

An Analysis of the Aesthetic of Imaginative Space in Sculpture

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Abstract

Sculpture is a form of art with diverse expressions, and the concept of space in sculpture has become increasingly complex, gaining significant attention from artists. Artists are no longer solely focused on the simple expression of shapes and the relationships between forms; they now seek spiritual elevation through the space in sculpture. In the field of sculpture creation, the expression of imaginative space has gradually become one of the most important factors. Many sculptors, both domestic and international, make full use of imaginative space to enrich and perfect the language of sculpture. By cleverly utilizing imaginative space, the meaning and depth of sculpture can be enhanced. Understanding the concept of imaginative space, learning from the perspectives and practices of artists in this regard, and both inheriting and innovating are essential. Starting from the characteristics of imaginative space, artists should inherit and innovate in their understanding and use of space, incorporating space appropriately into their own sculpture creations. Recognizing and exploring the imaginative space of sculpture, appreciating the dynamic changes of this space, and experiencing its unexpected outward expansion force, absorbing power, and unique sense of mystery are important aspects. Understanding the role and effect of space in sculpture creation helps artists appreciate its significance. Imaginative space, as an essential component of sculptural space, is indispensable in the creative process. Only through conscious and intentional use can one explore the greater potential of sculpture creation.

Key words: Sculpture; Sculpture Art; Space; Imagination; Imaginative Space

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1. IMAGINATIVE SPACE IN SCULPTURE

Sculpture is an art form in space. It is the creation of an artwork by the sculptor, using materials as a medium to express thoughts and emotions in space. The form is the foundation of sculpture; it is the visual focal point and a crucial component of the sculpture. Space, however, is another vital part. Through reflection and experimentation, sculptors use various feasible methods to shape materials with three-dimensional properties, creating spatial, tangible, and visible artistic spaces that convey the sculptor's artistic thoughts and emotional essence. Sculpture has multiple perspectives, and a proper coordination of the relationships between the three-dimensional spaces enables these perspectives to be better realized. Sculpture space generally includes three parts: real space, virtual space, and imaginative space. Real space is the carrier of the sculptural form, while virtual space is the empty or transparent part outside the form. The coordination between real and virtual spaces creates the sculpture, while imaginative space exists beyond both, emerging from the spiritual resonance between the viewer and the sculpture.

Imaginative space is a "space" beyond real and virtual spaces. The sculptor creates with intent, and the work conveys the artist's thoughts and emotions. When viewers encounter the work, they generate associations and reflections, resulting in a blending of the sculptor's, the artwork's, and the viewer's consciousness, which forms the imaginative space. The content of imaginative space is not synchronized in terms of spatial or temporal dimensions. In this asynchrony, human imagination

is synthesized. Imaginative space is a product of human association; it refers to the spatial sensations or soul resonance that viewers experience when influenced by the sculptural work within the exhibition space. “The creation of the conceptual space originates from the artist’s inclinations, depends on the work’s connotation, and is realized through the resonance with the viewer. Good sculpture always leaves room for imagination, avoiding direct and overt displays, seeking a deeper perspective, adding a browsing aesthetic, and guiding the viewer’s imagination.”

Within the context of Chinese culture, traditional aesthetics advocate that “beauty lies in imagery.” Imaginative space corresponds to the “artistic conception” or “imagery” often emphasized in Chinese culture. It is not merely the physical world but an imagery world that exists solely within aesthetic activities. Imagery space, to some extent, illuminates the real space. This pursuit of aesthetics is one that Chinese artists particularly focus on. The imaginative space of a sculpture is especially crucial, as it forms the source and foundation of the sculpture. The creation and generation of imaginative space are full of uncertainty. Sculptors must guide the viewer through their works, expressing their thoughts and emotions accurately to create resonance. Overall, a sculpture without the support of imaginative space, without the resonance of the soul and thoughts, cannot be considered a complete sculpture.

2. EXPRESSION OF IMAGINATIVE SPACE

2.1 The Aesthetic of Hollow Space in Imagination

Sculptors continually experiment and explore various forms and techniques to express imaginative space in sculpture. This not only deepens the meaning of the sculpture but also enhances its spatial sense. Hollow space is a crucial element in the artistic treatment of imaginative space, particularly in the creation of aesthetic associations and highlighting the integrity and vitality of

the main subject. Often, the “imperfection” in sculpture enhances its beauty. By connecting the space, the internal space expands outward while the external space contracts, blending virtual space and real space perfectly. Sculptors can also create virtual space through the shaping of forms. The overlapping, splitting, and surrounding of forms create hollows, and the empty spaces within the forms seamlessly integrate with the surrounding space, improving the overall spatial composition. The directional movement in sculpture can also play a role in expanding space. In their creation, sculptors intentionally present the forms in different directional movements—upward, downward, forward, or backward—according to the intended expression, achieving a visual resonance with the artist’s inner spirit, and ultimately extending the imaginative space of the sculpture.

An example is Henry Moore’s *Reclining Figure* (Fig. 2.1). The composition of the work is simple, with a clear theme. The nearly abstract form is concise and straightforward, and the sculpture clearly displays the approximate proportions of the human body. The hollowed-out cavities in the figure resemble structural spaces in the body’s skeletal framework. The entire statue depicts a woman in a reclining pose. The prominent “holes” in the piece are part of Moore’s unique artistic approach. These “holes,” consciously arranged, serve two purposes: on one hand, they increase the internal tension of the sculpture, allowing the viewer to truly feel the natural structure of the human body; on the other hand, they emphasize the connection between different parts of the sculpture, highlighting the relationship between the statue and space. This enhances the three-dimensional spatial imagination, allowing viewers to experience different changes in the figure and background from various viewing angles, thus generating an aesthetic conception. This imaginative use of hollow space often carries the same formal significance as the solid parts, achieving an imaginative realm where “the virtual and the real give birth to each other.”



Figure 1
Reclining Figure by Henry Moore

2.2 The Aesthetic of Mirror Space in Imagination

Mirrors can reflect the surrounding space, presenting it within a new visual realm and creating an entirely new virtual space. The intentional use of mirrored virtual space allows different views from different angles, producing unexpected effects. Artist Anish Kapoor is a master in spatial creation, and mirrors are materials he frequently employs. Through reflection, mirrors combine sculpture with space, creating a unique imaginative space that offers a stunning visual experience. The light and environment are constantly changing, and the space around the sculpture is also in flux. The reflected image in the mirror changes continuously, and the sculpture itself transforms, offering viewers varying perspectives of the same sculpture. This interaction between the space and the viewer generates a dynamic connection, enhancing the imaginative space of the sculpture.

An excellent example of mirror space imagination is Zeng Chenggang's work *Lotus* (Fig. 2-2). The lotus has long been admired by scholars throughout history, with its cultural significance enriched by countless poems and writings, symbolizing the embodiment of ultimate goodness and beauty. The artist chose the pure and beautiful lotus as the subject but presented it in an unconventional form. The lotus pod he created is no



Figure 2-2
Lotus by Zeng Chenggang

2.3 The Aesthetic of the Fusion of Space in Imagination

The combination of imaginative space can have unexpected effects. Space is intangible, invisible, and untouchable; its perfectly timed expression can create a visual impact that resonates deeply with the viewer. Both virtual space and imaginative space have transparent qualities, which allow for the emergence of imaginative space, enabling the viewer to experience more of the artist's thoughts. "Artistic conception" is a form of imaginative space, and the imaginative space in sculpture is the manifestation of this artistic conception. Artistic conception is, in fact, imaginative space. Artists never confine themselves to the physical structures of real

longer the usual round and full shape; instead, it appears wilted and cracked, subjectively treated. Only the seeds hidden inside are presented with a polished, lustrous surface, and the decayed lotus conveys a deeper, more profound meaning. It is ancient and sorrowful but also filled with hope, offering a stronger sense of vitality. The sculpting technique used for the lotus is robust, solemn, and ancient, even exuding a certain strength and dominance. This reflects the vitality and spiritual temperament of a nation, embodying the will to conquer the material world and natural forms, as well as an active and progressive spirit full of life.

The lotus is sculpted from stainless steel, and a pool of clear water is used in conjunction with it, creating a harmonious reflection between the natural plant form and the spirit of natural life. The mirrored surface of the stainless steel reflects different scenes and projects a distant space, establishing a special connection. This evokes a refreshing atmosphere and a graceful resonance, symbolizing a deep concern for life. The unique form and artistic thought of Chinese art emerge from the soil of Chinese cultural consciousness. Only through a profound understanding of this cultural consciousness can one genuinely appreciate the distinct forms of Chinese art.

objects but instead express reality through perception and abstraction, conveying the essence of things in a sensorial manner. They push the boundaries of space through the form and characteristics of imaginative space, turning the unintentional into the intentional.

Xu Zhenglong is a practitioner of the exploration of spatial fusion. He focuses on the poetic symbolism and metaphors in sculpture, creating works that feel modern, such as his piece *Violin*. The form of the sculpture is ambiguous—neither fully human nor fully object, resembling something yet nothing, with a natural flow of thoughts and a harmonious fit. The form plays with paradoxes—what it represents, it is not; what it is, it has no name—everything is illusory, everything is a

coincidence, and everything is born of contradiction. This multi-faceted fusion of space, the isomorphic relationship between contrasting materials, and the merging of all things into one, create a boundaryless, formless, and indistinguishable entity. This could be the “imaginative trace of the divine and the material world.”

The work also reflects the influence of pop art, with its oversized sculptures of everyday objects. This was once a trend in contemporary Western sculpture, breaking the boundary between sculpture and everyday life, stripping traditional sculpture of its sacred aura, and placing sculpture on an equal footing with ordinary objects. The work subtly reflects the artist’s views on the rapid transformation of sculpture. Through this piece, the artist responds to issues concerning contemporary

sculpture and traditional sculpture, as well as the relationship between Chinese and Western sculpture.

The personal work *Queue, Stand in Line* is a subtle exploration of spatial fusion. The inspiration for this piece comes from the iconic Terracotta Warriors of China, representing a fusion of traditional sculptural language with modern sculptural expression. In the work, elements of traffic police are combined with the image of the Terracotta Warriors. As viewers approach the sculpture, they notice that the multiple figures of the Terracotta Warriors point in different directions, creating a sense of confusion. However, the seemingly chaotic directions actually reveal an order within the disorder. When the viewer shifts their focus to a distance, the arrangement forms a representative “E” shape.



Figure 2
Violin by Xu Zhenglong



Figure 3
Queue, Stand in Line by Li Ying

With the development of the times, advancements in technology, and social progress, artists’ exploration of imaginative space in sculpture has never stopped. The artistic forms of sculptural imaginative space have become increasingly diverse, and the language of space has become more refined. The expressiveness of space has gradually become an important factor in sculptural space, and the use of space is one of the most challenging aspects of artistic creation. The continuously enriched and evolving imaginative space in sculpture is essentially the process by which sculptors continually explore and experiment with form and space.

What defines a complete sculpture? On one hand, the philosophical meaning and spiritual depth within the work are crucial. On the other hand, it is essential to use an appropriate form of expression to complete

the work. Only when a sculpture touches the viewer visually can it move them on a deeper spiritual level. Imaginative space in sculpture is not a passive element; sculptors consciously use imaginative space to serve the overall integrity of the sculpture. Some sculptors even deliberately create imaginative space as part of their expression. As an essential component of sculptural space, imaginative space is indispensable in the creation process. Only by consciously and purposefully applying it can the completeness of sculptural space be ensured.

Starting from the imaginative space of sculpture, artists inherit and innovate their understanding and application of space, incorporating imaginative space into their sculptural works in a thoughtful manner. By understanding, exploring, and utilizing sculptural space, artists grasp the charm and transformation of space,

feeling the unexpected outward force and absorbing power of space, as well as its special mysterious quality. At the same time, they experience how space enhances the expression and impact of the sculpture, enriching and perfecting the language of sculpture. This leads to a more complete concept of sculptural space, forming open and diverse forms. Conscious application of imaginative space in the results of artists' experiments and explorations can further promote the development of sculptural space concepts, keeping pace with the times. People's understanding of sculptural space continues to evolve, and the exploration of imaginative space remains one of the crucial directions for future development.

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