

## The Expression of Imagery in Sculptural Art

LI Ying<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup> Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology, Beijing, China.  
\*Corresponding author.

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### Abstract

Imagery sculpture, as a unique form of expression in sculpture art, emphasizes the integration of subjective emotions and objective objects. Through the artist's creative selection and re-interpretation, it presents images imbued with spiritual meaning. The creation process of imagery sculpture involves the artist extracting sensory impressions from life and subjectively processing them, with the aim of conveying inner thoughts and emotions through visual forms. In this process, sculptors not only retain the characteristics of the objective objects but also, through the process of "selection" and "elimination," enhance the expressiveness of the form, in order to create works that possess unique rhythm and artistic appeal.

The core feature of imagery sculpture lies in the subjective selection and strengthening of the object. Artists simplify, abstract, and symbolize the form, making the work not just a reproduction of the external world but a reflection of their inner emotions and philosophy. Sculpture works often exhibit a strong sense of rhythm and harmony, creating a pleasing spatial atmosphere that encourages viewers to experience a deeper emotional resonance behind the imagery. This emotional transmission makes imagery sculpture not only a visual art but also a medium for emotional communication.

This paper analyzes several classic imagery sculptures to explore the creative methods and forms of expression in imagery sculpture, clarifying its unique role in the field of artistic creation. Through imagery, sculptors express both a deep understanding of reality and transcend it, creating artistic images rich with symbolic meaning. These works lead viewers into an artistic realm filled with emotion

and thought. Imagery sculpture serves as both a carrier for the artist's emotional expression and a vital bridge for communication between the artist and the audience's hearts and minds.

**Key words:** Imagery Sculpture; Emotional Expression; Subjective Creation; Object Selection; Artistic Realm

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Imagery refers to objective objects that are selected and organized in an orderly way, becoming an image processed by the artist's subjective emotions. It has an indirect connection with external objective things and serves as an indirect reflection of the external objective world. Situated between abstraction and representation, imagery is different from both, as it is indirect. In Chinese art, imagery represents the highest form of value and embodies a fusion of Chinese philosophy and aesthetics.

When using imagery techniques in sculpture creation, more emphasis is placed on subjective creativity. Sculptors start from their inner emotions, focusing on subjective emotional perception and rational analysis. They enhance the characteristics of objective objects to align with their subjectivity, emphasizing key features while simplifying and omitting some secondary aspects. Related parts are combined to highlight the overall composition of the work. In terms of form, while maintaining objective features, greater emphasis is placed on the creator's subjectivity. Compared to abstract sculpture, it pays more attention to the connection between the work and the objective object, simplifying and summarizing natural forms to emphasize their distinct features. The work originates from reality yet transcends it.

Imagery sculpture uses forms to shape the artist's spiritual realm. An imagery sculpture is capable of conveying the creator's thoughts and emotions to the viewer through its spatial entity. In the process of art appreciation, the thoughts and emotions conveyed by an imagery sculpture resonate with the viewer's sense of the entity and imagination, forming a spiritual image in their mind that leads to emotional resonance. This is a marvelous experience, as the viewer, by perceiving and imagining the spatial entity, can connect emotionally with the creator across time and space. This is the charm of sculptural art.

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## 1. WHAT IS "IMAGERY"

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Imagery refers to the subjective acceptance of objective objects by a person, and the generation of a conscious image based on sensory perceptions. It can also be understood as the impression left by objective things in the brain. Imagery is a physiological impression, a product of sensory information sent to the brain and processed by thought. There is an intrinsic connection between the image in the mind and the objective object, triggering specific associations. Imagery also serves as a synonym for "impression" and "concept." In a literal sense, imagery can be understood as a combination of subjective thought and objective objects, such as when seeing an object forms a specific impression in the mind.

There are two types of imagery: direct and indirect. Direct perception of imagery can be understood as coming from a person's entire emotional life, beginning in childhood and encompassing everything seen, heard, and felt throughout their life. Imagery is filled with emotion; for instance, the chirping of a bird, the leap of a fish, or the fragrance of a flower—these memories, tied to specific objects in specific times and places, all have symbolic value. They represent emotions that human vision cannot penetrate into deeply. Indirect imagery is further divided into metaphor, simile, implication, and symbolism. Imagery is an important concept in ancient Chinese literary theory. "Yi" (意) refers to the inner, abstract intentions of a person, while "Xiang" (象) refers to the concrete objects in the external world. "Yi" originates from the inner mind and is expressed through "Xiang," with "Xiang" serving as a vessel for "Yi." In Chinese poetry, techniques such as "embedding emotion in scenery," "expressing emotion through scenery," and "harmonizing emotion and scenery" are used. The creative process involves observation, feeling, maturing, and expression, a process that reproduces life. When an author feels something about the outside world, they imbue a selected concrete image with their emotional color, creating a unique artistic world. This allows readers, while reading poetry, to undertake a secondary creation within their hearts based on this artistic world, infusing their own emotions while reconstructing the poet's experience and feelings.

In art, imagery exists as a form of expression that does not pursue realism but values the creation of a spiritual image through the depiction of objects. Through the artist's intentional, subjective creation, a spiritual form is produced. Imagery art is an art that focuses on the shaping of spiritual images, transforming objective things subjectively. It is a unity of subjectivity and objectivity. While it maintains a connection with objective things, it also transcends them due to the creator's subjective optimization of these objects. Artistic imagery, as an expression of subjective life experiences and emotional perceptions, has basic characteristics that can be summarized as imaginative, emotional, aesthetic, and symbolic.

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## 2. IMAGERY SCULPTURE

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Imagery is one of the expressive forms in sculptural art. Sculpture presents itself in three-dimensional form within space, possessing a physical "form" externally. In philosophy, it is believed that consciousness originates from matter, so the physical "form" creates the intangible "image." Concrete objects are subjectively transformed by the sculptor and created using suitable materials, distilling an image that conveys spiritual thoughts and emotional depth. This spatial presentation in physical form allows the viewer to observe, touch, and perceive, providing a deeper understanding of the artist's spiritual ideas and intentions, thereby achieving emotional resonance. Form generates imagery, and sculpture shapes form, enabling the appreciation of imagery through form and observing form through sculptural techniques. Throughout its development, sculptural art has always emphasized the expression of the spiritual level in terms of aesthetics. Works often contain an understanding of objective things, revealing the inner qualities and characteristics of the piece while also displaying an exploration of external form.

For example, in the sculpture *Galloping Horse Treading on a Flying Swallow* (Figure 1), the shape of the horse is vigorous and beautifully crafted, with its head held high, neighing, and in a galloping stance, embodying a spirit of boldness and determination. The horse is seen as a symbol of national spirit and heroic achievements. In the artwork, the galloping horse has three legs in the air, with only one rear leg lightly touching the back of a swift-flying bird, capturing a moment of dynamic balance. The bird looks back in surprise, further enhancing the impression of the horse's rapid forward momentum. The robust, rounded body of the horse showcases its great strength, yet its movement appears light, as the entire weight is supported by a small bird. This delicate balance demonstrates an exceptional understanding of mechanical principles and high technical craftsmanship. The horse, captured in motion, with its mane and tail flowing in the wind, is sculpted with simple lines, creating an image of

a lightweight, free-spirited horse galloping with lightning speed.



**Figure 1**  
*Galloping Horse Treading on a Flying Swallow*

Sculptural art influences and is influenced by other art forms, embodying strong cultural and national characteristics. Literati emphasize the expression of spirit and imagery, as seen in the resilient character of poets and the charm of landscape paintings by painters. At their core, they all focus on imagery in form. The development of sculpture does not pursue anatomically precise rational analysis but instead aims for a hazy and beautiful charm, embodying an ancient, authentic, and harmonious aesthetic of unified form and spirit. This explores how to more powerfully convey the strength and depth of the spiritual level in sculpture. The combination of objective forms and subjective creativity, as well as reality and illusion, creates the “artistic conception” of imagery sculpture. In China, there has long been a traditional concept of “using imagery to express meaning,” and creating a spiritual image is the ultimate goal of imagery sculpture. When viewers observe or touch a work in which the artist has materialized a spiritual image, they can feel the contained spiritual meaning, allowing the work to be elevated and resonate with them. This characteristic of imagery sculpture enables viewers to engage in deeper contemplation and insight.

For example, the *Han Dynasty Singing and Dancing Figurine* (Figure 2) exaggerates certain features to highlight a humorous effect, striving to capture the spirit through the likeness of form. The artist selects the most captivating aspects of the figurine’s performance, emphasizing artistic character through exaggerated body shape and varied facial expressions. Although the head appears large, the body small, the torso thick and short, with distorted proportions, this enhances the portrayal of the figure’s rich performance, intoxicating style, and natural expression as a successful performer. The figurine is vividly depicted and precisely balanced. Overall,

the design retains an ancient, rustic style, not simply imitating real-life performers, but focusing on portraying a unique essence of the performer. All of this results from the creator’s subjective processing and enhancement of the objective form to achieve the purpose of creating a humorous figure.



**Figure 2**  
*Han Dynasty Singing and Dancing Figurine*

### 3. CHARACTERISTICS OF IMAGERY SCULPTURE

The most important characteristic of imagery sculpture is the creator’s subjective “selection and omission” of objective forms. The key to imagery sculpture lies in deciding what to retain and what to discard from the objective form. Here, “omission” refers to the artist’s subjective removal of certain details from the form, simplifying and refining complex, intricate details to leave behind key, resilient features that help create an artistic atmosphere. In the process of sculpting, excessive detailing can overwhelm the final piece, preventing the viewer from immediately grasping the conveyed thoughts and emotions. Too much cluttered information disrupts the overall artistic intent.

Imagery sculpture has its own unique method of shaping form. Most works are created with block shapes, and the stacking of these blocks produces lines, the fundamental elements of the form. Combined with the artist’s subjective creativity and integration, the simplification of form into block combinations and line adjustments brings a certain rhythm to the work.

For instance, Xu Zhenglong’s work *Awakening of Insects* is a representative example of selection and omission. The work depicts an abstract, irregular, and sharp form, continuously growing and confined within

stone or another medium, struggling to break free from its restrictive surface. This symbolizes an individual's persistent, unyielding personality beneath a calm exterior. Although the piece is not large in size, it has a strong visual impact. The sharp, smooth geometric shapes pierce the rough stone surface like blades, forcibly carving into the surrounding space. *Awakening of Insects* (Figure 3) symbolizes the emergence of life after winter hibernation, beginning to stretch and awaken. Here, what emerges is sharp stainless steel, breaking through rusty iron. The contrasting colors and textures of these two different materials create a striking visual contrast.



**Figure 3**  
*Awakening of Insects* by Xu Zhenglong

The essence of sculpture requires the artist to subjectively process objective material properties, emphasizing certain features by selectively retaining and highlighting them to evoke an impression that shapes a spiritual image. The artist's method of emphasizing specific features involves using various techniques to capture and highlight the distinctive characteristics of the subject, skillfully drawing out the most compelling aspects and accentuating them.

For example, in Wang Peibo's work *Whirling Fine Sand* (Figure 4), the use of a minimalist spatial composition evokes people's attention and contemplation on science and the universe. Through changing light, the rhythmic variations in the form inspire a sense of hope and vision for the future. This concise form that emphasizes particular features demonstrates both a profound exploration of nature and a noble sense of humanistic concern. The refined shape reflects philosophical thought and romantic sentiment, making people feel a connection between art and science.



**Figure 4**  
*Whirling Fine Sand* by Wang Peibo

Imagery sculpture has its own unique shaping method—rhythm. Most works are created using block shapes, and during the stacking process, the basic elements of the form generate lines. Combined with the artist's subjective creativity and integration, the simplified combination of block forms and the arrangement of lines imbue the work with a sense of rhythm. In the field of sculpture art, rhythm and cadence are often discussed together. While they are intricately connected, they each have their own distinct qualities.

Rhythm refers to a pattern in which elements of the work repeat, and it can manifest in visual forms such as intersecting lines or color changes, or in auditory forms such as variations in note duration. Cadence, on the other hand, is a higher level of organization that adds harmony and beauty to the work, based on rhythm. It creates a pleasing sense of order and variation, resulting in a harmonious aesthetic in the overall composition.

For example, Zeng Chenggang's work *Lotus* (Figure 5) is an interpretation of rhythm. The lotus, a plant long admired by scholars, has been imbued with rich cultural significance through generations of poetic homage, symbolizing ultimate goodness and beauty. The artist chose the pure, beautiful lotus as the subject but presented it in an unconventional form. The lotus seed pod he created is no longer depicted in the traditionally round and plump shape but instead appears withered and cracked. The form undergoes subjective treatment, and only the seeds within the pod remain, appearing particularly smooth and lustrous. The withered lotus carries a deeper meaning; it is ancient and melancholic, yet filled with hope. The strong sense of life is emphasized, and the lotus is sculpted from stainless steel, paired with a tranquil pool

of water, creating a harmonious relationship between the natural plant and the essence of natural life. This pairing evokes a refreshing atmosphere and elegant meaning, reflecting a deep concern for life.



**Figure 5**  
*Lotus* by Zeng Chenggang

#### 4. EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION IN IMAGERY SCULPTURE

Emotion stems from people's subjective feelings about objective things. In real life, emotions are typically accompanied by the output of signals in the brain, expressed through specific body movements or actions. Emotion is the soul of artistic expression; if a work is devoid of emotion, it is merely an empty shell. To transmit their emotions to the viewer, artists must subjectively create and combine the original objective forms with their emotions.



**Figure 6**  
*Dream* by Li Ying

In the creation of artistic images, consciousness plays a leading role. The artist, through materials and other media, transforms consciousness into physical form, resulting in imagery sculpture. Imagery sculpture tends toward expressionism, representing a dialogue between reality and ideals. For example, the personal sculpture *Dream* (Figure 6) creates a dreamlike scene using imagery. The integrated forms create a sense of fantasy, where pink clouds could represent a daydream, an ongoing dream, or a dream within the heart.

Imagery sculpture differs in expression from figurative sculpture, as it is somewhat constrained, while abstract sculpture is disconnected from objective forms. Imagery sculpture combines the strengths of both of these expressive forms. It is rooted in reality yet transcends it, as the artist makes subjective choices about the objective form, focusing on what to “keep” and what to “discard.” By retaining and emphasizing key features, the artist shapes rhythm and creates an atmosphere.

Although imagery sculpture is a tangible creation in space, its purpose is not to make viewers see something specific, but rather to make them feel something. Through the forms of the object, the artist conveys their own meaning. Imagery is a spirit, an essence, a realm. The creation of imagery sculpture is an instinctual, free, poetic, sincere, and subtle act. Imagery sculpture requires the artist to subjectively blend the object with their own imagination, which goes beyond reality. Using various techniques, the artist arranges and integrates the work with the original object, transforming it into a new visual form. The essence of imagery sculpture lies in the relationship between the object and the spiritual image created, existing in a subtle balance of what is and isn't, concealed in its symbolism, allowing the viewer to experience the imagery.

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