

Iconographic Analysis of "Spring Wind Has Awakened" Based on Irving Panofsky

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ABSTRACT

[Background] Iconography emerged in 19th-century art analysis to decode artworks' meanings and cultural ties. While Mallet pioneered the concept, Panofsky's three-phase method became foundational. Its adaptation to China's dynamic cultural context highlights enduring academic and aesthetic relevance.

[Objective] This paper aims to explore the application of Panofsky's iconographic theory after its localization and development in China. Through an iconographic analysis of the 1980s vernacular realist oil painting *Spring Wind Has Awakened*, it aims to provide novel perspectives for the development of Chinese contemporary art.

[Method] Applying Panofsky's theory, a qualitative analysis of *Spring Wind Has Awakened* examines symbolic meanings and cultural contexts to assess its aesthetic and theoretical contributions.

[Results] The analysis indicates that, after localization and development, Panofsky's iconographic method has become an important tool in the study of Chinese art history. This method offers a new perspective for understanding the aesthetic preferences and cultural connotations present in China's vernacular realist oil paintings, and it provides valuable insights for the development of contemporary art.

[Conclusion] The application of Panofsky's iconographic analysis in China has verified its significance and practical utility in art history research. Through the analysis of "*Spring Wind Has Awakened*", this paper demonstrates the unique value of iconography in revealing the intrinsic meanings and cultural connections of artworks, thereby offering theoretical support and new research directions for contemporary Chinese art studies.

Keywords: Irving Panofsky; Iconography; He Duoling; *The Spring Breeze Has Awakened*

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1 Introduction

In the 1980s, Irving Pannowsky's art theories were formally introduced into the field of art research in China, and gradually became the focus of academic discussion. His iconographic viewpoints were especially widely noticed, not only triggering in-depth discussions in art theory circles, but also slowly unfolding in the iconographic interpretation of Chinese oil paintings, and achieving certain results (Shu,2019). It is worth mentioning that He Duoling's masterpiece 'Spring Breeze Has Awakened' stirred up extensive and far-reaching repercussions in the Chinese art world, and I'm afraid that even the creator himself had not expected the profound impact.

At that time, when China's reform and opening-up policy was in full swing, along with the clarification of the goal of the 'Four Worlds' construction and the historical process of 'Reform and Rehabilitation', the entire literary and artistic circles ushered in a profound emancipation of thought and creative innovation. During this period, issues such as humanitarianism and human nature became hot topics of research in the field of literature and art, while the field of artistic creation gave birth to such art schools as vernacular realism and scarism, which generally focused on the deep review and profound reflection on the life of young intellectuals in their choice of subject matter. Among them, Spring Breeze Has Awakened, created by He Duoling in 1982, fully demonstrates the artist's ability to delicately and precisely grasp the life experience and the subject's emotions in the process of dealing with the subject matter related to the intellectual youth. It is also because of this work that He Duoling is regarded as one of the most important representatives of 'scar art' in the process of contemporary art. By analysing the pre-image logos, image logos and iconographic interpretations of Spring Breeze Has Awakened one by one, we can understand the artistic motifs, image stories and fables of the work, and reveal the deeper meaning of its symbolic world, which will deepen our understanding of He Duoling's artistic creations, and provide new perspectives and ideas for the interpretation of Chinese contemporary art works, highlighting the unique value and far-reaching impact of the methodology of iconography in the study of art history. It also provides new perspectives and ideas for the interpretation of Chinese contemporary art works, highlighting the unique value and far-reaching influence of pictorial methods in art history research.

2 Irving Pannowsky and Pictorialism

Irving Panofsky is an internationally renowned art critic and art historian, an American Jewish scholar, and the first scholar to comprehensively explain Warburg's iconography. His contribution to the development of iconography can be said to be outstanding, and his far-reaching influence has been deeply imprinted in the field of art history. His theory of thought does not exist in isolation, but is deeply influenced by Kant, the German philosopher, writer, and founder of classical philosophy, especially Kant's unique insight that art is a creation of genius, which undoubtedly injects Irving Panofsky's theory of art with a richer connotation.

In exploring the origins of iconography, it is important to mention that it was first introduced in the modern sense of the discipline in 1912, when the shadow of the First World War had not yet fully enveloped Europe, Aby Warburg first put forward the idea of modern iconography at the International Conference on the History of Art in Rome. Then, in 1915, Irving Pannowsky, in his book *The Problem of Style in the Plastic Arts*, systematically criticised Wolfring's method of formal analysis and his double-rooted theory of style with the help of semantics and logic. Pannowsky thus laid the theoretical foundation of interpretive art history and formally brought the issue of interpretation in art history into the realm of academic discussion.

In other words, art history cannot stop at the classification and description of reproduction modes, but should fully reveal the psychological and historical reasons for the above reproduction modes, so that the interpretive role of art history on the spiritual level can be better played (Chen,2023). Whether artists or art historians, in describing and interpreting works of art, meaning and form are closely linked, there is no clear boundary between the two, this article also shows that his three levels of iconographic analysis of the doctrine has been basically shaped. 1921, Irving Panofsky went to the University of Hamburg, Germany, as a teacher, and for a short time to facilitate the University of Cahill constructed a close academic contacts, thus laying down his own theory of iconography. This laid the theoretical foundation of his own iconography.

Irving Panofsky's philosophical methodology begins with *The Concept of the Artistic Will*, as seen in his German-language dissertation. In the first note to this work he states that it is a continuation of an article published many years earlier in the same journal (Chen,2022). The release of Irving Panofsky's work, *Studies in Picturesmithing*, marked a major historical turning point for pictorialism, suggesting that it had ceased to be an auxiliary discipline and had become an indispensable cornerstone in the study of art history. The publication of *Studies in Pictorialism* in 1939 is generally regarded by the academic community as a sign of the emergence of pictorialism (Sun,2021).

Irving Panofsky pointed out that iconography belongs to one of the ways to study the history of Western art, a comprehensive exposition of the main content of works of art, the key to which is the study of the cultural significance of the work as well as the subject matter and other aspects. Irving Panofsky emphasises that the method of iconographic research is primarily aimed at reconstructing meaning, i.e. the iconographic approach, where the reader is able to go through the process of the artist's creation once again, and to appreciate the reasons for the artist's choice of meaning for a particular form of reproduction. Irving Panofsky in the study of iconography in the iconographic interpretation, iconographic analysis, the former iconographic description of the three major levels of division, the majority of experts and scholars in the study of the above three major levels from shallow to deep, layer by layer to develop the analysis and combination of (Huang, 2023).The research method of iconography in the meaning of cognitive level of interpretation of art images to the height of the reconstruction of meaning, the effective theoretical basis provided to the image hermeneutics and image interpretation. Its aesthetic thought focuses on the study of literature, history, and different documentary collections, with a strong sense of history. It focuses on combining aesthetic research and aesthetic viewpoints into scientific nature, with a precision close to that of scientific nature, breaking the boundaries of disciplines.

3 He Duoling's Artistic Career and The Spring Breeze Has Awakened

Born in 1948 in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, known as the 'Land of Heaven', He Duoling was born into a scholarly family, with a mother who specialised in classical literature and a father who was an economist. From an early age, he demonstrated a remarkable artistic talent, taking a keen interest in painting at the age of three and publishing his own work in magazines at the age of seven. At the age of 10, he was already winning honours in international children's drawing competitions, which undoubtedly augurs well for his future in the Chinese art world. He is now a member of the Chinese Artists Association and a national-level artist, and his profound artistic attainments have won him the Silver and Bronze Medals at the 6th National Art Works Exhibition, the Bronze Medal at the 7th National Art Works Exhibition, and the Monaco Government Prize at the 22nd Monte-Carlo International Grand Prix of Art. 1969, He responded to the call of the youth policy and went to the Daliang Mountains of Sichuan Province, where he worked as a

team member, and the land provided him with an unceasing source of energy and support, despite the harshness of life in the countryside. Despite the hardships of rural life, the land provided him with an endless stream of creative inspiration. He chose to transcend the hardships of life and immerse himself more in the magnificent scenery of nature. In the fields and mountains, he listened to the sound of pine waves, looked at the distant mountains, and felt the magnificent beauty of nature. This period of youth life was more like a spiritual practice, enabling him to find himself in the embrace of nature, thus laying the foundation for his later free-spirited and poetic artistic style. Since then, he has merged his emotions with the rhythm of nature, and sketched out an exclusive art world with his paintbrush.

At the age of 29, He Duoling was admitted to the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, where he furthered his studies in the oil painting class in 1979. His work ‘Spring Breeze Has Awakened’ became an exemplary work in the wave of ‘Scar Art’ in the 1980s. ‘Scar Art’ was an important art movement that emerged in Sichuan in the 1980s, expressing the oppression and trauma that people suffered in their hearts and daily lives after a decade of catastrophe. The artists gradually turned away from the aura of idealism in their creations and turned their attention to the real situation of ordinary people. As a result, He Duoling left a distinctive mark of ‘He Duoling Aesthetics’ in the Chinese art world, with his grey tones and subdued expression presenting a deep insight into human nature and society. As a representative work of He Duoling, Spring Breeze Has Awakened is not only a typical work of ‘scar art’, but also originates from the artist's personal experience as a youth, reflecting his insight and reflection on that special era.



Fig 1:He Duoling completing his work on Spring Breeze Has Awakened 1981

Image source:Online

As He Duoling said in his correspondence about Spring Breeze Has Awakened, ‘Like most of my contemporaries, I have long since said goodbye to that world, but it has not disappeared from my heart. On the contrary, whenever I want to draw something, it comes out so clearly in front of my eyes - it is a poor and scabrous place. Bare slopes, desolate riverbanks, nothing pleasing to the eye; the sky looked down indifferently on the earth, and the farmer beat his oxen hard because it was always trying to nibble off a wedge of grass from the ridge. I rolled through three years there. Some people may appreciate the shoes of my pen that have broken the run and think that it is rich in interest but it is not the life itself that has kept me there for a long time, but the place where the purest nature of mankind lies.’ (He,1982) He Duoling has mentioned that what is engraved in his heart is not the intellectual youth life itself, but the purest human

nature in that time, and the painter has expressed his nostalgia for those years and the imprint that the intellectual youth life has left on his soul many times. Using Pannowsky's method of iconography, He Duoling's artistic expression can be analysed in terms of the image, schema and content of the painting Spring Breeze Has Awakened.

4 Irving Panofsky's Iconographic Perspective on Spring Has Awakened

4.1 Pre-Imagery Level: The Deconstruction of the Artistic Matrix of Natural Subjects

The object of study of pre-imagery is the first nature or the natural subject composition of the matrices, i.e., things that can be recognised by looking at them, objective narrative representational qualities, and interpretations based on actual experience. The composition of colours and lines in the work, the reproduction of different natural objects such as animals and people, it focuses on the form of the work's own artistic language. In contrast to the formal analytical view proposed by Wolfring, who paid particular attention to formal analysis, even words such as pillar and man need to be circumvented, proto-photographic description relies more on the personal experience of the connoisseur for the direct identification of the parent subject, so as to identify the things and events that have been presented in a variety of forms under different historical conditions. Thus, it can be seen that its iconographic research allows for the effective realisation of 'rebellious' stylistic research on the first level: through the pure analysis and deconstruction of the artistic elements, the subject and the object are pinpointed - even though pre-Imaginic descriptions are corrected mainly according to the stylistic history (Qi&Fan,2011).



Fig 2: 'Spring has awakened' He Duoling 1981 96cm ×130cm Now in the National Art Museum of China

Image source:Online

In Spring Breeze Has Awakened (Figure 2), He Duoling's delicate brushstrokes and serene compositions present the universalising connotations of the natural theme. This 1981 work was inspired by the vibrant

lyrics of Schubert's song 'Twilight Spring', 'The Spring Breeze Has Awakened'. The painting shows a little Yi girl sitting in the withered grass on a winter's day, her right index finger subconsciously placed in her mouth, her eyes pure and innocent, undisturbed by the world. Next to her are a small dog and a prone old ox, standing and resting in the weeds, creating a serene and profound atmosphere. Despite the bleakness of winter, on closer inspection there are some tender green buds peeking out of the withered grass, symbolising the emergence of spring.

On the level of pre-photojournalistic description, this work presents deeply symbolic details. The little girl's wind-blown hair, rosy face, frozen hands and bare ankles all present the harshness of winter in realistic detail. Her white blouse and green cloth waistband bring a hint of warmth, while the thin trousers and single shoes deepen the hardship of the character's environment. Details such as the dog's black and white fur and the old cow's mottled skin further render the winter's dreariness and chill. However, the work contains a quiet vitality in the cold atmosphere: the little girl sits quietly in the withered grass, as if in silent dialogue with nature; the old cow lies in the grass, seemingly waiting for the coming of spring; the puppy looks up at the sky, revealing its exploration and desire for the unknown.

This kind of pre-photographic analysis reveals the artist's natural elements and emotional attachment in his works. By depicting figurative natural scenes, He Duoling conveys his concern for the innocence of humanity and his respect for the power of life. 'Spring Breeze Has Awakened' is not only a recollection of the youth years, but also a eulogy of the simple life, which conveys the artist's poetic understanding of life and nature. Through the portrayal of tenacious vitality in winter, the artist not only creates a vivid natural motif visually, but also evokes a deep resonance in the viewer's heart about resilience, purity and hope.

4.2 The level of iconography: the world of stories and fables in images of programmed subjects

The research object of image journal analysis is the story and allegory behind the images composed of secondary or programmed themes, i.e., the meaning conveyed by the images. At this stage, people analyse the reasons and meanings of the appearance of the images in the historical records by going deeper into the themes of the images and speculate on the possible general rules of the appearance of the themes such as the concept, nature of the story, etc., so in the analysis stage, it is necessary to have a wealth of knowledge and master the original documents to understand the evolution of the images in different historical contexts (Hu,2021). Interpretation is based on canonical knowledge, while revision of interpretation is based on genre history. At this level, the analyses mainly focus on the historical allegory behind the images to explain the creative themes, but at the same time, factors such as the customs and historical traditions of the works need to be explored in depth in order to achieve an accurate interpretation of the connotation of the works. However, this process can be highly subjective, such as perspective analysis and historical material extraction (Yang,2024).

'Spring Breeze Has Awakened' has a unique composition and symbolism, adopting a top-down perspective composition, removing the traditional mid-range, far-range and horizon, and increasing the intimacy and spatial cohesion of the characters and animals in the picture. In the painting, the little girl is placed on the left side of the picture, while the image of the old cow, although only half of it is shown, forms the centre of gravity of the vision and enhances the sense of downward slanting compression. The small dog at the bottom right of the picture forms a balanced structure, carrying this sense of visual pressure through a

triangular composition. The spatial arrangement of the figures and animals has been carefully considered, showing a subtle relationship between the three: the old cow and the little girl are at an angle of about 45 degrees, the little girl extends down to the right at an angle of about 60 degrees, and the little dog, although not directly obscured, forms a circular triangular layout with the two. This layout cleverly surrounds the blank grass in the centre of the picture, making the whole composition harmonious. The artist's arrangement of the faces and eyes of the three figures further strengthens the spatial sense of the picture: the old ox gazes at the left front, the little girl gazes at the lower left of the picture, and the little dog tilts its head up to look at the sky, and the direction of these lines of sight extends out to the vast sky above and the vast earth below, creating a sense of spatial depth and fluidity.

The ingenious positional arrangement of the little girl, the old cow and the dog and the construction of the whole scene create a strong and realistic 'sense of scene', which makes the viewer feel as if he or she has been instantly drawn into the real scene full of life and emotional temperature. The generation of this 'sense of scene' is not accidental, but an inevitable product of the artist's private experience and unique perspective. The artist's personal experience in the countryside during his insertion into the army has provided him with rich materials and inspiration, and his understanding of rural life is not limited to the hardships and difficulties at the material level, but is full of personalised beautiful memories and literary romantic imagination. The artist did not regard that period of time simply as a period of suffering to be forgotten or escaped from, on the contrary, he was fascinated by every inch of land and every strand of wind in the countryside with an almost obsessive attitude. In those days, he read a lot of books, especially the classics of foreign literature, which broadened his horizons and enriched his emotional world, making his understanding of the countryside more profound and multi-dimensional, and incorporating this temperament into his paintings.

In addition to the 'sense of scene' of the composition, the technique of the work also provides important support for the creation of this atmosphere. The artist is inspired by the works of American painter Andrew Wyeth, especially in the creation of texture. He had seen prints of Wyeth's works in 'World Art', which stimulated his interest in Wyeth's approach to texture. His pursuit of texture was no longer satisfied by traditional realism. The artist painted the grass in detail with a single brush stroke, and in order to achieve a bright and high-gloss effect, he sandpapered the picture several times to give it a fibreboard-like texture, creating an aged visual effect. The head of the little girl has been repeatedly modified, and the cotton dress is the result of a copy he wore in the heat of July. The details of the girl's hair, the dog's hair and the dead grass in the meadow are also delicately depicted, adding texture and a sense of perspective to the image. The choice of technique is not just about visual representation, but also about the artist's deliberate creation of a sense of time and history in the expression of his content.

'Spring Breeze Has Awakened' became the artistic expression of He Duoling's life as a youth, and even more so, it is the condensation and sublimation of his personal feelings. The artist's concentrated depiction of single objects and the rendering of the environment draws the viewer into that particular era, with the atmosphere and mood expressed in details that are both unified and restrained, and with colours and forms that are harmonious and natural. The whole picture adopts a soft middle tone, and the main image of the little girl wearing red clothes becomes the most vivid contrasting colour in the picture, forming a sharp contrast with the warm grey tones around. The delicate brushstrokes and soft middle tones in the picture create a strong lyrical atmosphere, and the whole picture carries a light sadness, poignancy and a kind of poetry without losing hope (Liao,2021).

4.3 The hermeneutic level of iconography: the excavation of the deeper meaning of the world of symbols

The third stage of iconography focuses on the interpretation of the deeper meanings of the symbolic world, and the term 'ikonologisch' was first introduced by Abi Wahlberg in 1912 in his book *Italian Art and International Astrology in the Palazzo Ferraraschi Fano*. Wahlberg emphasised that the central task of iconology is to uncover the deeper meaning or content behind a work, i.e. its conceptual and symbolic value. Subsequently, Pannovsky inherited and developed Wahlburg's theory of iconology in 'Studies in Iconology', and clearly defined the connotation of iconological interpretation: the dominant values of the times and the principles deeply rooted in a class, a nation, a religion are embodied in artistic creation through the hands of an individual and together with his or her personal character. It is a process that leads from the mere work of art to the humanities or society. The third level is the way to grasp the connotation behind the art work, and art presents different cultural connotations in different fields (Du,2012). In this process, pure forms, motifs, pictorial elements, storylines and allegories are all seen as external manifestations of deeper principles, and by analysing these elements, the researcher is able to gain insight into and understand the symbolic significance of the artwork.

He Duoling's *Spring Breeze Has Awakened*, as one of the masterpieces of scar art, is often interpreted as the gradual recovery of Chinese society after the 'cold winter'. The withered grass that is about to return to green and the little girl's messy bangs on her forehead are widely regarded as symbols of the 'spring breeze', suggesting that society is awakening from the suffering of the Cultural Revolution and embracing a new beginning. Although the little girl's eyes are slightly confused, the ground under her feet is still solid, and the old cow and dog guarding her side seem to foreshadow the coming warmth of spring, when the power of life will always be resilient and cyclical. It is widely believed that the resurgence of Chinese society in the early 1980s signalled the end of the era of 'God' and the rise of the era of 'Man'. As an art movement, Scar Art, together with Scar Literature, exposed and reflected on the traumas of the Cultural Revolution, and this critical theme was quickly transferred to the field of fine art, contributing to a trend of fine art centred on reflection and criticism. After the reform and opening up of China, the Chinese art world drew on the forms and expressions of Western art, and the humanitarian and lyrical realism of Andrew Wyeth became a source of inspiration for young artists. He Duoling, as a leading figure in scar art, incorporated Wyeth's style into his own creations, which contained sadness in calmness, and the emotions of the scars formed a subtle but profound resonance with the natural imagery in the paintings. Along with the spring breeze of reform and opening up, the buried emotions and creative inspirations of artists were awakened, and He Duoling thus became an outstanding representative of the art world at that time, whose works were fresh, poetic, and light, leading the audience into a new spiritual world.

In the 1980s, the 'Scar Artists' chose to return to nature, replacing the revolutionary theme with a realistic approach, and expressing humanitarian sadness through grey and cold tones. This shift marked a return to the revolutionary theme and a return to the concern for humanity, such as Luo Zhongli's *Father* and Liu Yulian's *Scars*. He Duoling's *Spring Breeze Has Awakened* has become a classic of this period. However, the artist's own interpretation is different from the general political symbolism of the society. He emphasises that the 'spring breeze' in the painting does not symbolise the recovery of the country or the reform and opening up of the country, but rather the 'natural spring breeze', and that the work, through the lyrical atmosphere as well as the sadness of the imagery, brings back a lot of the Chinese vernacular realism in the

painting. Through its lyrical atmosphere and poignant imagery, the work formally opens the door to the delicate depiction of many aspects of Chinese vernacular realist painting. Over the decades, this work has touched the hearts of countless viewers, opened up new perspectives and aesthetic values for the prosperity of Chinese oil painting, and established an indelible position for modern Chinese oil painting with its poetic and lyrical temperament. 'Spring Breeze Has Awakened' also reflects He Duoling's stage-by-stage understanding of the connotation of "poetry". Music, poetry and other art forms injected rich cultural elements into his paintings, gradually shifting his works from the lyrical and poetic style of the early period to the ethereal and philosophical qualities of the later period, and ultimately fitting in naturally with the traditional Chinese aesthetic system.

5 Conclusion

Panofsky's humanist approach to iconography emphasizes that image interpretation should go beyond surface depictions to uncover deeper documentary, thematic, and symbolic meanings. In analyzing 'Spring Breeze Has Awakened', a purely pictorial narrative might focus on natural elements but overlook the humanistic sentiment and historical context. By integrating He Duoling's personal experiences, the early 1980s social background, and Western artistic influences, one can grasp the artist's reflections on innocence, resilience, and nostalgia. Contemporary iconographic research, now widely interdisciplinary, offers valuable insights into Chinese art, deepening our understanding of its historical and cultural significance.

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