

A Comparative Study of Expression and Representation in the Art of Vincent van Gogh and Zhu Da

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ABSTRACT

Vincent van Gogh and Zhu Da (Bada Shanren), while operating within distinct historical eras and cultural frameworks, each developed a highly individualized artistic language, transforming their canvases into a form of spiritual soliloquy. Van Gogh expressed the fervor and solitude of his inner world through liberated color and impassioned brushwork. In contrast, Zhu Da conveyed a sense of lofty detachment and spiritual alienation through minimalist brushwork and an austere, reserved visual poetry. Despite their divergent expressive modes, both artists moved beyond the objective representation of external forms. Instead, they reconfigured their works into direct symbols of internal psychic states. Their art bears the weight of profound questioning—interrogations of self, world, and the nature of existence—stemming from personal psychological and spiritual distress, while simultaneously serving as a vehicle for emotional catharsis. In this capacity, their work demonstrates art's unique power to act as a spiritual mirror, reflecting the profound depths of human experience.

KEYWORDS

Vincent van Gogh; Zhu Da; Expressive form; Comparative study

1 Introduction

In the protracted course of human artistic endeavor, certain souls resonate with profound power across vast expanses of time and space. The seventeenth-century Chinese painter Zhu Da and the nineteenth-century Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh represent two such artists—separated by two centuries and distinct cultural traditions, yet reflecting one another across spiritual distances. One channeled the sorrow and lofty solitude of a fallen dynasty through ink-wash depictions of withered lotus and aloof solitary birds; the other poured his longing for life and struggles with existence into swirling starry nights and blazing sunflowers. Their art does not merely replicate the external world, but constitutes a pure outpouring of inner emotional force onto the canvas. This study seeks to transcend the conventional boundaries between Eastern and Western aesthetics, exploring the parallel trajectories of their lives and spiritual conditions. It interrogates the expressionistic qualities embedded in their respective pictorial languages, excavates the emotional content at the core of their central visual motifs, and ultimately illuminates the shared expressive impulse that arises from universal human experience.

2 Parallels in Life Trajectories and Spiritual Circumstances

The life courses of Zhu Da and Vincent van Gogh resemble epics steeped in suffering and solitude. Their spiritual trajectories, like two fissures that never intersected yet ran parallel, are deeply etched into the historical fabric of their respective eras, collectively pointing to a shared destiny of individuals on the margins grappling with inner truth.

Zhu Da's (c. 1626–1705) life began amidst the cataclysmic collapse of the Ming dynasty. As a descendant of the Ming imperial lineage, the trauma of losing his dynasty and family not only stripped him of worldly status but also forced him to confront dual crises of survival and moral integrity. He first took Buddhist vows, later becoming a Daoist priest. The succession of his sobriquets—from "Xuege" to "Geshan" to "Bada Shanren"—veiled a displaced loyalist's heart that could find no peace. This circumstance imbued his inner world with a dual character: first, a profound, bone-deep sorrow for his fallen dynasty and cultural heritage, which elevated his art into a holistic lament for a lost civilization that transcended personal grief; second, an extreme, resulting pride and alienation. He chose feigned muteness and madness, maintaining a resolute distance from the new Qing order, shutting out the social world, and channeling all his energy into ink and brush. His art thus became the sole conduit for his existential plight—a thunderclap within silence, a conflagration beneath the cold and desolate.

Van Gogh's (1853–1890) spiritual struggles stemmed more from the intense conflict between the individual and modern society, and between his inner self and external reality. His early professional failures as an art dealer, teacher, and lay preacher foreshadowed his fundamental misfit within societal structures. After committing to painting, his lifelong financial dependence on his brother Theo, emotionally fraught and unrequited romantic pursuits, volatile relationships culminating in the violent clash with Paul Gauguin and his self-mutilation, alongside the likely torment of mental illness, relegated him to the social and psychological periphery. The acute contradiction of his life lay between his yearning for

understanding, love, and spiritual warmth, and the reality of cold rejection, misunderstanding, and alienation. Behind the shifting geographical backdrops—the blazing sun of Arles, the walls of the Saint-Rémy asylum, the crows over the wheatfields at Auvers—lies the trajectory of a soul oscillating violently between hope and despair. Van Gogh later reflected that even as flowers fade and leaves fall, vibrant life can emerge against all odds. For him, painting was far from a leisurely pastime; it was a physiological necessity, a bulwark against psychic collapse, and a desperate quest to affirm his own existence to the world.

Despite their vastly different cultural contexts and specific circumstances, the spiritual conditions of Zhu Da and van Gogh reveal profound similarities. Both were “outsiders,” marginalized figures existing outside the mainstream of their respective socio-cultural milieus, bearing immense loneliness. Their inner worlds accumulated intense emotions—be it the loyalist’s grievous indignation or the individual’s existential anxiety and passionate longing for life—that could neither be dissolved nor comprehended by the 世俗 world. Ultimately, both had no choice but to channel art as their sole means of expression, resistance, and redemption, transforming canvas or paper and silk into a direct reflection of the soul. This expressive impulse, born from the depths of their lived experience, constitutes the core driving force behind their artistic creation.

3 Comparison of Expressive Formal Language in Their Works

When inner emotions demand an outlet akin to molten lava, the formal language of art becomes the decisive channel for their ultimate manifestation. Zhu Da and Vincent van Gogh employed radically different material mediums—one ink, the other oil; one rooted in the East Asian *xieyi* (idea-skill) tradition, the other in Western Post-Impressionist exploration. Yet, within their respective practices, each elevated formal language to serve the expression of intense emotion, achieving a thoroughgoing transformation of expression itself.

Zhu Da’s formal language is grounded in a philosophy of “reduced brushwork” (*jianbi*), characterized by extreme concision and a potent, restrained expressivity. His use of ink and brush achieves an ethos of severe economy, where each mark is deliberate and potent. His brushlines possess a weight and rhythmic modulation akin to a vajra pestle; the fish, birds, or lotus stalks rendered with his sparse, minimalist strokes nonetheless embody a monumental latent force. Through the interplay of “flying white” (*feibai*) and intentionally hesitant strokes, these forms exhibit a tenacious vitality and an unyielding posture. The gradations of ink in his work are rendered with meticulous subtlety. By masterfully controlling the interaction and permeation of water and ink, he coaxes a rich spectrum of densities, moistures, dryness, and desiccation from the monochrome black, thereby constructing an ethereal and profoundly silent cosmic atmosphere. Within Zhu Da’s reductive brushwork, the technique of “dry brush” (*kubi*) is consistently evident. Building upon his simplified strokes, the use of dry brush further enhances the painting’s ethereal and austere resonance. Negative space (*liubai*) is a fundamental and often dominant compositional element in Zhu Da’s works. His compositions are renowned for their audacious and unprecedented strangeness. The extensive, unpainted areas in his paintings are not mere emptiness. Instead, this void functions as a pictorial device that carries emotional weight, symbolizes the cosmos, or implies boundless desolation. Thus, the negative space is not blank but a mode of presenting imagery where substantial meaning resides within the insubstantial. In his paintings, elements such as lotus leaves, flowers, pine trees, and rocks often appear unanchored, as the ground or water surfaces are rendered through strategic omission. This interplay between the painted and the unpainted generates a dynamic vitality, where substance and void reciprocally give rise to each other, imbuing the scene with a vigorous sense of life.

This artistic approach is deeply intertwined with Zhu Da’s engagement with Chan (Zen) Buddhism. Following the collapse of his dynasty and family, Zhu Da entered the Buddhist monastic community. His life experiences and Chan philosophy exerted a decisive influence on his late artistic style. The ideal of “ethereal naturalness” he espoused resonates profoundly with the aesthetic of artistic conception created through the use of negative space. Pictorial elements are often positioned at the margins or corners of the composition, or depicted in tilted, precarious states, generating a potent visual tension imbued with instability. For instance, in works such as *Deer under a Tree*, the deer’s raised head and aloof expression, or in *Bird on a Withered Tree*, the bird perched alone on a dead branch, its head tilted back and gazing upward with a contemptuous “white-eyed” stare, embody through their posture a direct manifestation of solitary indignation. The forms of depicted objects, such as withered trees, are highly exaggerated and simplified, even to the point of grotesqueness. Birds are often shown with their pupils pressed against the upper eyelids, rendering an expression of cold indifference and silent mockery. Similarly, the unique depiction of fish with upturned white bellies in works like *Fish and Birds*, or a bird standing on jagged, bizarrely shaped rocks, its eyes downcast, alongside gnarled and contorted tree branches, all deviate from conventional naturalism. These forms function as direct projections of the artist’s internal imagery. This formal language employs the most economical brushstrokes to evoke the richest associations, containing immense depth within extreme simplicity. Beneath the surface of cold detachment and stark elegance lies a reservoir of intense, fervent emotion.

In contrast to Zhu Da, van Gogh's formal language constitutes a feast of "addition"—a fervent chromatic outpouring coupled with the spiraling dynamism of his brushwork. He moved beyond Impressionism's objective analysis of transient color under natural light, instead imbuing color with wholly subjective emotional and symbolic significance. The vibrant yellows, cobalt blues, and vivid greens of his Arles period radiate like a direct emanation of life force, while the interwoven deep blues, olive greens, ochres, and agitated orange-reds in his later works from Saint-Rémy and Auvers convey a deepening melancholy and restless agitation. In his hands, color transcends mere description, becoming intensely expressive, wielding direct visual impact and psychological potency. His brushstroke system holds revolutionary significance. Short, thick, twisting, and swirling strokes materialize like neural fibrils, imbuing the surface with kinetic energy and raw force. As one English critic noted, van Gogh "devoted all his energy to pursuing the simplest, most common thing in the world: the sun." This is evident whether in the swirling galactic vortex dominating the sky in *The Starry Night*, the brilliant, flame-like undulations and pressingly close blooms in *Irises*, or the golden, twisting, rising petals of *Sunflowers*. His brushwork renders the entire pictorial field into a state of intense movement and concentrated solar energy, transforming natural motifs into direct cartographies of an inner storm. His compositional approach is equally charged with subjective tension. Horizons are often tilted, viewpoints dramatically brought forward, and perspectives deliberately distorted. All elements serve the imperative of intense emotional expression rather than optical verisimilitude. The objective presentation of an artwork can reflect the evolving inner emotions of its creator. As symbolic embodiments of an individual's spiritual state, artworks manifest the creator's unique artistic style through color, line, and formal characteristics, thereby realizing the expression of the creator's personal psyche and emotions.

Their approaches to formal language stand in stark contrast. Zhu Da's artistic expression turns inward, condensing profound meaning within sparse simplicity, employing negative space and subtlety to stimulate the viewer's imaginative participation. Van Gogh's artistic expression, in contrast, erupts outward, asserting the raw soul through vehement intensity, utilizing saturated compositions and potent visual elements for direct sensory impact. Beneath this divergence, however, surges a shared and pivotal current. Both artists executed a thorough rupture from the comparatively objective, balanced, and harmonious aesthetic conventions prevalent within their respective traditions. They each radically intensified the emotional capacity of formal elements, transforming line, ink tone, color, brushstroke, and composition into direct vessels and symbols of feeling. In their work, artistic form ceases to be merely a tool for depicting the world; it becomes the foundational building block for constructing a parallel, internal emotional universe—a world wholly their own.

4 Core Imagery and Emotional Interpretation in the Works

The creation of a formal language ultimately serves the shaping of imagery and the infusion of emotion. These images, like signatures of their inner worlds, recur and evolve, forming the most profound and moving chapters of their art. Zhu Da's core imagery constitutes a highly refined allegory of solitary estrangement. Birds and animals serve as his most classical symbols. They are most often depicted singly, with hunched backs and retracted necks, perched precariously atop perilous rocks or standing alone amidst withered lotus stalks. Particularly iconic are the eyes rendered with upward-turned whites "casting a white-eyed glance at the blue sky." Executed with the most economical brushwork, this detail crystallizes an attitude of disdain for the mundane world, cold detachment, and an inner depth of grief and vigilance. It becomes an enduring symbol of the unyielding spirit of the yimin. In his depictions of flora, plants consistently appear broken, withered, and decaying. Their once-lush forms are reduced to stark, lean structures standing alone in cold ponds. This serves both as a metaphor for his personal fate and a symbol of the arduous maintenance of unsullied virtue within a harsh reality. The forms of his gnarled trees and bizarre rocks are jagged, possessing a solid, unyielding, and off-balance quality that starkly contrasts with the frail vegetation. They symbolize a nearly obstinate, prideful force that buttressed his inner world. Through techniques of exaggerated distortion and a posture of detached observation, he silently exposes and ridicules the absurdities he perceived in history and contemporary reality. The emotion conveyed is restrained and concentrated, akin to a powerful undercurrent flowing beneath a layer of ice. Collectively, these motifs construct a pictorial world that is austere, desolate, tense, and fraught with unease.

Solitude fundamentally shaped Vincent van Gogh's childhood, a period he later described as "bleak and barren." At the core of van Gogh's oeuvre lies a visual articulation of security and isolation. The sunflower stands as his most iconic motif—dense, tormented, and fiery efflorescences that emanate an astonishing vitality from humble earthenware jars. These works transcend mere representation of friendship; they embody the artist's own fervor for life and his almost devotional reverence for light and warmth, constituting a tragic striving toward boundless brilliance within a confined medium. In *The Starry Night*, swirling nebulae, an incandescent moon, and undulating hills transform a tranquil night sky into a psychic cosmos, pulsating with mysterious rhythm. The cypress, writhing like a dark flame beside the church, ascends as a melancholic conduit linking earth and firmament—a symbol of mortality and the enigma of eternity. Similarly, in his iris paintings, executed during his asylum years, each bloom exhibits distinct character through vibrant,

unconventional coloration and contorted linearity. This approach aligns with the artist's recurrent wheatfield compositions, where analogous expressive techniques convey both singularity of form and depth of emotional resonance.

The motif of the wheatfield serves as a profound witness to the evolution of van Gogh's existential state—from the radiant golden waves shimmering under the Arles sun, brimming with anticipation of harvest, to the darkened, wind-lashed stalks bending beneath storm-laden skies and swirling flocks of crows at Auvers, foreboding an impending end. This progression encapsulates the full arc of the artist's inner journey, moving from hopeful abundance to an acute presentiment of closure. Yet, amid this visible transformation, van Gogh's artistic vision remained intrinsically consistent. As he wrote to Theo, "My inner self has not changed... What I cling to, believe in and love, I cling to, believe in and love all the more. Tranquility and consolation remain the ultimate aim; the search for truth, the ultimate path; and sorrow, the ultimate emotion through which redemption is attained." This statement underscores a constancy of purpose beneath the shifting surfaces of his subjects. This enduring fervor did not go unnoticed by his contemporaries. Art critic Émile Bernard, reflecting on an exhibition, observed that van Gogh's paintings left an impression of vital harmony, noting that "an intense love of life is the dominant feature of these canvases." Thus, even as his subject matter grew somber, the expressive force and passionate engagement that defined his work—from sunlit fields to tempestuous horizons—remained unwavering, united by a profound, unyielding dedication to emotional and spiritual truth.

In comparing the two, the emotional cadence and conceptual underpinnings in Zhu Da's works are conveyed with greater reticence and complexity, whereas the imagery in van Gogh's oeuvre demonstrates a more immediate mode of emotional expression. Van Gogh's affective language is characterized by a raw, unrestrained quality, possessing a direct and visceral power to move the viewer. Yet, whether it is the solitary bird casting a sidelong glance or the swirling night sky, the withered lotus and barren rock or the blazing sunflowers, all transcend mere representation. They become absolute symbols of the artist's spiritual condition, vehicles for profound interrogation and emotional catharsis—an individual's confrontation with the self, the world, and the very nature of existence under immense psychological pressure.

5 Conclusion

Authentic expressionism is never a superficial venting of emotion nor a mere manipulation of form. Rather, it constitutes a profound struggle—a magnificent endeavor wherein an individual, confronting fundamental existential crises, mobilizes complete sincerity and creative force to translate inner truth into visual form. Both Zhu Da and Vincent van Gogh reveal this same verity: upon their canvases flows the very essence of being and struggle. Their works stand as powerful beacons of the human spirit amidst profound isolation, cutting through the passage of time to illuminate one another. Together, they affirm art's enduring power as a means of redemption and a testament to existence. In this silent dialogue, the withered lotus and the sunflower, the solitary bird and the starry night, collectively narrate a timeless allegory of solitude, defiance, passion, and being.

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