

Comparative Study

This comparative study critically reviews three artworks from different cultural contexts. Through examining contrasts and connections between them, some interesting changing of function and meaning in art are revealed. The three artworks are *Mortals—Endless Tower* by contemporary Chinese artist Xiang Jing, *The Burghers of Calais* by 19th Century French artist Auguste Rodin, and the Paleolithic *Black Horse and Smaller Ibex, Black Bison* from Niaux, France. *The Sorcerer* from Chauvet Cave in France will also be included in the discussion.



Mortals - Endless Tower
Xiang Jing
Fiberglass and paint
465×120×120CM
2011

Black Horse and Smaller Ibex;
Black Bison; late upper Paleolithic period; from Niaux, France.



The Burghers of Calais,
Auguste Rodin
1884-1895, bronze
91×97.5×78.75 in.

The Sorcerer at Chauvet Cave;
Aurignacian period
(37,000-27,000 years ago)



Analysis of Formal Qualities



Black Horse and Smaller Ibex; Black Bison; late upper Paleolithic period; from Niaux, France. Photos by and courtesy of Jean Clottes. Source for three photos: *Cave Paintings and the Human Spirit*, David S. Whitley

The Sorcerer at Chauvet Cave; Aurignacian period (37,000-27,000 years ago)
Photo by and courtesy of Jean Clottes.

Three images are shabby. There are four objects which seem to be animals in three artworks. They are all consisted by built-up lines and non-representational shapes, meanwhile they are in neutral colors. Since they were done on the surface of stones, there are real textures of stone and therefore created illusion of 3D form.

From a contemporary perspective, these works are highly abstract. But if we consider them from the perspective of people at that period, they are naturalistic. Three works used biomorphic elements. Considering cave paintings with a broader perspective, especially Paleolithic works. Most of them used outlines of bison, horses and other animals¹. This formed a motif and meanwhile created unity with variety. All of Paleolithic cave paintings were presented in deep caves without any light², so people need to use oil lamps or fire in the past and now flashlight to view these works. These flickering lights cause movements, therefore the relationship between the artworks and the environment was built. Moreover, these light sources are limited since they could only illuminate a little areas. When people use light sources to illuminate in order to view works, other paintings are all in the dark and they could only see the one that are lighted. So, this is a method of emphasizing focus by dark vs. light.

Interpretation of Function and Purpose

Critical Hypothesis: to paint powerful objects in life as ritual offerings.

For ancestors in Paleolithic period, animals were more mysterious than human-beings. Since they didn't have enough wisdom to know about nature, animals became species that are much stronger than human-beings in their consciousness. Frequently depicted animals in Paleolithic cave paintings were not only bison, horse and ibex, but also mammoths, reindeer, aurochs, panthers and other large animals³. This was Paleolithic cultures. These animals were painted with rough and strong lines, which made them presented in a powerful status. Moreover, these animals were not a normal part of ancestors' diet⁴, so it is impossible for them to paint these animals as diet records, which promoted the establishment of the presumption that some large animals symbolized power.

Our ancestors' living areas were mouths of the caves; however, the unique sites (depth of caves that are in darkness) that these Paleolithic cave paintings were found have long distances from these living areas⁵. So, these paintings were created in spaces that almost no one could see them. Then, it could be presumed that the existence of these art were not for recording life or aesthetic accomplishment.

The Sorcerer at Chauvet Cave; Aurignacian period (37,000-27,000 years ago)



bison head
human legs

Flickering light causes movements, so illusion of animals' motion would be created. This might be a way that our ancestors restore the movements of powerful animals, and used to achieve the function of sacrifice.

The image of sorcerer was a human-bison conflation⁶. Based on this, ancestors might create imaginary but powerful animals to achieve the purpose of sacrifice.

According to the comparison between Paleolithic cave paintings and Native American practices that made by archaeologists, these deep cave spaces were inferred as shrine. There were three forms of remained items that presumed as ritual offerings since the situation in Paleolithic caves were highly similar to Native American practices. First, items like waste obsidians, toolmaking stones, small twigs and etc. In caves were pushed into the cracks and declivities in the walls; Second, small stone plaquettes were incised and left in caves; Third, power objects that ancestors believed⁷. Therefore, cave paintings of animals in this case might also be used as a kind of ritual offerings.

Since Paleolithic cave paintings are too old, we can't know everything about them. Also because of the limited evidences, it is very hard for us to understand their meanings and functions.



Black Horse and Smaller Ibex (upper); Black Bison (lower); late upper Paleolithic period; from Niaux, France.

Source for three photos: *Cave Paintings and the Human Spirit*, David S. Whitley.

Evaluation

Evaluation of the Artist's use of Materials

The works were done on the surface of stones. Engraving scraped into the cave walls or ceilings by using stone tools, or painting in red or black by using colors from ground ocher, charcoal, or manganese mixed with fat or oil. Sometimes, engraving was also used with paints⁸. Considering ancestors' ability level in Paleolithic period, it is brilliant for them to create these two art making methods. Meanwhile, the works that done by using these materials were preservative for a very long time that we cannot imagining therefore they can also be viewed nowadays.

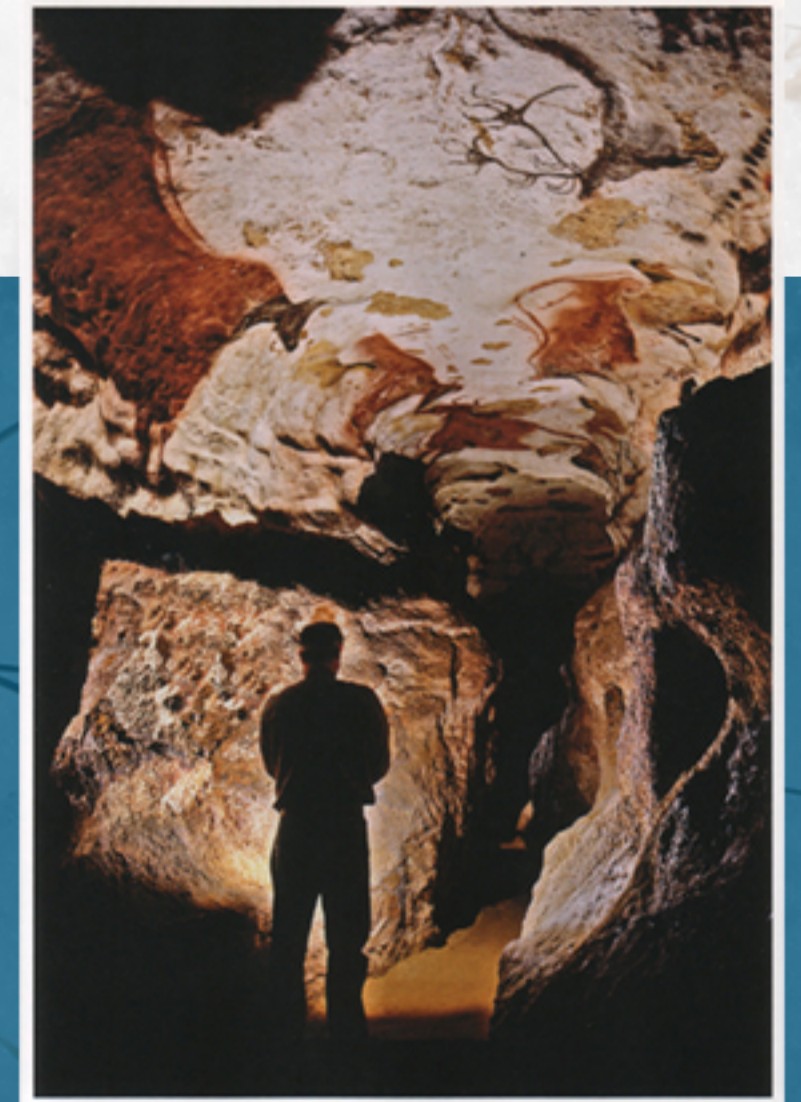
Evaluation of the Artist's Conceptual Framework

In the period that thoughts had not been enlightened, it is good that ancestors had consciousness to imitate nature (imitationalism) and then create images for their believes. Also, imitative behaviors not only stayed on one single object, but also various of them. Meanwhile, ancestors had intentions to use large animals as "symbols" of power; however, using "symbols" to describe their painting content may be premature. Moreover, there was a ideological development of ancestors revealed. At first, ancestors only knew to imitate the nature, but then, they tried to create new image by combining body of human-being with bison's head. So, it is very amazed that ancestors could have ideological development in a short time in that case.

Evaluation of the Artwork's Cultural Significance

These cave paintings showed Paleolithic culture by showing a social act. Through it, we can know an important part of ancestors' life. Also, these images were widely used in Paleolithic society for thousands of years, so they could be considered as a shared graphic language. Moreover, Paleolithic cave painting might showed potential emergence of the world's first religion according to my research, as the right picture showed.

"At the center-middle of the photo (the back of the salon), the painted animals seem to swirl over the ceiling of the cave. This creates the impression of falling into a vortex, a characteristic of a shaman's trance."⁹



The Salon of the Bulls, Lascaux Cave, France. Photo by and courtesy of Norbert Aujoulat.

Analysis of Formal Qualities



The Burghers of Calais
1884-1895, bronze,
Auguste Rodin
91×97.5×78.75 in.
source: *Rodin*

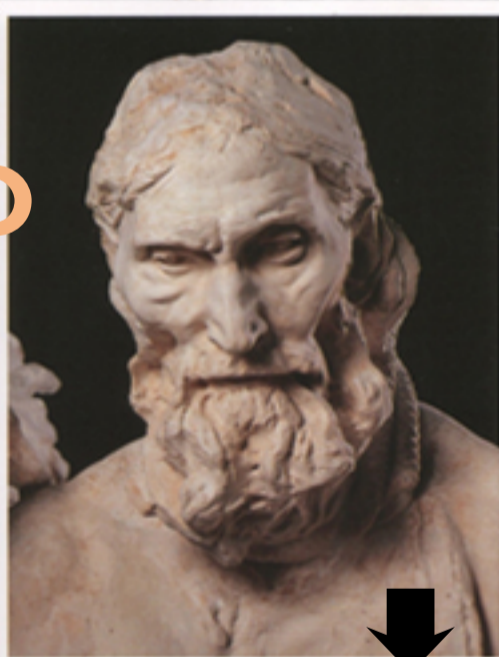
This group of sculpture (3D form) is consisted by six male figures. They are in life size and all wore simple clothes. Meanwhile, they are placed on a low platform and face to different directions. They are in monochromatic color, so the value is emphasized. Moreover, there are texture of worn.



This figure is facing to the left. His face moves more to the left than his body. He is raising one of the hands with opening mouth. It seems like he is saying things.



Standing with one hand raising and his jaw set.



He is standing and looking down with frowned face.

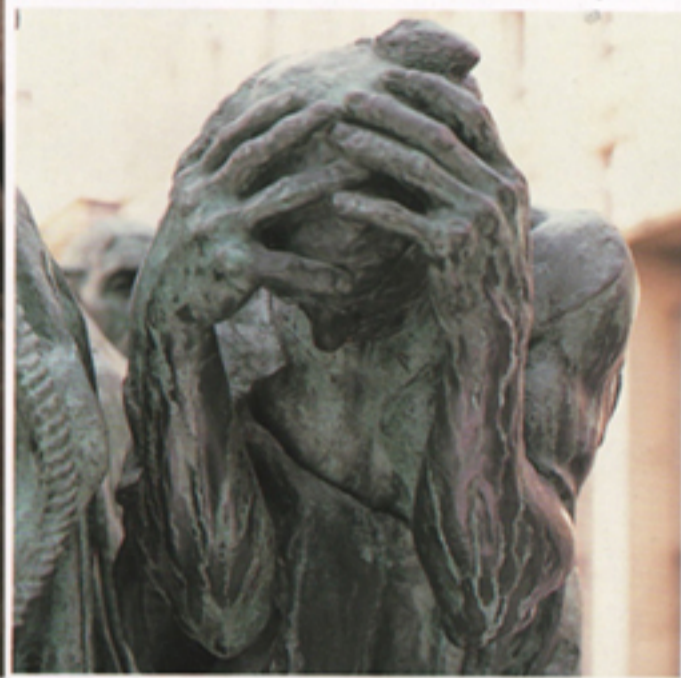


This man is standing with a thing holding in hand. The thing in his hand seems like a key. His mouth is tightly close, and no other emotion shown on his face.





He is standing in a bent posture and his head is buried by hands



standing with arms outstretched and mouth open. It seems like he is looking at things around him.



This collection of figures can be displayed either in a whole or separately. When these figures shown as a whole, this work is in an unity. but when they are shown seperately, the unity will be interrupted.

This is a naturalistic work. Six figures are placed closely, so they are unified by proximity and repetition. Each of figures has different motions. Meanwhile, since six figures have similar proportion, this work lacks of major focus, which makes emphasis are evenly divided. Moreover, the artist made biomorphic elements dominant and minimized geometric elements, such as the pedestal of this group of sculptures. Even the pedestal was made into a cube, but it is not a perfect cube.

Interpretation of Function and Purpose

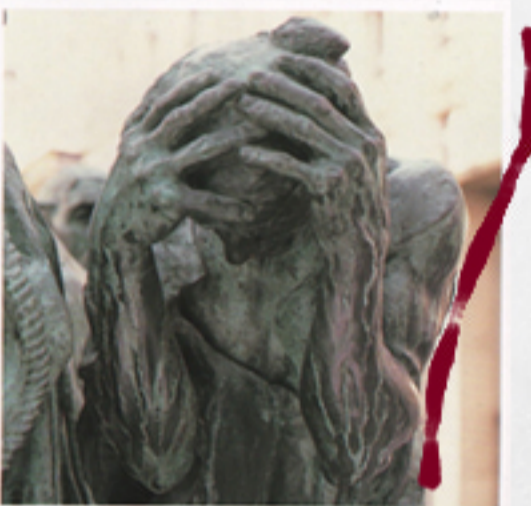
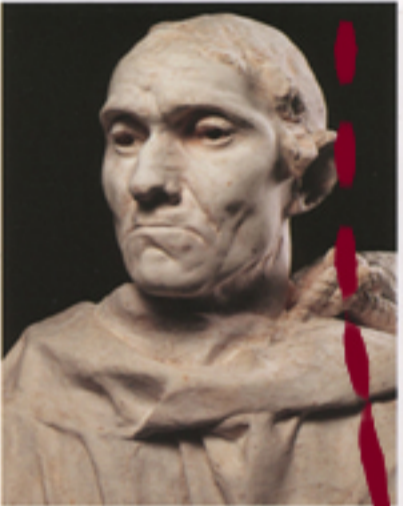
Critical Hypothesis: create a monument to honor heroic sacrifice that took by six burghers of Calais to save the city in 1347. Meanwhile, to show their complex emotions when they were going to face death, and also to show that success of saving the city was contributed by all six of them. If anyone lost, the city would not be saved successfully.

Cultural Context: in 1347, ten years after the beginning of the Hundred Years' War, King Edward III of England laid siege to the French town of Calais. After about eleven-month surround of this town, Calais people were in extreme short of food and water. So, six principal citizens of Calais offered themselves as hostages to Edward to exchange the freedom of their city. King asked them to come forth barefoot and bareheaded with nooses around their necks and keys to the town. King planed to kill the heroic burghers, but they were saved by King's wife at the end¹⁰.



Eustache de Saint-Pierre
The first volunteer.

Jean de Fiennes
the fifth volunteer



Jean d'Aire
The second volunteer

Andrieu d'Andres
the sixth volunteer



Jacques de Wiessant
The third volunteer



Pierre de Wiessant
The fourth volunteer

Different motions of six heroes show their complex emotions like hesitation and anguish.

The artist used beauty, which he believed it was to follow the nature to honor six heroic citizens. "Everything is contained in nature," he said, "when the artist follows nature he gets everything". "Everything" for Rodin means aesthetic beauty, and he got aesthetic beauty through combining anatomical realism with inner personality¹¹. So, when he caught the forms of heroes bodies, he also tried to show their inner emotions.

Lack of major focus helps to honor six heroes' sacrifice in an equal way. Six figures were sculpted into a same height and similar sizes¹³, which shows that no figures are more important than other figures. Therefore, Rodin wanted to emphasize the equal importance of each hero in this action.

3D form is a more intuitional way to honor rather than 2D form, since it restores the images of heroes. In this case, and people can view 3D artworks from different perspective.



The Burgers of Calais, Auguste Rodin
1884-1895, bronze
91×97.5×78.75 in.
Source: *Rodin*

Strong unity achieved by repetition and proximity emphasizes the importance of taking the heroic action a whole, which also helps achieved the function of honor heroic citizens of Calais.

Rodin sculpted six heroes into life sizes and placed them in a low platform to honor them¹². He didn't sculpt six heroes into a large size and placed them high because he wanted to present heroes as complex and conflicted ordinary individuals, so that their sacrificial action was more great from this aspect.

Rodin used beauty contrast with ugliness to emphasize the glory and heroism of six burghers. Figures of six heroes were made in beauty, however, suffering, wars and rich men with simple clothing are ugliness. Through contrasting these two elements, the function of honor the sacrifice of six heroes are enhanced.

Six figures were arranged in a rectangular cubic pedestal, but this pedestal can be separated into six parts. So this collection of figures can also be decided into individuals. This created consistent formal contrast and ideological contrast of individual versus collective; however, the pedestal would only be a rectangular when six figures are together. So this also emphasized the importance of each hero to gather and save the city of Calais as a whole.

Evaluation

Evaluation of the Artist's use of Materials

Rodin used bronze as material to make the sculpture. This is a classical material, but classicism is a very suitable form to achieve the function of honor. Meanwhile, heavy characteristic of bronze and the texture of worn it showed enhanced the honor significance of this sculpture. The sculpture that made by bronze could last forever, this characteristic enhanced the purpose of this sculpture, which is to immortalize six Calais heroes. Moreover, bronze shows a monochromatic color, this made the sculpture emphasizes on value, and shows the light and shadow of each figure. This builds a serious and respectful feelings when people view this work.

Evaluation of the Artist's Conceptual Framework

Rodin's innovative thoughts about monuments made his work more excellent. He tried to capture the real physical and spiritual status of characters rather than sculpting a falsely glorifies heroes. He restored heroes to ordinary human beings therefore to enhanced their glory more strongly.

Evaluation of the Artwork's Cultural Significance

Before this group of sculptures was made, France was defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. Meanwhile, the Second Empire was sudden collapsed. So, that was an urgent time for France to reconstruct national identity and confidence¹⁴. Therefore, the government commissioned serious public sculptures to convey the greatness of France and heal the wounded pride of French people meanwhile restore the French confidence. *The Burghers of Calais* was accepted for this purpose, so it is a successful monument.

Analysis of Formal Qualities

Mortals - Endless Tower, 2011

Xiang Jing, fiberglass and paint

465×120×120 cm

Source: http://www.xiangjingart.com/index.php?g=portal&m=article&a=work_image&id=130 (March, 2017)

This is a Chinese contemporary work, it is 3 dimensional. Ten female figures are contained in this work. These females forms an upright implied line. All of them have different appearances, and most of them have smile faces. Their legs are doubled back around to the front of their bodies, it's seems like they are playing acrobatics. But this motion is still too twisty and unbearable for acrobats' bodies as generally speaking. The whole work has real textures, but they are very smooth and fresh. Meanwhile, the work has high intensity and complimentary colors. So the work looks garish, meanwhile these factors made this fiberglass sculpture does not

look like fiberglass. Moreover, this work has a large height. When people view this work, they could look at horizontally at first, but they need to look up later.

This is a generally naturalistic work. It has unity (proximity, repetition and continuation) with variety. It also has formal balance since both sides are similar. Meanwhile, the artist used biomorphic elements and exaggerated motions in her work. Moreover, this work is in a large scale.

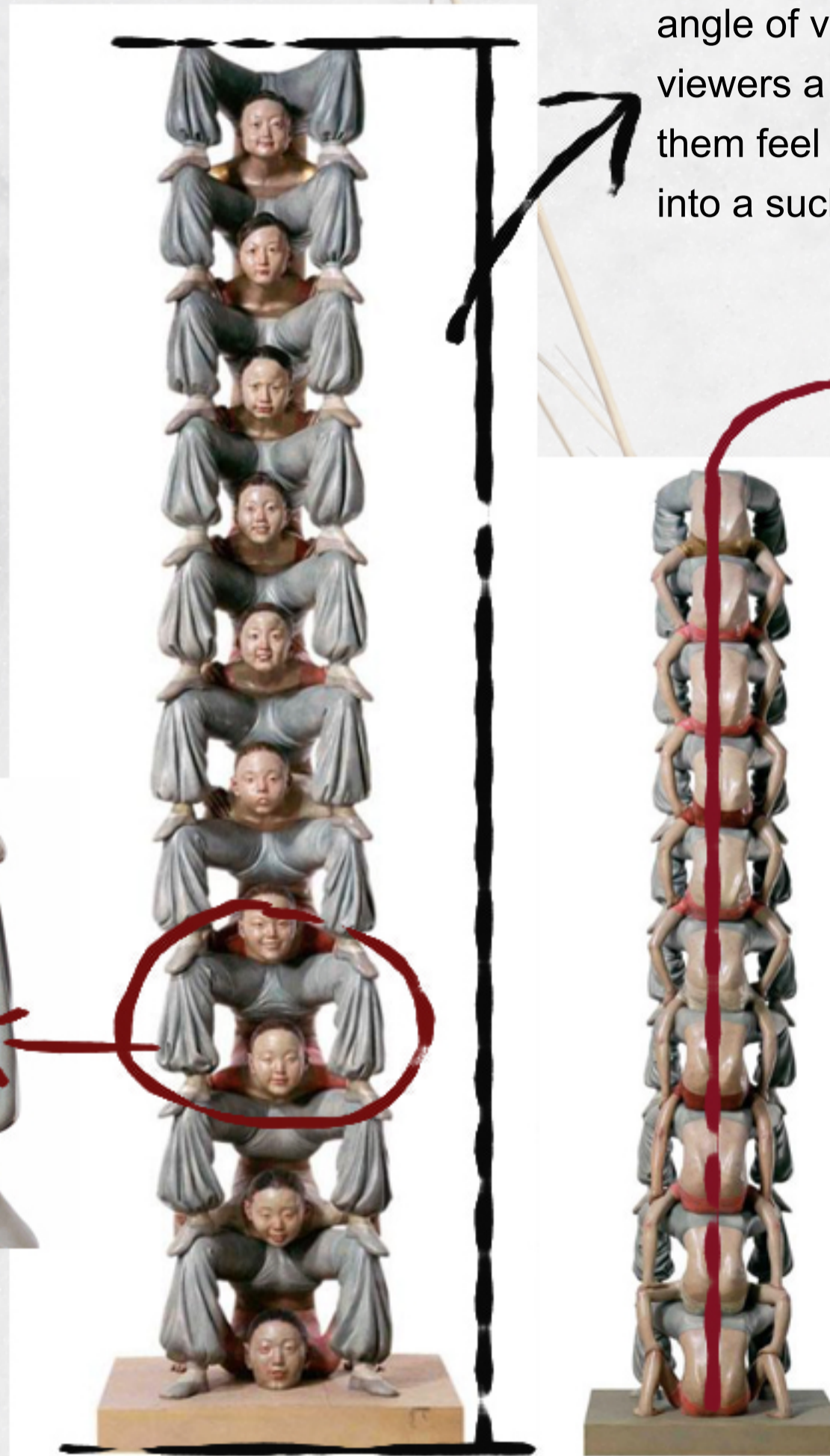


Critical Hypothesis: under the pressure of the reality, people distorted because they are trying to play their own social roles and keep themselves in the social order.

These females are playing acrobatics. Acrobatics are performances that watched by audiences. Being watched is a source that realistic pressure comes from, so these acrobats are recipients of realistic pressure. Meanwhile, when viewers watch acrobatics, what they see is each acrobat play their own parts well and therefore form a good acrobatic performance. So, every acrobats play their roles well under the pressure of being looked. The artist used minority, acrobats, to represent majority in our society, therefore, every acrobats can be considered as the symbol of social individual.



These figures are in an excessive distorted motion because each of them has to play their own parts well. Meanwhile, each of them bears extreme large physical pain but still with smile faces. These revealed the pain that under the pressure of reality.



Mortals - Endless Tower, 2011
Xiang Jing Fiberglass and paint
465×120×120 cm

A large height that need to view from a normal angle of view to a low angle of view would give viewers a sense of oppression, and then make them feel the weight that presses these acrobats into a such motion.

The artist carefully organized the space and put figures into an upright line. Each figure supports the one that above them and therefore formed this line. Combine this with the title, it could be associated with the tower. So, this could be considered as a symbol of social order. Every one tries to keep and be in this order. Meanwhile, use of formal balance enhanced the feeling of keep in an order.



High-intensity colors and smooth textures make this sculpture looks new. And this help to show that the issue the artist want to explore or reveal is current.

Evaluation

Evaluation of the Artist's use of Materials

The artist chose 3-dimensional form, so people can view this work from any angle, which can help viewers see how distorted these figures' bodies are. Meanwhile, the artist used fiberglass with paint in a high technical way, to rebuilt the scene that acrobats performing, and to showed the general time background, contemporary age, of this work. So to a certain extent, fiberglass helped artist to show her objective, which could be considered as a suitable material to use in this work.

Evaluation of the Artist's Conceptual Framework

The artist used a visual element, acrobatics, as a metaphor to showed an internal status of human in our contemporary age, which focused on the relationship between individuals who are in the society and the world. In order to convey artist's idea, three concepts are shown in this work: pressure, conformity and endurance. Twisty postures of each figure and the "tower" they formed shows an unbearable pressure and their strong endurance. Meanwhile, each figures wears same clothes, has same age and same hair style, then in a same body position, these factors shows the conformity of this work. Because of these three elements. the artist's idea was strongly conveyed. So, this is a successful work.

Evaluation of the Artwork's Cultural Significance

I can see some strong connections between Xiang's work and some very famous ancient sculptures in China, the terra-cotta warriors in Xian. Because these warriors are very famous and I'm Chinese, perhaps I see this more clearly. Both the terra-cotta warriors and Xiang's acrobats have a high level of conformity. Both are clearly servants – acrobat performers and the emperor's guards – meanwhile, both sets of figures are wearing a uniform. Finally, despite the conformity, each terra-cotta warrior has a different individual face, which is also true with Xian's acrobats. Xiang is also Chinese, and these terra-cotta warriors are very famous in China. I can infer that there may have been in influence there.

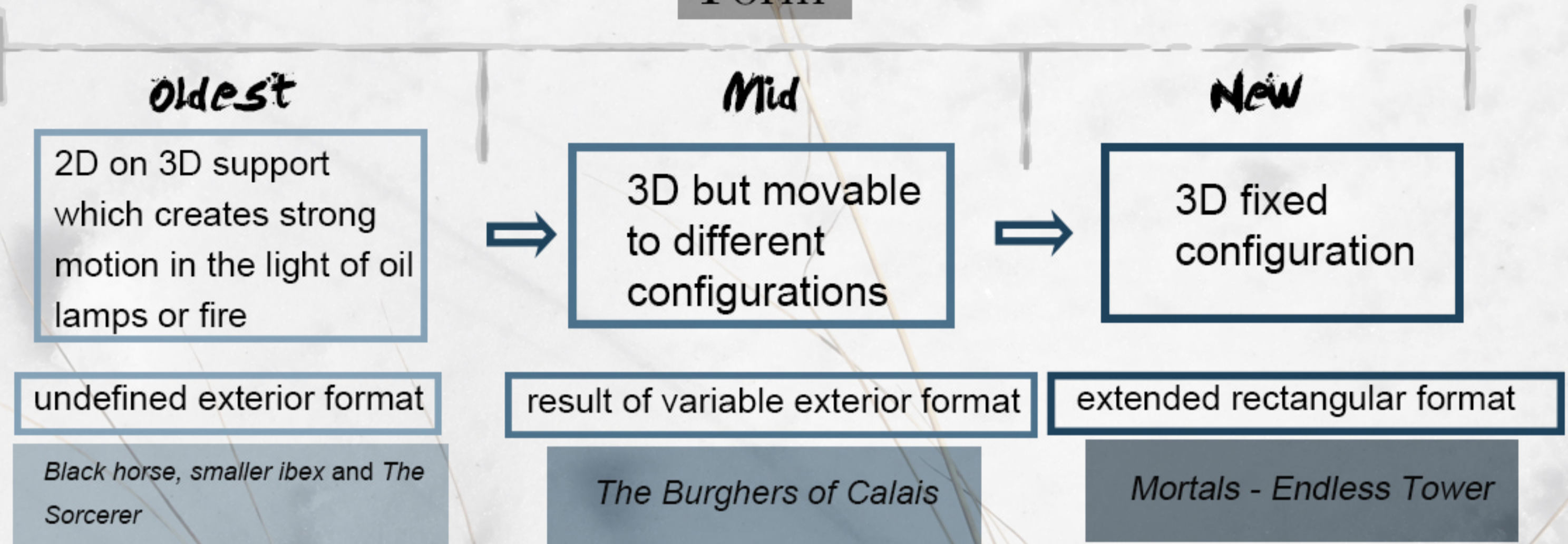
Terra-Cotta Warriors in Xian
From 221 B.C. to 206 B.C.



Image source: Bmy.com.cn. (2017). *Emperor Qingshihuang's Mausoleum Site Museum*. [online] Available at: <http://www.bmy.com.cn/2015new/index.htm> [Accessed 27 Apr. 2017].

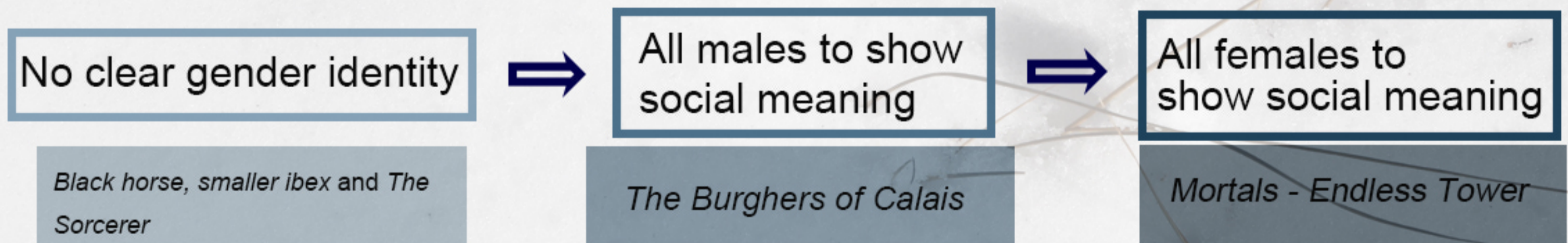
Comparison of three works:

Form



In Paleolithic cave painting, deep cotes in the cave without light and the special illuminating method made exterior format undefined. In *the Burghers of Calais*, movable configurations made the exterior format defined but various. In *Mortals—Endless Tower*, the whole work is like an upright implied line, which made the format fixed.

Gender



In these Paleolithic cave painting the artists mainly depicted animals and animal-person combinations. In *the Burghers of Calais*, since all six heroes were all males, Rodin had to sculpt males. Meanwhile, In *Mortals—Endless Tower*, Xiang is a female artist, she explores social issues using the female form.

Meanings (artists objective)

Oldest

Mid

New

Past

may have only been clear to select few (remote location)

clear then

requires some thought reflection to understand

Now

Unclear today even with careful professional study (lack of reliable evidence)

only clear if background information is provided

requires some thought reflection to understand

Black horse, smaller ibex and The Sorcerer

The Burghers of Calais

Mortals - Endless Tower

Comparing to what extent, can viewers understand the artists' objectives in the past and now. I got that in the Paleolithic cave painting, even at the period the cave paintings been created, there might be only a few people could understand what these painting depicted or their functions based on remote locations of these works. Even now, with careful and professional studies of these cave paintings, people are still not very clear about them because they are too old. Considering *the Burghers of Calais*, every one would know the function and meaning of this group of sculpture at the period this work been created. Now, this work needs some explanations so that viewers can understand, although some general meaning is possible without explanation. About *Mortals— Endless Tower*, this is a contemporary work, so it needs thought reflections for viewers to understand either in the past or now.

Connection of three works:

Based on my previous studies of three works, they revealed the changes of meanings, functions and also the survival of art during these billions years. The function of art has largely changed in these years. Through Paleolithic cave painting, it could be known that art has clear purpose, since human beings were in the early stage of cognitive and aesthetic consciousness awakening, they just knew to imitate the chosen powerful objects around them; Then, art turned to be clearly institutional later. After impressionism, art started to exist for artists' own expression and aesthetic needs. When the age Rodin lived came, both institutional art and personal art were widespread. Then considering modern art, limitations of art are less, and purpose of art is more. About the content and criterions of art, art is not only limited in realistic depictions anymore as time goes on, meanwhile, being naturalistic is not the major measurement to judge an artwork anymore.

