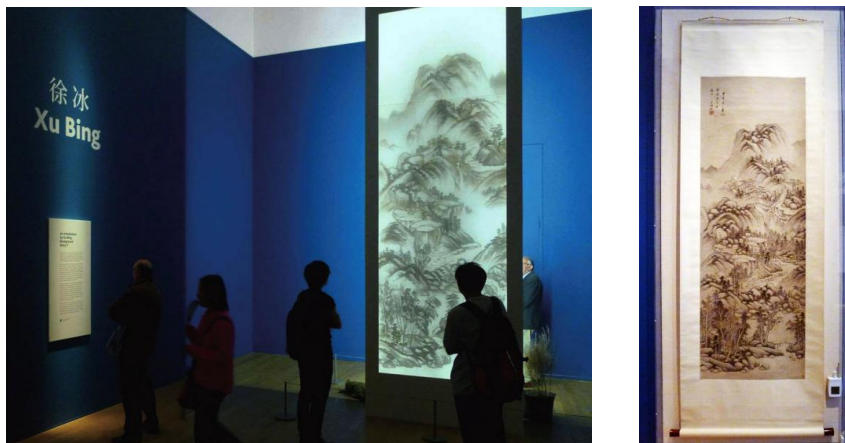
To better analyze complex artworks, the researcher proposes the hypothesis that "Icon," "Index," and "Symbol" are seen as three levels of artworks and form a new "triadic relationship." The advantage of this approach is that it avoids the unclear boundaries of the existing "Icon," "Index," and "Symbol" types and serves as a fixed analytical step to help think clearly about the work of art. In addition, this approach can transform the original juxtaposition into a sequential logical relationship, making the boundaries more apparent and hierarchical.

The following analysis will be conducted using specific artworks to test the feasibility of the hypothesis.

4. Analysis of Contemporary Artworks

4.1 Artwork Introduction

"*Background Story 7*" [Fig. 3] (a) is a work of a series created by Modern Chinese artist Xu Bing. It was exhibited at the British Museum in May 2011. *Background Story 7* is about six meters high, composed of a wooden frame and a light box made of frosted, translucent organic glass. Xu Bing used materials that can be found everywhere in our daily lives, such as twigs, corn husks, hemp, and newspaper, some of which were attached directly to the frosted glass panels, while some were fixed in the light box with clay. "The extent to which these materials can be seen from the front of the glass panel depends on the distance between them and the glass panel and how the lighting from the top and from behind"[19]. When these objects approach the frosted glass, people can see clear images from the other side of the panel, and the pictures of these objects blur when they get further away from the glass, similar to the effect of dyeing on Chinese ink paintings on traditional rice paper. The subtle control of distance creates unexpected visual effects. Seen from the front, it is a vertical hanging scroll of an elegant traditional Chinese landscape painting. At the same time, the chaotic array of materials at the back of the work shows the visitors how the image is created. Xu Bing's work echoes another work exhibited at the British Museum—a hanging scroll of a landscape painting created by Wang Shimin, a painter in the early Qing Dynasty [Fig. 3] (b), in 1654. Xu Bing uniquely imitated Wang Shimin's work, which was exhibited at Gallery 3.



[Fig.3] (a) Ink installation works (b) Works created by Wang Shimin

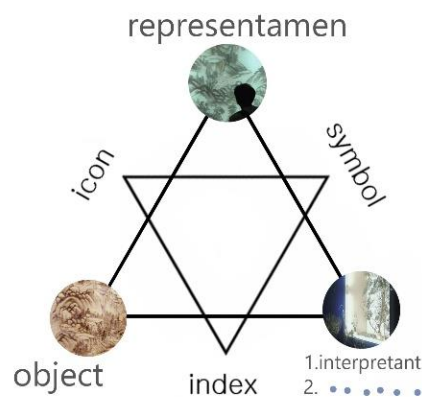
4.2 Artwork Analysis

4.2.1 "Background Story 7" symbol structure relationship diagram

The logical internal factor between Icon, Index, and Symbol is the resemblance. These relations are independent, and it is a similar style of identification of the work. The resemblance is based on visual perception, in other words, between symbols and objects that can be identified under subjective experience. It is one-sided if the interpretation of meaning can only be a single symbolic interpretation. The performance of complex works requires upgrading the triadic relationship, in which the Icon, Index, and Symbol are seen as a whole, forming three directions for interpreting the work. The icon is the external description, mainly the descriptive content of appearance; Index is the internal information mining, deciphering the hidden content. The Symbol synthesizes the first two elements, respecting ethnic customs, community culture, and totemic culture. The most meaningful interpretation is the integration of the three. The triadic relationship structure of Icon, Index, and Symbol is subordinated to the structure of representamen, object, and interpretant, forming a unified double "triadic relationship" relationship.

The term "representamen" refers to the ink installation, the term "object" refers to Wang Shimin's work, and the term "interpretant" refers to the "material assemblage" behind the ink installation. The visual art effects in "Behind the Story 7" are Icon, Index, Symbol. "Background Story 7" symbol structure relationship diagram is formed [Fig. 4].

The relationship between the symbols is present wherein, an "Icon" is between the ink installation (representamen) and Wang Shimin's work (object), while "Index" is between Wang Shimin's work (object) and the materials, the "Symbol" is between the landscape painting and the materials. The relationship between landscape painting and materials is symbolic. The production of an artwork is a coding process, and the viewer is in a decoding process to understand the artwork's meaning. The subject's knowledge of the world must be based on symbols. Thus, symbols are the only source from which the subject acquires knowledge; without their existence, the issue could not think. Symbols are dynamic, and the function of symbols is signification and differentiation. All image symbols have direct and indirect encoding.



[Fig. 4] "Background Story 7" Symbol Structure Relationship Diagram

4.2.2 Icons (Representing Chinese Classical Painting)

Modern artworks give up the grand narrative in content creation and turn to the expression of the inner feelings and thoughts of creators. "Interpretation is a process of discovering meaning, and meaning occurs in the interaction and negotiation between readers and the text"[20].

Interpreting "icon" is essentially finding the iconicity between signs and objects at the visual level. Iconicity refers to the similarity between the form of a sign and its object among icons, which is the

way icons are represented and the basis for the creation of icons. It is a primary level of an artwork and a simple direct narrative of the form of the work. "*Background Story 7*" imitates Wang Shimin's work, a concrete display using the "immediate object."

Between the ink installation (representamen) and Wang Shimin's work (object) is an "Icon." Contemporary ink and wash cannot be separated from the rich historical and cultural roots and traditions. Only based on inheriting and carrying forward the excellent Chinese traditional culture can contemporary ink and wash have strong vitality and room for development. The aesthetic interest of modern people inherits the cultural spirit of the ancients. It seeks to "slow down" the state of mind in the fast-paced life of the contemporary era, returning to the peace and tranquility of the spirit.

4.2.3 Index (Exploring the Laws of Chinese Ink Painting)

Between Wang Shimin's work (object) and the materials are "Index." The relation between this type of sign and the objects does not lie in visual similarity. Instead, their relationship is dynamic. The dynamic object is the real meaning of interpreting artworks. This type of sign goes deeper than the previous one, as it requires the interpreter's perception to supplement the knowledge, both technically and culturally. When seen through the frosted glass, the edges of the chaotic materials at the back of "*Background Story 7*" are blurred by the lighting. However, the sense of form is still evident, creating an effect of the vague part and the clear part complementing each other, which show the charm of Chinese ink painting. A twig can represent a tree or a type of tree, and a stone can represent a mountain. "The Tao of Painting" was a famous dictionary used in the Qing Dynasty that contained typical painting techniques used in ancient China in the same way Chinese dictionaries contain radicals. Painters can create works in their minds if they keep these techniques and patterns in mind. "*Background Story 7*" is an innovation of traditional techniques used in Chinese ink paintings, with landscapes depicted on two-dimensional paper transformed into three-dimensional installations. The seeming landscape painting has neither a landscape nor a painting. Instead, three-dimensional materials are used to create an atmosphere of a two-dimensional image, and the image exists only in shadows.

Xu Bing describes this series of works as "paintings about light." Images presented in "*Background Story 7*" are created by the control of lighting rather than an imitation of three-dimensional effects using material paints (the sense of light, three-dimensionality.) [Fig. 5]. In this case, the three-dimensional installation is the Index of the traditional Chinese ink painting is the object. The creative technique of using three-dimensional installation instead of traditional two-dimensional paper is interpretant. This attempt is Xu Bing's new exploration of the relationship between art images and media.



[Fig. 5] The Work Exhibited (the back), 2011, British Museum, London

4.2.4 Symbol (Demonstrating the Ethnic Character of Chinese Ink Painting)

Between the landscape painting and the materials is a "Symbol." Between the landscape painting and the materials is a "Symbol." The material is real, the ink work is unreal, and the unreal effect relies on the glass and light in the middle. This art cannot be as realistic as classical oil painting, but to create more and more layers between reality and illusion, because Chinese ink painting has five layers of ink color."

Chinese painting is represented by ink painting, in which the painters subjectively, rather than objectively, depict nature. The painters always create the best forms in their minds by visiting the mountains and completing their paintings in one stroke. While painting, the painters keep observing nature on paper and frequently use the technique of scattered perspective, not limited by time and space. The principles of "observing while moving" and "scattered perspective" are used for the composition[21], resulting in long scrolls of paintings.

Chinese painting emphasizes the expression of the philosophy of nature with the art form of painting and the pursuit of the meanings behind the paintings, which expresses the "Tao," while appreciating landscape paintings is the process of "viewing the Tao" and "grasping the truth." The Tao is the universal law of things and the ultimate truth (traditional Chinese aesthetics). The "mountain road" in Chinese ink painting is also a symbol, not only a representation of the real mountain road in the real world, but also a symbol of the road of the growth of human beings.

Ink installation art has broadened the range of the expressive language of ink, explored a shortcut for the ink to become contemporary, and provided a sound stage for the ink to go global. Ink interventions in installation art offer a unique artistic perspective to the creator due to the way the colors and forms of the figures and environments from different geographical, ethnic, economic, and cultural backgrounds are formed and inextricably intertwined.

With great freedom, Xu Bing mixes traditional and modern, Eastern and Western artistic concepts, to provoke the viewer into a reconsideration of the conventions underlying traditional art forms, and to confront the cultural implications of those conventions.

Summary: According to the practical analysis, the triadic relationship of Peirce's semiotics in interpreting artworks depends on the form of the specific work. It can be solved by choosing one type of symbol if it is a two-dimensional work. If it is a three-dimensional work, it must integrate all three classes to form a whole triadic relationship structure. The triadic relationship structure of Icon, Index, and Symbol is subordinated to the structure of representamen, object, and interpretant, forming a unified double "triadic relationship" relationship that becomes the logical relationship of this interpretative artwork.

5. Conclusions

This thesis investigates the interpretation of Chinese ink installation art through Peirce's semiotics to reveal the hidden Chinese traditional culture behind the artworks. Through theoretical combing and case study analysis, it is found that when using Peirce's semiotics to analyze artworks, if the analyzed artworks belong to the two-dimensional plane category, it is sufficient to follow the method of "Icon," "Index," "Symbol" are the three types of symbols and the analysis is done. Suppose the work to be analyzed is three-dimensional. In that case, we need to modify the relationship of "Icon," "Index," and "Symbol" into three levels of relationships, which represent "External," "Internal," and "Integrated." This forms a dialectical logical relationship. With representamen, object, and interpretant, it forms a double "triadic relationship" model is more comprehensive and universal from the perspective of analyzing the meaning of artworks.

The results of this study, on the one hand, help the viewer understand the formal characteristics of

Chinese contemporary art, characterized by the preservation of the "Chinese element" and its active participation in the global art movement in a deconstructive manner. It also reveals that contemporary Chinese art conceptually supports Western artistic concepts but implies that the traditional symbols of Chinese art serve as a source of creative inspiration and uniquely contribute to the global artistic dialogue.

Research limitations: It is only a preliminary exploration, and more profound research is needed. Future research outlook: The next step is to conduct empirical research on the categorical symbols of Peirce's semiotics, study the latest research results of other scholars, discover unique perspectives, write research experiences, and use the research results for academic conference exchange. This study's research value hopes to contribute a reference value to "constructing a method of iconography in Chinese academic contexts."

The globalization of contemporary art is already a trend; art is no longer limited by geography and culture but circulates and spreads globally, suggesting that art is about to become a universal means of communication that transcends language and nationality. Chinese contemporary artists have borrowed from Western art theory and integrated traditional culture into contemporary art creation, forming a unique cultural phenomenon of "Chinese elements."

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