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Exploration of teaching reform in the design composition course from the perspective of abstract art

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Abstract. As a foundational course for design majors, Design Composition has long taken the principles of formal beauty and point-line-plane training as its basic content, extending from these to the study of planar, chromatic, and three-dimensional composition, while paying insufficient attention to the cultivation of students' abstract thinking ability. Based on the teaching reform practice of "subjectively adding a special topic on abstract art" to the course, this paper explores the theoretical basis, curriculum design, and implementation path of introducing abstract art into composition teaching. Practice shows that the embedding of the abstract art topic effectively improved students' understanding of the essence of "composition," promoted their ability to transform visual thinking from the concrete to the abstract, and provided a new approach for the content reconstruction of basic design courses.

Keywords: design composition, abstract art, teaching innovation, abstract thinking, fusion of horizons

1. Introduction

As a basic course in modeling for design majors, the significance of Design Composition lies not merely in enabling students to master exercises in point-line-plane composition, color matching, and three-dimensional construction, but more importantly in establishing a thinking path that proceeds from form observation to form organization. A problem commonly encountered in current classrooms is that the principles of formal beauty are taught before students have acquired visual experience. After completing the full course, students can restate the relevant concepts of the principles of formal beauty, yet two kinds of problems tend to appear in their works. The first is treating the principles as formulas and completing the picture through the repeated arrangement of basic forms; the second is pursuing superficial novelty without understanding the logic of composition and lacking internal order, which weakens the function of thinking training.

The core question this paper addresses is whether students can first accumulate perceptible and judgeable formal experience through a special topic on abstract art, and then understand the principles of formal beauty. The paper explains the basis for introducing abstract art into composition teaching from the perspectives of historical origin and visual grammar, and combines methods such as temporal reversal and deconstructive analysis, finally reflecting on the effects and limitations based on classroom observation. The focus of this paper is not simply to add appreciation content on abstract art, but to adjust the temporal relationship between

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the special topic on abstract art and the principles, treating abstract art as a process-oriented training resource for abstract thinking.

2. Current teaching status of design composition

2.1. Increasingly formulaic teaching content

At present, the teaching content of the Design Composition course has long adhered to the classic framework of the "three major compositions," with teaching methods dominated by the instruction of the principles of formal beauty and repetitive hand-drawing or collage training. After lecturing on principles such as contrast, unity, balance, rhythm, and cadence in class, teachers assign composition assignments on corresponding themes according to the three modules of planar, chromatic, and three-dimensional composition, and students complete graphic arrangement and color filling according to the established classroom knowledge. Meanwhile, two kinds of problems readily arise in students' practice. The first is mechanical application, treating the principles of formal beauty as formulas and completing assignments through the repeated arrangement of basic forms, so that the works conform to the principles yet lack vitality. The second is blind novelty-seeking, pursuing visual innovation without understanding the underlying logic of composition, which causes the works to be superficially flashy yet lacking internal order.

Prolonged formulaic training readily leads students to equate Design Composition with pattern filling or the technical drill of skeleton arrangement, generating the negative perception that the course is dull or irrelevant to design. The weakening of learning motivation directly diminishes the thinking-training effect that the course should have [1].

2.2. Systematic absence of training in abstract thinking

The Design Composition course is essentially a discipline that explores "the methods of organizing abstract form." Whether it is the point-line-plane relationships in planar composition, the control of tone in chromatic composition, or the spatial construction in three-dimensional composition, the core lies in training students to extract pure formal elements from intricate concrete forms or spaces and to organize and express them according to a certain logical relationship.

In teaching practice, abstract thinking is often regarded as an ability students possess by default rather than a goal requiring deliberate cultivation. Teachers explain the formal characteristics of points, lines, and planes but seldom guide students to consider why abstraction is necessary and how abstract form is achieved; students complete abstract composition exercises as required but do not necessarily truly understand the visual logic and spiritual meaning behind abstract form. The root of this contradiction lies in the course treating the presentation mode of abstract art as the training process of abstract thinking: students' assignments have the form of abstract art, yet students have not undergone the complete process of thinking transformation from concrete observation to abstract extraction and from perceptual intuition to rational organization [2].

2.3. Cognitive disconnect in design practice

As a professional basic course, Design Composition should ultimately serve the learning and practical application of subsequent professional design courses. A structural contradiction has long existed in actual teaching: the large number of abstract exercises students complete in the composition course can hardly be transferred naturally to specific subsequent courses such as brand design and layout design.

Although students have mastered the drawing techniques of points, lines, and planes and the textual statements of the principles of formal beauty, they lack a way of thinking that connects these abstract forms with specific design problems. When faced with a task such as brand logo design, students do not know how to "translate" brand concepts into abstract graphics; when faced with a layout task, students do not know how to use composition logic to organize the visual hierarchy of information. Between the abstract forms trained in the composition course and the specific content they are to serve.

3. Theoretical basis of the teaching reform

3.1. The inherent isomorphism between abstract art and composition

3.1.1. Isomorphism of historical origins

From the perspective of design education history, "composition," as an independent course, has theoretical origins inseparable from the abstract art movements of the early twentieth century. The term "composition" itself derives from the Russian Constructivism and Dutch De Stijl movements of the early twentieth century, and it formally took shape as a theoretical system at the Bauhaus design school founded in Germany in 1919. The Bauhaus made composition art a foundational course, aiming to research and innovate in modeling methods such as form, color, and texture with respect to abstract artistic elements [3]. In 1922, Kandinsky, a renowned teacher of the Bauhaus, was appointed to the Bauhaus faculty and systematically introduced the point, line, and plane theory he had explored in abstract painting into basic design education [4]. It can therefore be concluded that abstract art and design composition share the same form at their historical origin.

3.1.2. Isomorphism of visual grammar

From the perspective of visual language, abstract art and design composition share the same system of formal semantics. Abstract art conveys emotion and meaning through pure formal elements such as lines, colors, and shapes, abandoning concrete depiction of natural objects. Design composition likewise uses basic elements such as points, lines, planes, colors, and textures as its vocabulary, studying their organizational rules and formal principles. The difference between the two lies not in which forms are used, but in that abstract art pursues spirituality and emotional expression, whereas design composition pursues functionality and the construction of order. This shared formal semantics makes pedagogical transformation between the two possible.

Composition design studies visual language and its compositional rules, adopts a relatively abstract form of artistic expression, and possesses a design language common to various types of design [5]. This indicates that abstract ability itself is a basic attribute and inherent requirement of the discipline of composition. What students need to learn in the composition course is essentially how to use abstract formal language for visual organization and expression. Therefore, introducing abstract art into composition teaching is a return to the origin of the course and a clarification of its essence.

3.1.3. Methodological demonstration from the concrete to the abstract

While abstract art provides the results of abstract works, it also provides the process by which abstract works are formed, namely how artists extract pure form from intricate nature and life. Taking Mondrian's famous *Tree* series as an example, the artist gradually simplified a concrete tree into a structure of vertical and horizontal lines, thereby constructing a purely abstract form, as shown in Figure 1 [6]. The evolutionary process clearly demonstrates a complete chain of thinking from concrete observation to element extraction, from natural form to geometric composition, and from perceptual intuition to rational order. For the Design

Composition course, abstract artworks precisely provide the visual model of the abstraction process that students lack most.



Figure 1. Mondrian's tree series works

3.2. The unique value of abstract art as training in abstract thinking

3.2.1. Abstract thinking: the core competence goal of the design composition course

The core mission of the "three major compositions" course is to comprehensively liberate students' modeling concepts, enabling them to shift from the traditional concrete mode of cognition to the abstract aesthetic realm, and thereby acquire the ability to generalize and summarize various formal elements [7].

In traditional teaching, abstract ability is often treated as a presupposed premise rather than a goal requiring deliberate cultivation. Students are required to complete abstract composition assignments but are rarely guided through the complete process of thinking transformation from the concrete to the abstract and from the perceptual to the rational. The deepening of abstract ability training should follow the progressive pattern from cognition to feeling, to understanding, and then to creation.

3.2.2. Abstract art: the cognitive process from exposure to reflection

When students first encounter abstract art, their most common reaction is incomprehension, which exposes a deeper cognitive problem: students are accustomed to understanding a work through its concrete picture, and once the concrete reference is lost, they lose the basis for visual judgment. Abstract art forces students to abandon this approach and shift their thinking to an observational approach concerned with how the picture is composed.

In the specific process of teaching implementation, the training value of abstract art for abstract thinking is manifested at three levels:

1. Training the ability to identify and classify visual elements. Abstract works reduce visual expression to pure basic elements such as points, lines, planes, colors, and textures. When appreciating abstract works, students need to learn to identify these elements and their modes of organization, and whether the relationships among colors are contrastive or harmonious, thereby meeting the cognitive requirements for basic visual elements in the composition course.

2. Training the ability to perceive and judge formal relationships. Abstract works make formal relationships themselves the core object of aesthetics. When facing an abstract painting, the basis for students' subjective judgment is no longer the degree to which concrete details of the picture are reproduced, but whether the organization of elements in the picture possesses a sense of order, rhythm, and balance, which is precisely the ability that the principles of formal beauty aim to train. Abstract artworks transform the principles of formal beauty from theoretical knowledge into perceptible visual experience.

3. Training the ability to transform and express from the concrete to the abstract, which is also the highest level of abstract thinking training. Students must not only be able to understand abstract works, but also be able to extract abstract formal elements from concrete objects of observation and reorganize and express them in the language of composition.

4. Reform practice: embedding the abstract art topic into the course

4.1. Positioning and objectives of the topic

4.1.1. The position of the abstract art topic in the course

Placing the abstract art topic before the principles of formal beauty is the core temporal strategy of this teaching reform [8]. Its teaching logic lies in first enabling students to establish perceptual intuition and overall cognition of compositional content through the appreciation of abstract artworks and transformation exercises, and then introducing systematic instruction in the principles of formal beauty, so that learning the principles shifts from memorizing rules to seeking grounds. As students gradually accumulate perceptual experience in the abstract art topic, such as which pictures look orderly and which proportional relationships feel comfortable, when teachers subsequently explain principles such as "balance," "proportion," and "rhythm," students are able to connect these abstract concepts with their own visual experience.

4.1.2. Teaching objectives of the abstract art topic

The teaching objectives of this topic are divided into three levels:

Cognitive objective: To understand the development trajectory and core schools of abstract art, to comprehend the isomorphic relationship between abstract art and design composition in visual language, and to be able to identify basic compositional elements such as points, lines, planes, and colors in abstract works.

Ability objective: To be able to use the thinking mode of abstract art to extract, simplify, and reconstruct visual elements, to extract formal elements from concrete objects, to reorganize and express them using the language of composition, and to analyze the formal characteristics of abstract works using compositional logic.

Literacy objective: To establish the course cognition that "composition is training in abstract thinking," to shift from drawing composition to understanding composition, to cultivate the ability of visual transformation from the concrete to the abstract and the capacity for aesthetic judgment, and thereby to stimulate interest in exploring abstract visual language.

4.2. Design of teaching content modules

4.2.1. Introduction to abstract art

This module aims to break students' unfamiliarity with and misunderstanding of abstract art and to establish the basic cognition that abstraction is a serious mode of visual thinking. The teaching content takes the origin and core concepts of abstract art as its main thread, selecting representative works and theoretical propositions of artists such as Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Malevich as teaching cases, and explaining how abstract art broke free from the concrete world and developed points, lines, planes, and colors into an independent visual language.

4.2.2. Formal analysis of abstract works

The core task of this module is to train students to use the formal language of composition to conduct formal analysis of abstract works, achieving a cognitive shift from surface viewing to deep understanding. Traditional teaching of work appreciation mostly remains at the level of understanding what emotion and specific artistic value a work expresses, and students readily develop a sense of alienation from being unable to understand it. This module shifts the focus of appreciation from interpreting the content of works to analyzing their form, requiring students to conduct structural interpretation of abstract works within compositional contexts such as the organization of points, lines, and planes, the relationships among colors, the division of space, and the balance of force.

4.2.3. Transformation exercises from the concrete to the abstract

This module is the core practical component of the topic teaching, aiming to let students personally experience the complete thinking process of the evolution of abstract works. Taking the evolutionary logic of Mondrian's *Tree* series as a reference, students are required to select a concrete photograph and carry out multiple rounds of simplification and extraction, from retaining the basic outline, to extracting the main lines, and then simplifying into geometric forms, thereby forming a pure abstract composition.

The teaching intent is not to have students imitate famous works, but to train a crucial capacity of visual judgment: to identify, within intricate concrete information, which are the essential formal elements that need to be retained and which are redundant details that can be discarded. This kind of judgment capacity is precisely the core literacy that the Design Composition course aims to cultivate. The deepening of abstract ability training should follow the progressive pattern from cognition to feeling, to understanding, and then to creation.

4.3. Innovation in teaching methods

4.3.1. Temporal teaching based on advance organizer theory

Traditional Design Composition teaching usually follows a linear process of "concept instruction, example demonstration, student practice": teachers first explain the definitions and essentials of the principles of formal beauty, then use examples to illustrate how the principles are applied, and finally require students to carry out composition exercises according to the principles. The latent assumption of this process is that once students understand a concept, they can apply it. In actual teaching, however, students' reception of abstract concepts such as "balance," "rhythm," and "proportion" mostly remains at the level of literal memorization, making it difficult to establish effective connections with their own visual experience; as a result, learning the principles degenerates into reciting provisions, and composition exercises degenerate into mechanical application of the principles.

This reform makes a reversed adjustment to the teaching sequence, with the core strategy of first experiencing abstract artworks and then, through guidance, naming the principles of formal beauty. Before systematic instruction in the principles of formal beauty, students first accumulate rich perceptual visual experience through appreciation and transformation exercises in the abstract art topic; after students have formed intuitive judgments on issues such as the orderliness of the picture and the proportions of pictorial elements, formal instruction in the principles of formal beauty is introduced, so that learning the principles shifts from simply instilling concepts to naming the formal experience of existing abstract compositions.

4.3.2. Deconstructive analytical training from looking at paintings to reading paintings

Traditional teaching of work appreciation mostly remains at the level of considering what emotion and artistic value a work expresses, and students readily develop a sense of alienation from being unable to understand it. This reform shifts the focus of appreciation from interpreting the content of works to analyzing the compositional form of the picture.

The so-called deconstructive analytical training from looking at paintings to reading paintings refers to guiding students to regard an abstract work as a compositional system that can be decomposed, recombined, and locally replaced, and to understand the function and meaning of each compositional element through hypothetical decomposition. The specific operation includes three strategies. First, reductive analysis: students are asked to try to decompose an abstract work themselves, considering what would happen if all the lines in the painting were removed, if the colors were changed to black and white, or if a color block were moved away. Through such "hypothetical destruction," students can intuitively feel the role of each compositional element in the overall structure. Second, contrastive analysis: concrete works and abstract works on the same

theme are juxtaposed, and students discuss what content the abstract work has lost, what content has been retained, and what content has been strengthened compared with the concrete work, thereby understanding the logic of abstraction choices through comparison. Third, transformational analysis: students are required to describe the formal characteristics of an abstract work in their own words, and the teacher then transforms these perceptual descriptions into compositional terminology, helping students establish a connection between perceptual experience and rational concepts.

The core intent of this method is to move students from passive viewing to active analysis. Abstract art removes the details of concrete content, making formal relationships themselves the object of aesthetics and forcing students to abandon the questioning mode concerned with the content and meaning of abstract works in favor of an observational mode concerned with their compositional form, which is precisely the core ability that the composition course aims to cultivate.

4.3.3. Verifying formal principles through the creative process

This reform instead emphasizes the teaching philosophy of "learning by doing," treating instruction in the principles of formal beauty as a preparatory tool for students' compositional creation rather than the ultimate purpose of learning.

Specifically, it includes three stages:

First, embedding micro-exercises. During instruction in the principles of formal beauty, immediately after each principle is explained, students carry out a five- to ten-minute exercise in the manner of abstract composition, experiencing the visual effect of the principle at once.

Second, setting propositional creation. In the comprehensive training stage, students are required to complete a compositional work with a clear formal intent, taking the methodology of abstract artists as a reference, and to write a brief compositional statement.

Third, implementing "critical commentary." In the work commentary session, students are guided to analyze their own and their classmates' works in the language of the principles of formal beauty, transforming the principles from textbook knowledge into a critical tool of artistic theory.

5. Effects and reflection

5.1. Teaching effects

5.1.1. Significant improvement in classroom participation

Before the implementation of the abstract art topic, students' expectations of the Design Composition course generally leaned toward technical drills such as "drawing grids" and "making patterns," classroom participation was relatively passive, and the proportion of students who actively asked questions and expressed opinions was low. After the implementation of the topic, the liveliness of classroom discussion showed a marked change. In the transformation exercise segment from concrete things to abstract expression, students showed a high degree of engagement, not only earnestly completing their own transformation exercises but also actively observing classmates' works and offering comments. According to classroom observation records, during the topic teaching stage, the number of students who spoke actively increased noticeably compared with the traditional teaching stage, and the content of their remarks shifted from questions about technique to questioning of compositional principles.

5.1.2. Positive shift in attitudes toward learning the principles of formal beauty

When the instruction of the principles of formal beauty began after the implementation of the abstract art topic, students showed characteristics in learning attitude different from those of previous cohorts. Students of

previous cohorts mostly displayed a passive state of rote memorization when encountering concepts such as "balance," "proportion," and "rhythm," whereas the students of this cohort were able to actively connect design composition concepts with the visual experience accumulated in the earlier abstract art appreciation. When the content of students' existing visual experience was named and explained, both their learning motivation and depth of understanding improved.

5.1.3. The awakening of formal awareness in composition exercises

Classroom observation revealed that students who had undergone the abstract art topic training displayed a more self-aware formal awareness in subsequent composition exercises. This was manifested specifically in that they would first carry out sketch-based reasoning about formal relationships before starting work, rather than directly beginning pattern drawing, and that after completing a work they could actively explain their formal choices rather than merely offering subjective interpretations of the work. The shift from entirely subjective performance to subjectively exercising initiative on an evidential basis is an important signal that abstract thinking training has begun to take effect. It indicates that students have begun to transform the principles of formal beauty from textbook content into a creative tool, initially establishing the course cognition that "composition is training in abstract thinking."

5.1.4. Changes in cognitive attitudes toward abstract art

Before and after the teaching practice, students' cognitive attitudes toward abstract art changed noticeably. At the beginning of the course, most students responded to abstract art with incomprehension and an inability to find an entry point for evaluation. After the topic teaching, students gradually became able to analyze and discuss abstract works in the formal language of composition. In the work commentary sessions later in the course, students were able to actively use concepts such as "rhythm," "contrast," and "balance" to describe their own and others' works, indicating that their visual analysis ability and aesthetic judgment improved to a certain extent.

5.2. Existing problems

5.2.1. Conflict in class hours between the abstract art topic and existing course content

The class hours of the Design Composition course are rigid, and the embedding of the abstract art topic objectively compressed the time originally allotted to training in compositional techniques. In teaching implementation, instruction in the principles of formal beauty and comprehensive composition training likewise require sufficient practice time. How to achieve a balance between the enlightenment of abstract thinking and training in the three major compositions within limited class hours is a problem that this reform has not fully resolved.

5.2.2. Teaching adaptation difficulties caused by differences in students' visual experience

The abstract art topic imposes a certain threshold requirement on students' reserve of visual experience. In teaching implementation, it was found that students with better artistic literacy or more experience visiting art museums and exhibitions showed higher participation and comprehension in the segments of abstract work appreciation and formal analysis, whereas some students with insufficient visual experience exhibited a degree of cognitive anxiety and tended to remain silent in discussions. The instructional design of the abstract art topic needs to pay greater attention to individual differences among students and provide more differentiated guidance strategies, so as to avoid inequality in learning new content caused by differences in starting points.

5.2.3. The connection between the abstract art topic and subsequent professional courses needs strengthening

This reform focused mainly on teaching optimization within the Design Composition course, but paid insufficient attention to how the abstract thinking ability cultivated by the abstract art topic can be transferred to subsequent professional courses. Although classroom observation shows that students display stronger formal awareness in composition exercises, whether this can be sustained and deepened in subsequent courses still lacks follow-up verification. If abstract thinking training remains confined within the composition course and fails to form a coherent cultivation chain across the entire design curriculum system, its teaching effect will be greatly reduced.

6. Conclusion

Aiming at the problems of formulaic teaching content, the absence of abstract thinking cultivation, and disconnection from subsequent design practice in the Design Composition course, this paper proposes embedding a "special topic on abstract art" into course teaching. At the theoretical level, the paper demonstrates from historical origins and visual grammar that abstract art and design composition possess inherent isomorphism. At the practical level, this reform places the abstract art topic before instruction in the principles of formal beauty and, through three modules of introduction to abstract art, formal analysis of works, and transformation exercises from the concrete to the abstract, combined with teaching methods such as temporal reversal and deconstructive analysis, enables students to accumulate perceptual visual experience first and then learn formal principles. The effects show that classroom participation, attitudes toward learning formal principles, formal awareness in composition exercises, and cognition of abstract art all underwent positive changes. Nevertheless, problems remain, including conflicts in class hours, teaching adaptation difficulties caused by differences in students' visual experience, and insufficient connection between abstract thinking training and subsequent professional courses. Overall, this study provides an operational reform approach for shifting basic design courses from technique training to thinking training.

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