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### Influence of Epidemic Painting on People's Emotions

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#### Abstract

The background of the study is based on COVID-19 from March 2020 to May 2023, a period in which anxiety and depression rose by 25% globally. The study explores how painting can serve as a tool for releasing emotions and positively impacting mental health. The study uses qualitative research methods and Feldman's visual analysis theory to analyze paintings related to the epidemic and identify key factors that contribute to emotional relief. The findings suggest that epidemic painting resonates with viewers and helps them release their emotions.

Keywords: COVID-19; Emotion of psychology; Painting

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#### 1.0 Introduction

Against the backdrop of the increasingly close connection between global public health events and human mental health, the psychological support value of art, as a non-verbal emotional medium, in times of crisis, has gradually become an essential topic in interdisciplinary research.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which broke out at the end of 2019 and was officially declared over in 2023, has profoundly affected mental health across the globe. In the face of this crisis, various forms of emotional expression and psychological support emerged, with visual art playing a significant role. Artists have always responded to epidemics and social crises through their creations, providing emotional comfort to affected people.

This study aimed to examine how artworks related to the epidemic affected people's emotional states. The study explores how various artistic elements, including color choices, themes, and composition strategies, promote emotional expression and viewer response. This analysis has special significance as society continues to deal with the psychological impact of the epidemic, and it will remain valuable even after the epidemic is officially over.

This study focuses on two key aspects:

- i) How does epidemic painting serve as a medium for emotional expression and release?
- ii) What specific artistic elements contribute to psychological comfort and emotional processing?

After the COVID-19 pandemic ends in 2023, people will return to their normal lives. However, I am concerned that people will not forget the experience and pain during the epidemic because of the disappearance of the epidemic, and this sad emotion will always exist in people's subconscious (Wang Yuemei, 2020). According to expert Lu Lin (2020), there is no time to delay in psychological

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rehabilitation after the COVID-19 outbreak (Lu Lin, 2020). Therefore, the author believes that this research content is valuable and significant at present, when the epidemic has been accompanied by people.

## 2.0 Literature Review

### *Epidemic Painting*

The epidemic paintings mentioned in this article refer to "works created by artists related to the epidemic", and the special emphasis in this article is "paintings created by artists related to COVID-19". The artist comforts and protects the suffering society through strong emotions and demonstrates the power to overcome the epidemic (Kasriel, E., 2020). EL Messiry (2020) discusses the relationship between the epidemic and art, and he believes that paintings during the epidemic can change over time. By exploring the idea that epidemic painting can alleviate suffering, interpreting works that reflect the contrasting characteristics of the human spirit, and recognizing that disease outbreaks can also contribute to the development of painting, at the same time, art contributes to our experience of coping with epidemics by providing relief from pain and stress (EL Messiry, 2020).

### *The Impact of The Epidemic on Emotions*

The research background of this study is based on the global COVID-19 pandemic from early 2020 to 2023. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that depression and anxiety disorders have increased by more than 25% globally since the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020 (WHO, 2022). This is due not only to health risks, but also to quarantines, social distancing, and economic stress associated with the outbreak. In 2023, the World Health Organization announced that more than 760 million cases and 6.9 million deaths had been recorded globally since December 2019, but the actual numbers are thought to be much higher (WHO, 2023). This tragic global disaster has become an indelible pain in human memory, but it has also had an impact on people's lives and mental health.

WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said: "The information we now have about the impact of COVID-19 on the world's mental health is just the tip of the iceberg, but it is a wake-up call for all countries to pay more attention to mental health and better support the mental health of their people" (WHO, 2022). In 2022, University of Washington scholar Ziyad Al-Aiyil's team showed a 35 percent increased risk of anxiety, 39 percent increased risk of depression, and 38 percent increased risk of stress and adjustment disorders after COVID-19. In the same year, British researchers found that the epidemic lasted into its third year, long-term social distancing, disruption of daily life, blurred boundaries between work and life, and uncertainty about the future, the number of insomnia in the UK rose from one in six to one in four, and, The impact of the epidemic on mental health lasts for at least two decades (Shen Jiu Science, 2022).

### *The Influence of Painting on Emotion Regulation*

In the context of COVID-19, painting, as a means of expressing and releasing emotions, has gradually attracted the attention of academia and the public. For example, Luo Xueing, Zhang Zheyu et al. discussed the utility and efficacy of painting in treating mental health issues among COVID-19 patients, with particular emphasis on the deployment of art therapy during the pandemic (Luo XX et al., 2023). Another example: After the COVID-19 outbreak in China, although art therapy is still in its early stages of development, it has led to a resurgence of art in psychological comfort (He W, 2023).

As a form of non-verbal expression, painting can help people express and release their inner emotions (Liu L, 2021). Appreciating art can also help people bring their repressed emotions into consciousness, enabling them to experience emotional release and relief. Audiences can understand the emotions expressed by artists by observing symbols and metaphors in artworks and find resonance and inspiration from them (Zhang, 2023). Meanwhile, Li Chungue, Liu Yan et al. (2023) noted that painting therapy has been proven to be an effective psychological intervention. During the epidemic, painting has become even more of a tool for emotional release and psychological adjustment, and its influence on people's emotions has attracted widespread attention (Li CG et al., 2023). Painting, as a way to express emotions, uses colors and themes to help individuals release pressure. Especially in extreme situations, such as natural disasters, wars, and epidemics, the emotional-regulation function of painting is particularly evident (Xiong YC, 2020).

## 3.0 Methodology

### *3.1 Research method*

This study adopts a qualitative research method. Creswell, John W., and Creswell, J. David (2018) talk in their book that qualitative methods rely on text and image data. At the same time, qualitative researchers usually collect multiple forms of data, such as documents and audiovisual materials, which are open data. Then the researcher reviews all the data to make sense of it. Moreover, organize it into code and themes that span all data sources (Creswell, John W., & Creswell, J. David, 2018). In addition to these general features, there are more specific approaches (i.e., survey strategies, designs, or procedures) when conducting qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell also says that these methods have emerged in the field of qualitative research since it came of age in the social sciences in the early 1990s. They include procedures for data collection, analysis, and writing.

### *3.2 Data Collection*

The data for this study primarily came from artworks and related texts produced during the epidemic, including works by David Hockney, Liu Xiaodong, and Pang Maokun.

### 3.3 Visual Analysis

This process adopted Feldman's visual analysis theory. According to the visual analysis theory proposed by Edmund Burke Feldman in the mid-20th century, this process is divided into four steps: i) Describe, ii) Analyze, iii) Interpret, and iv) Judge. Firstly, describe precisely what you see, in sufficient detail. The description should include the content and subject in the figurative work, as well as the abstract elements in the non-figurative work (size, shape, texture, color, light source, media, form, space, etc.). Secondly, analyze this stage, focusing on how these formal elements interact to form the work's overall composition and aesthetic effect. This step encourages the viewer to think about how the artist uses these elements to convey meaning and emotion. Thirdly, Interpret: this section explains the work's content and theme, considering the artist's intention and potential symbolic meanings. This step helps the audience communicate more deeply with the work and develop their own understanding. Moreover, the Judge evaluates the work based on the previous analysis, taking into account its aesthetic value, emotional impact, and cultural significance. This step encourages the audience to reflect on their own reactions to the work and to express their opinions (Visual Arts, 2024). Feldman's analytical process has been used to analyze the artist's work.

### 3.4 Case analysis

*David Hockney (b. 1937)*

As an important contributor to the Pop art movement of the 1960s, David Hockney is considered one of the most influential British artists of the 20th century.

David Hockney has created a series of works full of natural beauty and vitality during the pandemic (see Figure 1 and Figure 2 below). The pond in the countryside, the reflection of the willow tree, the bud on the branch, the shape of the cloud, and the arrival of "spring" symbolize hope and vitality. The plants with bright colors brighten people's eyes in the isolation of the epidemic, instantly erasing the haze in their hearts and arousing a desire for life. This is a color baptism, the artist left the original real color, with extremely bright colors to express their feelings for nature.



Fig. 1 & 2: Do Remember They Cannot Cancel The Spring  
(Source:) Famous Pictures

Li W (2022) commented on David Hockney's paintings: "Spring is fresh, summer is complete, autumn is gorgeous, winter is strong... The symphony of nature, composed of the cycles of the seasons, can bring strength and hope to people, especially in times of pandemic "(Li W,2022). Beaux Arts Magazine (2020) commented: "A fresh meadow, a clear sky, and four dazzling daffodils pointing skyward like many miniature SUNS. Hockney uses this sunny, reborn nature to give us a great lesson in resilience. At a time when everyone is invited to stay at home, the painter opens a window into everyday life, reminding us that if the world is idle, nature continues to work. Slowly, but surely. In flower language, daffodils are also synonymous with waiting... Therefore, Hockney advises patience: Spring is here, and there is no doubt that better days are on the way "(Gerald Van Weinberg, 2020).

The researcher chose David Hockney's works as the object of analysis because Hockney uses bright colors to depict spring flowers and trees, which can immediately attract the audience's attention and convey a positive mood. These brightly colored works arouse the audience's appreciation of natural beauty and nostalgia for the simple pleasures in life. During the pandemic, many people experienced quarantines and restrictions, and these works may remind people that even in the darkest moments, there is light and beauty. His brightly colored, succinctly composed images convey a sense of serenity and hope, helping the viewer temporarily escape from anxiety. Through the analysis of Hockney's creation, we can see the important role of color in emotional regulation.

*Liu Xiaodon (b. 1963)*

Liu Xiaodong, a famous Chinese contemporary artist, is known for his realistic style. Staying in New York in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak, artist Liu Xiaodong, who works mainly on everyday subjects, has created a series of watercolors to document how the city has changed over the past four months (see Figures 3, 4, and 5 below).



Figure. 3: Thank You  
(Source:) The Paper.cn



Figure. 4: The Sparrow Who Does Not Fly  
(Source:) The Paper.cn



Figure. 5: Chessman  
(Source:) The Paper.cn

Liu Xiaodong's thematic paintings depict the struggles and resilience of ordinary people amid the epidemic. Empty playgrounds, empty streets, fallen trees, ordinary strangers... The figure of Liu Xiaodong's wife and daughter, when this picture is captured by Liu Xiaodong's painting, the empty city, the expression of words, the mother and daughter who maintain social distance, the sheltered meaning of home and the urban memory are mixed, wrapped by the current historical situation, so that a watercolor painting created with loose and light strokes has multiple meanings. "The tourists disappeared, the rich people went to the big villas in the countryside, and those who stayed here were the small middle class and ordinary people, and the original vitality of the city began to emerge." This is extremely rare in Liu Xiaodong's view, "such a free city, but people are still very obedient, everyone returned home, there is no one on the street, there are a few people walking dogs, wearing masks, two meters away from the chat, Liu Xiaodong also moved over (see, Figure 4)." As one of the best painters in China with realistic skills, Liu Xiaodong has always accepted all of this. In that Spring, he painted a sad and warm New York (Li J, 2020). "Liu Xiaodong: Spring in New York", an online exhibition launched by Rishon Gallery, features these works that capture the artist's boredom, relaxation, anxiety, longing, and inspiration. Liu Xiaodong recorded a series of historical moments from a private perspective, juxtaposing collective historical memory with the self-expression of individual experience, and understood and explained the outside world through an inward view and exploration (CAFA, 2020).

His works capture the real corners and moments of ordinary people during the epidemic through records, which can resonate strongly with the audience. The emotional depth in these paintings helps the audience to release their repressed emotions.

#### Pang Maokun(b. 1963)

Pang Maokun is a famous Chinese artist, famous for his powerful, realistic paintings of human figures. He pays special attention to the depiction of portraits, emphasizing the attention to people and the embodiment of the spiritual world.

Pang Maokun created his work "Eternity and Transience" (see Figure 6 below) during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020). The work depicts the tired state of nurses' busy work during the epidemic from different characters' perspectives, and accurately captures the real moments of medical staff at work. At the same time, the work chooses the angel in white as the painting subject, which reflects the greatness and warmth of human nature and grants people unlimited power during special periods. The detailed portrayal of the characters' facial expressions and the imperfection of their body movements also reveals the fragility of life. The most significant feature of Pang Maokun's works is the attention to people, the expression of people's faces, in the depiction of people's faces, the expression of people's spiritual world (Zhi H, 2021).



Fig. 6: Eternity And Transience  
(Source:) Sina.com

China Academy of Art(2021) Comments on this group of paintings: The figures in the picture are the epitome of all medical workers. They are sons or daughters, fathers or mothers, but for the sake of the life safety of millions of people, they give up their small families for everyone, which makes people respect and the whole picture brings tears to the eyes of the viewers (China Academy of Art, 2021).

In addition, the artist's extensive use of gray and white tones enhances the sense of urgency and gravity of the picture, adding a sense of holiness to the picture. The strong color impact of black and white tones and the reasonable composition of the dynamic characters all reflect the tenacious determination of human beings to fight against the virus and show the tension of human nature. His works contain profound humanistic concern. He successfully uses realistic artistic language to express his thinking about the meaning of life in the face of the epidemic. This strong emotional resonance makes his works have a profound emotional release function, and it is easy to make the audience cry excitedly, so as to achieve the purpose of emotional release.

#### 4.0 Finding

Through the analysis of the artist's paintings, the author has summarized the following points:

i) Emotional expression of colors in epidemic painting

The use of colors in epidemic painting, such as warm and bright colors, can give people hope and comfort; The cold and dark colors can express the depression and unease brought about by the epidemic.

ii) Emotional expression of the subject in the epidemic painting

Many artists chose the epidemic as the theme to show people's emotional experience during the epidemic. When viewing these works, the audience can find resonance in them, thus relieving anxiety and loneliness.

iii) The influence of painting creation intention and thought on emotion

The artist's creative background and intention play an important role in the emotional expression and influence of epidemic painting. The artist expresses his concern and thinking about the epidemic through his paintings, conveying his respect for life and his insistence on hope.

#### 5.0 Discussion

This study explores the influence of painting art on people's emotions by analyzing the paintings of artists during the epidemic. The findings reveal the important role of painting as an emotional release and psychological adjustment tool during the epidemic, and also provide new ideas for future mental health interventions.

i) Epidemic painting and emotional release

It is found that painting art can effectively express and transmit emotion through elements such as color, theme and creative intention. This finding echoes Zhang's (2023) research, which further confirms the importance of painting as a non-verbal form of expression in emotional release. Especially in a special period like the epidemic, painting provides a safe and effective channel for people to vent their emotions.

ii) Epidemic painting and psychological intervention

The results of the analysis showed that the paintings during the epidemic could arouse the emotional resonance of the audience and help alleviate anxiety and loneliness. This is consistent with the research results of Li CG et al. (2023). Through interpreting the visual elements in paintings, the audience resonates with the artist's emotional expression, thus achieving emotional release and psychological adjustment. The application value of art therapy in psychological crisis intervention is emphasized. In particular, David Hockney's bright colour work and Liu Xiaodong's realistic paintings show how art can give hope and strength in difficult times.

iii) Influencing factors of epidemic painting

The influencing factors of epidemic painting mainly include the artist's creative background and intention, the visual elements of painting, and the audience's interpretation and resonance. These factors work together to affect the emotional expression and effect of epidemic painting. Garcia Ramos et al. (2021) also pointed out that in pandemic paintings, the audience's cognition and the external environment can affect the interpretation of the works (Garcia Ramos et al., 2021). Therefore, in psychological intervention, these factors should be fully considered to improve the effect of painting art intervention.

iv) Limitations acknowledged

Although this study has identified the core influencing factors and the emotional regulation value of epidemic-themed paintings, the following limitations remain. Firstly, the sample is not representative. The cases selected for the study focus on the works of renowned artists such as David Hockney, Liu Xiaodong, and Pang Maokun, and do not include paintings by folk creators, people of different age groups, or those from diverse cultural backgrounds during the pandemic. This may lead to the research conclusions being unable to cover the expression characteristics of non-professional creative groups fully, nor can they fully reflect the differences in epidemic-related paintings in different cultural contexts. Secondly, the data collection is single. The research data mainly relies on the paintings themselves and the evaluation of existing related texts, lacking direct survey data on the audience. Without obtaining real-time emotional feedback and audience interpretations after watching the works through interviews, questionnaires, and other means, it is difficult to precisely quantify the intensity of the effects of different influencing factors on emotional regulation.

#### 6.0 Conclusion

Through a visual analysis of the works of famous artists during the epidemic, this study reveals the relevant factors in the epidemic paintings that have a positive impact on people. The results show that painting can help viewers regulate emotions through color, subject matter and other ways to relieve anxiety and loneliness. At the same time, the expression of emotion in painting art also provides a

theoretical basis for the treatment of psychological trauma in the future. Future research could continue to explore the role of different art forms in emotion management, with epidemic painting being able to resonate with viewers and help people release their emotions.

Through this study, we can see the application potential and value of painting art in the field of mental health. In the future psychological intervention practice, the emotional expression and psychological adjustment function of painting art should be fully explored and utilized to provide more emotional support and psychological comfort for people. At the same time, this study also provides a new perspective and method for the study of painting art in the field of mental health, and promotes the practice and development of painting art in psychological intervention.

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## Paper Contribution to the Related Field of Study

By studying the creation of artists during the epidemic period, this paper understands the emotional expression elements in paintings. These caring elements can be used in similar environments in the future as a way to relieve people's anxiety and have a positive impact on society. Secondly, this study enriches the applied research of painting art in the field of mental health, and promotes the practice and development of painting art in psychological intervention. The significance of this paper is that the relevant painting elements obtained in the research process can be used in the painting of psychological trauma in the future to help more people with psychological trauma.

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