

# *The Painting of Dreams: An Effective Expression of Reality*

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses, from the perspectives of aesthetics and psychology of literature and art, how artists can effectively express reality through dreams in their paintings. The discussion primarily revolves around several key questions. On one hand, it explores why artists choose dreams as a subject for their creations, why dreams represent a form of reality, and why paintings should also express reality. On the other hand, it acknowledges that while dreams can serve as an intuitive visual representation, they often feature absurd and chaotic scenarios. This paper aims to help art practitioners see the psychological logic of dreams in order to find the truth deep within their hearts. It also discusses how using dreams as a subject can visually present reality and emotionally resonate with the audience.

**Keywords:** Painting, Dreams, Reality, Psychological Distance, Methods of Expression.

## 1. Introduction

Painting exists as a means to express emotions, thoughts, and explore reality. What is the reality that it should express, and how should it be sought? How can one strip away the external appearances of things on a flat surface to convey this reality? These questions have become core issues that many artists pursue throughout their careers.

In contemporary times, this exploration has become even more complex. In an era of multicultural integration, reality seems to have become more elusive. However, dreams offer us a unique window, allowing us to transcend the confines of the material world and perceive and express the realities hidden behind everyday life.

## 2. Stripping Away External Appearances

Since ancient Greece, philosophers have explored the concept of reality. At first glance, the material appearances we perceive through our external senses seem real. However, people do not only live in a world of material appearances but also in a mental world, which is far more real and profound than the material facade. Plato posited that the world is divided into three levels: the highest is the realm of forms, where true reality resides; the second is the material world, which contains material appearances that imitate true reality; the lowest is the world created by artistic activities, which imitate material appearances and thus are imitations of imitations, making it the least real. The forms he referred to transcend the material and perceptual worlds and are the true source of reality. They represent the essence of perfection, wisdom, truth, and morality. Plato's forms were deified, and truth became an existence beyond the perceptual material world, accessible only to a few wise individuals. [1] This view was naturally influenced by the political and social conditions of Plato's time, yet it

does not hinder the recognition of what lies beyond material appearances—what this paper refers to as the mental realm. The mental realm represents our personal experiences and subjective feelings towards the material world, which might be closer to the essence of reality than our knowledge of external appearances. This suggests that our understanding of the material world is limited and relative, and the essence of reality may transcend our perceptions and appearances.

In reality, true reality exists in our minds. The mind is the source of human knowledge; without it, knowledge would lose its foundation. “Mind” refers not only to natural consciousness but also to a force capable of creating civilization. When detached from material production, it can create art, religion, philosophy, and more. Although the mind is not a material entity, our knowledge, our skills in material production, and our evaluations and concepts of things are all derived from the mental realm, not merely from the external appearances of the material world. In other words, the material appearances we perceive in the external world are produced and created based on the existence of the mind. Immanuel Kant, the founder of German classical philosophy, stated:

“Erkenntnis has two main stems, possibly originating from a common, unknown root: *Sinnlichkeit* and *Verstand*. Through the former, objects are given to us; through the latter, they are thought.”[2]

These two stems are what Kant referred to as “transcendental intuition” and “empirical perception.” According to Kant’s theory, all our understanding comes from experience; without prior experience, we have no knowledge. We use transcendental conditions such as time and space as the foundational structures for perceiving and understanding the world, and we use empirical perception to experience and understand the knowledge we acquire. Even though, as Kant said, experience is conditional and limited, leading to variations in our perception of the world, it does not prevent us from sensing the existence of the external sensory world in this way. We are not merely entities that exist physically; more importantly, we are entities of mental thought. We obtain the energy to sustain our physical existence through the external material world, and the true meaning of sustaining our physical entities is to maintain the existence of the mind. If we can understand the reality of our physical entities through material appearances, we should also realize that only by deducing from reality can we attain true reality.

After affirming the reality of the mind, the reality of transcendental intuition as the foundational structure of cognition is also confirmed. Intuition serves as the basic framework for our perception and understanding of the world, existing within our cognition independently of any specific sensory experiences. We can intuit all external things, and our intuition of external objects is not influenced by acquired education. When we engage with objects, intuition is the most primitive and simple form of “knowing,” the purest form of sensation, akin to the state of unity between the self and the object described in Eastern philosophy. The renowned Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce stated in his book, *Aesthetic as Science of Expression and General Linguistic*:

“Intuitive knowledge can exist independently of rational knowledge. Concepts that are blended into intuitive products, insofar as they are blended, cease to be concepts because they have lost all independence and autonomy; they were once concepts, but now they have become elements of intuition.”[3]

For instance, when a writer describes the wind, the writer’s wind is not the geographer’s wind. Although it inevitably involves knowledge and concepts, it primarily conveys the deep intuition of the heart, bypassing sensory perception and conceptual understanding. This is our intuition of the wind, our genuine emotion, and our true and pure understanding of the world. This intuitive experience is a form of reality. It is only through such self-awareness that we can expand the scope of our knowledge and enrich the content of our understanding. Croce wrote:

“An artwork, though full of philosophical concepts, may have more richness and depth than a philosophical treatise; similarly, a philosophical treatise, though it may contain abundant descriptions and intuitive elements, remains fundamentally a conceptual work. Despite the presence of those

concepts, the complete effect of the artwork remains an intuitive product; and despite the presence of intuitive elements in the philosophical treatise, its complete effect remains conceptual.”[3]

Thus, without intuition, we might not even be able to sense beauty, let alone define it. Art, as a practice of spiritual experience, embodies the foundation of human civilization, representing pure reality without material content.

### 3. Painting and Reality

Painting is not merely a reproduction or imitation of physical phenomena; it expresses intuition and can convey the essence of reality itself. As Professor Wang Defeng stated:

“Art is the original manifestation of truth.” Zhu Guangqian said that the “aesthetic experience” is an experience of intuition, where the object of intuition is the “image,” so the “aesthetic experience” can be described as “intuitive imaging.” This has been recognized as a fundamental principle by aestheticians since Kant. [4]

When we are at an art exhibition and see a piece that we admire, it seems to momentarily occupy all of our consciousness. This choice of a favored piece comes from “aesthetic experience.” Some argue that while viewing a piece, we also analyze the images within it, thus connecting aesthetics with perception. Indeed, we may initially be attracted to a work by an image in the painting, and this initial attraction is unrelated to aesthetics; it is more about psychological stimulation and response. Any subsequent interpretation of the image is merely speculation about the author’s intent, which has little to do with beauty. The aesthetic experience is realized when, after being stimulated, we remain captivated by the artwork, feeling as if we have instantaneously entered the painting and shifted to another space-time, which is what is meant by “intuitive imaging.” The Department of Basic Art at Tsinghua University’s Academy of Arts invited Professor Deannimo from the Massachusetts College of Art and Design for two weeks of intuitive painting instruction and conducted a series of tests. These included untitled instant reactions and intuitive tests related to music. The results showed that painting for more than 30 seconds cannot be considered purely intuitive, as rational and experiential traces become more apparent with longer painting time. Under conditions of instant reaction, human intuition is at its purest, as only things produced without room for thought can be truly intuitive, unconscious, or a genuine subconscious expression without visual interference. Experimenters easily enter certain emotional states and are most susceptible to inducement. [5] The purpose of aesthetics is never utility or meaning; neither visitors nor creators are physicists. The reality of intuition is neither a material existence nor can it form objective knowledge or be intuitively understood through objective knowledge. Knowledge obtained through rational thought requires intuition as its basis; otherwise, it is not pure, original knowledge but rather knowledge influenced by numerous factors, ultimately refined and polished. Intuition is not a simple physiological pleasure; it is our purest initial recognition of external things. As a self-sufficient and self-determined existence, intuition is practiced, expressed, communicated, and exchanged through art.

Painting differs from other forms of expression. As a medium, painting aptly practices intuition and carries the responsibility of embodying “intuitive forms.” Today, painting has finally moved beyond its role as a mere recording tool. When such functional aspects are no longer the focus, painting gains greater significance and value through the transmission and expression of aesthetics. Works that focus solely on function and appearance can be quickly generated by artificial intelligence. At this point, painting should not merely replicate reality but instead break free from practical and material constraints to express something beyond the tangible. The advantage of painting in directly conveying aesthetic value relates to the concept of “psychological distance.” Mr. Zhu Guangqian explains the role of “psychological distance” in aesthetic analysis in his work *Psychology of Literature and Art*:

“Psychological distance is the distance a person achieves when breaking free from practical utility to reach beyond the material.”[6]

For example, for someone living in a coastal city, the seaside may just be a daily route to work, with the sea breeze being too humid and the beach too crowded. For a visitor from elsewhere, however, the ocean is a beautiful painting. The distance between “a daily route” and “a beautiful painting” is what is known as psychological distance. Thus, “psychological distance” refers to the space one can achieve by breaking free from practical utility to reach beyond the material. When the distance is too close, it is inevitable to fall back into the reality of the world from the aesthetic realm. Painting, as a two-dimensional art form, appropriately creates a distance between material appearances and aesthetic experience.

#### 4. Intuition, Dreams, and Expression

The experience of beauty is essentially an experience of intuition, and the object of intuition is the “form.” Aesthetic experience can be described as the intuition of form. As a two-dimensional mode of expression, painting inherently involves the discussion of form, and discussions about painting cannot avoid discussions about its subject matter. Since painting should move beyond merely replicating reality and return to a more pure “aesthetic experience” to express intuition, what subject matter can better convey intuition? Dreams are capable of doing so.

Freud noted: “We should now understand that these appearances are products of certain subconscious imaginations, and they may also be products of sexual impulses.”[7]

Dreams are products of the subconscious and usually carry strong emotional connotations. The relationship between the subconscious, dreams, and intuition is complex, and any absolute interpretation would be unscientific. However, we can affirm that there is a direct connection between them and the most authentic cognition within the mental realm. Human mental activity is continuous and uninterrupted. From intuition to perceptual awareness, consciousness, over time, leaves behind sensitive memories that move into the subconscious and influence intuition. Thus, intuition is, to some extent, a product of subconscious stimulation.

We should recognize that human mental life is an uninterrupted, continuous process. During this process, a vast amount of sensory impressions are stored in the brain as memories. Some of these still have a strong influence on our senses today, allowing us to feel their presence, which is conscious awareness. Others, as time passes, have their sensory impact gradually diminish until they disappear, becoming part of the subconscious mental activity.[8]

It is evident that intuition is almost a rapid cognitive process of the subconscious. Like the subconscious, intuition represents the most genuine knowledge we have when there is no time for logical reasoning about things. Therefore, there are two reasons why dreams are chosen as a means to express “reality” in painting. First, the absurdity of dreams creates a “psychological distance” that is neither too close nor too far. Second, dreams are a result of intuitive action and emotional expression; although dreams are chaotic, they are still a form of reality.

To appreciate beauty and return to the realm of aesthetic experience, one must transcend the practical meaning of objects. This is the “psychological distance” mentioned earlier concerning aesthetic issues. Psychological distance is the space a person achieves by breaking free from practical utility to reach beyond material reality. It is the distance between observing and defining the appearance of things and engaging in aesthetic appreciation. Since distance implies varying degrees of proximity, to immerse oneself in the world of aesthetic experience, one must not be too far or too close. For instance, a person living by the sea sees the ocean every day and cannot escape the concept and significance of the sea, making the distance too “close” for appreciating beauty. Conversely, a visitor from inland who encounters the sea becomes immediately enchanted, achieving the appropriate psychological distance. If the distance is too “far,” everything lies outside our cognitive

range and is unknowable, making it impossible to reach the realm of aesthetic experience. Only a “neither too close nor too far” distance allows for the appreciation of beauty. Artists, unlike others, not only can transcend the practical utility of objects to appreciate beauty but also can step out of their role as mere imitators, being both subjective and objective. This is precisely what dreams accomplish.

The images in dreams do not exceed the scope of our cognitive experience, but they do transcend the appearances of daily observations and belong to the realm of the mind. This allows dreams to effectively capture the “psychological distance” in aesthetic activities. From a creative perspective, the content of a work is the manifestation of the artist’s innermost self. When creating, if we wish to “step outside ourselves and see ourselves,” dreams provide an excellent means to achieve this. However, dreams are often regarded as unreal, which seems contrary to our intention to express reality. In reality, while dreams are non-material and do not belong to the external sensory world, they are still a form of reality. We often perceive dreams as unreal partly because they detach from the material world of external senses, and partly because they seem illogical and absurd. Let us first address the issue of dreams being detached from the external sensory world but still possessing reality. We have already confirmed the reality and importance of “the mind” as an indispensable part of human existence. Dreams, as products of the mind and expressions of the subconscious, belong to the realm of the mind and cannot be denied their reality simply because they lack physical substance. Next, let’s discuss the issue of dreams lacking logic. Firstly, we cannot prove that something lacking logic is inherently unreal, as this would be an unscientific stance. Secondly, dreams do not actually lack logic. The perception that dreams lack logic arises because they do not adhere to causal relationships. Instead, dreams align more with a result-first causation, where the result is experienced before the cause is apparent. In the real world, we usually have a cause that leads to a result. However, in dreams, due to their complete subjective control by consciousness, the cause is arranged to achieve the result. Thus, dreams are responses to stimuli, bypassing our logical thinking and directly expressing the purest desires and conflicts of the inner self. This is similar to intuition, which is often a form of cognition that bypasses logic and analysis. Dreams can be seen as a deep form of intuition, offering insights into our inner emotions and conflicts. Since we do not deny the reality of intuition, we should not deny the reality of dreams. By using dreams to convey intuition, artists can transcend material constraints while simultaneously re-engaging with materiality. In new aesthetic activities, choosing dreams as a subject achieves an appropriate “psychological distance.” Dreams are absurd, lacking logic, and difficult to fall into the superficial appearances of things. They embody true emotions, making it easier to create aesthetic experiences that resonate with intuition. In fact, the immersive beauty we experience when appreciating a painting is itself a form of illusion, a kind of dream.

## 5. Conclusion

Dreams are a visual manifestation of intuition and the subconscious, representing a form of genuine cognition in the mental realm with minimal external interference. Dreams begin with intuition and embody the concept of “result-first causation.” The reason dreams appear unreal is that they do not adhere to causal relationships. In the world of dreams, there is not a cause followed by a result; rather, a thought emerges in the subconscious as the result, and then we construct a cause to bring about this result. This is why dreams can seem absurd. The absurdity of dreams provides an appropriately balanced “psychological distance” for visual presentation, allowing viewers to awaken their sensory memories and achieve emotional resonance during appreciation. By analyzing dreams, artists can both “step outside themselves and see themselves” in their creative process. Thus, dreams serve as a genuine experience and a visualization of intuition, enabling artists to effectively convey real emotions through their work.

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