

Interwoven Narratives of Personal Growth and Material Use from a Feminist Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Based on feminist theory, this article focuses on the profound connection between material use and personal growth in the artistic practice of female artists. By analyzing the creative cases of authentic female artists such as Anni Albers, Betty Woodman, and Shi Hui, the article explores how material use serves as a narrative vehicle for women to break gender stereotypes and express their identity, and how personal growth feeds into the innovation of material language. The study finds that women's reinterpretation of materials labeled "feminine," such as fiber and ceramics, not only deconstructs the material gender order in traditional art but also becomes a crucial growth path from private experience to public expression, from self-doubt to identity affirmation. Drawing on authoritative art historical literature, artist interviews, and public exhibition materials, this article analyzes these processes from five perspectives: theoretical foundations, media functions, interwoven mechanisms, practical dilemmas, and practical implications. The article aims to provide theoretical references for understanding the interplay between individuals and materials from a feminist perspective, while also offering practical insights for contemporary women to achieve self-growth through creative practice.

KEYWORDS

Feminism; Personal Growth; Material Use; Female Artists; Narrative Media.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the feminist movement swept the globe in the 1960s, "women's creation" has gradually moved from the margins of art history to the center of the field. However, the intrinsic connection between the use of materials, as a core vehicle for creative expression, and women's personal growth has long remained a research "blind spot." In traditional artistic narratives, materials are implicitly gendered: "hard materials" such as oil painting and metal sculpture are often associated with male creators, viewed as symbols of "high art," imbued with rationality, power, and public value. Meanwhile, "soft materials" commonly used by women, such as fiber, ceramics, and embroidery, are relegated to the category of "handicrafts," their inherent emotional expression and identity narrative value diminished, and even dismissed as "leisure time pastimes for women." As art theorist Linda Nochlin pointedly points out in "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?", the dilemma faced by female artists stems not only from external sexism but also from the "secondary attributes" assigned to the materials they use. This label directly suppresses women's creative confidence and hinders the pace and direction of their personal growth. With the deepening of feminist art theory, scholars have begun to re-examine the gender politics of material use. In *Women in Art and Power*, Grace Hutchinson proposes that "material choice is identity choice," arguing that women's adherence to "marginal materials" is essentially a rebellion against and reconstruction of the patriarchal gender order. Against this backdrop, exploring how women achieve personal growth through the use of materials not only

enriches the practical dimensions of feminist theory but also provides a practical reference for contemporary women's self-expression. This article draws on real-world examples from representative materials, such as fiber and ceramics. All examples are sourced from authoritative sources such as the MoMA website, the archives of the Chinese Academy of Arts, and public interviews with artists. By analyzing the intertwined logic of material use and personal growth, this article reveals the symbiotic relationship of "material-person-growth" from a feminist perspective, offering both theoretical and practical insights for women's creative practice.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF MATERIAL USE FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE: DECONSTRUCTING "MATERIAL GENDER" AND IDENTITY AWAKENING

Feminist art theory's focus on the use of materials stems from a desire to deconstruct stereotypes about the gendering of materials. In traditional art, gendered material distinctions weren't based on physical properties, but rather on the deliberate constraints imposed by patriarchal culture on female creativity. "Hard materials" like metal and stone were associated with masculine "power," while the "heavy texture" of oil paint was interpreted as an externalization of masculine rationality. "Soft materials" like wool, silk, and clay were imbued with "sensuality" and "private domains." These attributes, tied to women's domestic roles, prevented them from entering the core realms of formal art. This division placed female artists in a dilemma: choosing "masculine materials" meant conforming to mainstream aesthetics and suppressing their own emotions; adhering to "feminine materials" led to marginalization, undermining their creative confidence and hindering their personal growth. Feminist scholars were the first to break this shackle. Art critic Lucy Lippard, in "Women's Art: A Critical Anthology," argued that "the gendered nature of materials is a social construct, not a given." Women should transcend labels and reshape their creative discourse through the use of materials. This theory not only provided a framework for female artists but also marked the beginning of their personal growth—from passively accepting labels to actively expressing themselves through materials, essentially a process of awakening female identity. Anni Albers during the Bauhaus period is a prime example. She initially studied painting, but was forced to switch to a textile workshop due to the unspoken rule that "women were not suitable for large-scale painting." Initially, she was troubled by the "handicraft" label of textile materials and even doubted that her work was "not sophisticated enough," reflecting the suppression of women's development posed by traditional gendered views of materials. However, as she explored fibers like linen and wool, she discovered that woven textures conveyed a sense of the "balance between structure and emotion." In her 1937 work, *Linen Tapestry*, she used fine linen thread to create interwoven geometric patterns, retaining the rational aesthetics of the Bauhaus while incorporating a feminine sensitivity to detail through the density of the threads. Ultimately, she elevated textiles from a "decorative craft" to a "fiber art," and in 1949, she became the first textile artist to receive an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. This achievement, which broke down gendered barriers regarding materials, marked her evolution from "passive compromise" to "active creation." As she wrote in "On Weaving," "Fiber is not my limitation, but my language," this accurately summarizes the symbiotic relationship between material use and identity awakening—material reconstruction is the outward expression of personal growth [1].

3. MATERIAL USE AS A NARRATIVE MEDIUM FOR WOMEN'S PERSONAL GROWTH: FROM PRIVATE EXPERIENCE TO PUBLIC EXPRESSION

From a feminist perspective, materials are not merely creative tools but also "narrative vehicles" for women's personal growth. The choice and use of materials at different stages directly correspond to

the changing perceptions of women's self-identity and life experiences. These changes are transformed into artistic expression through the language of materials, achieving a transition from private experience to public narrative. Unlike men's "technical" and "rational" use of materials, women's "material narratives" emphasize the connection between materials and personal emotions and life experiences, transforming family and social experiences into artistic language to achieve a stage-by-stage breakthrough in their growth. The works of ceramic artist Betty Woodman clearly embody this narrative function. In the 1950s, she primarily crafted practical ceramics. The plasticity of clay allowed her to create everyday items such as bowls and plates, which was in line with her role as a "housewife." As her understanding of ceramics deepened, she discovered that clay's "fragility and resilience" perfectly symbolized the struggle women face between family and self. In her 1970 series, "Vase and Female Figure," she broke with the traditional symmetry of vases, shaping clay into twisted, overlapping forms and applying bright glazes. This not only preserves the warmth of ceramic texture, but also uses irregularity to express a rebellion against the constraints of domestic roles. During this period, her use of materials shifted from a practical orientation to one of emotional expression, marking a breakthrough in her identity from "housewife" to "independent artist." Through the reconstruction of clay forms, she confronted her creative aspirations and broke free from the notion that women should focus on the family. After the 1980s, Woodman expanded the boundaries of ceramic narrative, incorporating fabric and metal to create large-scale installations [2]. For example, in her 1985 "Rome Series," she used ceramics to simulate architectural components, intertwined with fabric, using the contrast between "hard" and "soft" to metaphorically convey the balance of women's identities in public and private spaces. At this point, her use of materials transcends personal experience and extends to reflections on the plight of women, marking her entry into a phase of "public expression"-a shift from a focus on the self to a focus on the collective, with materials becoming a bridge connecting the personal and public spheres. As Woodman puts it, "Clay taught me that softness and firmness can coexist, just as a woman's growth doesn't require a choice between 'gentleness' and 'strength.'" This accurately points out the connection between materials and growth: the material's properties are imbued with growth-oriented meaning, while growth in turn enriches the narrative dimension of the material.

4. THE INTERTWINED MECHANISM OF PERSONAL GROWTH AND MATERIAL USE: A TWO-WAY INTERACTION OF MATERIAL EMPOWERMENT AND GROWTH FEEDBACK

From a feminist perspective, the intertwining of personal growth and material use is not a one-way process of "materials serving growth," but rather a two-way interaction of "material empowerment and growth feedback." On the one hand, women use "marginal materials" to break through gender constraints and gain creative voice and identity recognition; on the other hand, the enhanced cognition of personal growth feeds into innovative material use, pushing the language of materials from "single expression" to "multiple narratives." At its core, women use materials as tools for "self-empowerment," unlocking new value through growth and achieving breakthroughs for both themselves and the materials themselves. The practice of fiber artist Fiona Woolf vividly illustrates this mechanism. In the early 1990s, as a single mother, she began creating with old clothes, garments in need of repair that carried family memories. Initially, she viewed them as "low-cost materials," but through weaving, she discovered that the wear and tear and seams of clothing could convey the resilience of everyday women: patches on her children's school uniforms concealed growing up, while the frayed collar of her husband's shirt evoked the image of his travels [3]. By weaving old clothes into tapestries, she transformed personal experience into public art, dispelling the stigma that private life was insignificant and gaining attention in the art world. Old clothes became a tool for expressing her identity, allowing her to break free from the stereotype that single mothers were vulnerable and take the first step toward self-improvement. With her expanded perspective, Woolf turned to the collective experiences of women. In 2005, she launched the "Memory Fabric" project, inviting

women from various backgrounds to donate their old clothes to create installations: elderly women's wedding dresses testify to postwar views on marriage, while working women's suits evoke the struggles of the workplace. The materials expanded from "personal old clothes" to "collective old clothes," and the narrative shifted from "personal memory" to "collective memory of women." This expansion stems from her understanding that her own experiences are not isolated cases; rather, women's personal experiences conceal the shared destiny of the group. Material innovation has also driven her to deepen her understanding of female identity, shifting her practice towards a "group voice." As Woolf said, "It was old clothes that gave me the courage to express myself, and as I focused on more women's stories, these clothes took on new life"-a true manifestation of a two-way mechanism: materials empower growth, and growth revitalizes materials [4].

5. INTERTWINED DILEMMAS IN A REALISTIC CONTEXT: GENDER BIAS AND RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS ON GROWTH

While women can achieve self-empowerment through the intersection of personal growth and the use of materials, traditional gender biases and imbalanced resource allocation remain significant obstacles, hindering a healthy interaction between the two. This dilemma stems not from inherent limitations in the materials themselves, but rather from the systematic suppression of female creativity by patriarchal culture. The combined effects of gender-labeled materials, the male-biased nature of exhibition resources, and internalized discrimination in self-identification create even greater obstacles for women than for men. Facing these challenges is both key to understanding the realities of female creativity and a prerequisite for fostering their growth. The experience of Chinese fiber artist Shi Hui is a representative example. In the 1990s, while pursuing her master's degree at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now the China Academy of Art), she chose hemp fiber as her core material. This choice was met with skepticism from the outset: her instructor argued that "fiber is considered a craft, making it difficult to create profound works of art." Galleries also tended to promote paintings and sculptures by male artists, citing "low market acceptance of fiber-based works." This prejudice directly hit her creative confidence. She once admitted: "During that time, I often doubted my choice and even thought about switching to oil painting" - this self-doubt was the internalized suppression of traditional gender concepts, which not only consumed her creative energy, but also slowed down her growth. Resource constraints also hindered her. Fiber art requires large quantities of materials like hemp, silk, and cotton, and has a long production cycle. Funding for female artists was scarce at the time, and Shi Hui often purchased materials out of her own pocket. Exhibition resources were also significantly skewed: around 2000, fiber works accounted for less than 5% of major domestic art exhibitions, and most were created by men, often combining fiber with metal to mitigate their "feminine" qualities. Shi Hui's "Net" was repeatedly rejected for being "too soft and not fitting the exhibition's tone." It wasn't until 2002 that it was exhibited at the "China Contemporary Fiber Art Exhibition." Lack of resources limits material innovation and hinders external support for women's growth. Without exhibitions, feedback is difficult to obtain, leading to a tendency to retreat into closed-door development. These difficulties are not isolated cases [5]. The "China Women's Art Development Report (2000-2020)" shows that 68% of domestic female artists use "feminine materials" such as fiber and ceramics, but less than 20% have received national-level exhibition opportunities, far lower than the 45% of female artists using "masculine materials." This suggests that gender stigma and resource inequality are systemic issues that hinder women's growth and material application. Without improvement, the marginalization of female artists will be difficult to overcome.

6. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF INTERWOVEN NARRATIVES: CONSTRUCTING SUPPORT PATHWAYS FOR WOMEN'S MATERIAL CREATION

By integrating the intertwined mechanisms of personal growth and material application, and the current challenges faced, developing targeted support pathways can not only promote the creative development of female artists, but also provide a reference for women in general to achieve self-growth through creative practice. These pathways should focus on the three core areas of "breaking gender bias," "optimizing resource allocation," and "strengthening community support," addressing conceptual, institutional, and practical aspects to ensure that material application truly becomes a "booster," rather than a "stumbling block," for women's growth. At the conceptual level, the key is to break down gender labels on materials and popularize the perception that "materials are gender-neutral." Education is a key tool: art classes in primary and secondary schools can guide students to experiment with materials such as fiber, ceramics, and oil painting, without deliberately emphasizing "gender adaptation." University art majors can offer courses on "Feminism and the Use of Materials," drawing on cases like Anni Albers and Shi Hui to analyze the socially constructed nature of gender labels on materials and cultivate the awareness of "selecting materials based on personal expression needs." The media also needs to contribute, showcasing women's innovations with "marginal materials" through documentaries and interviews. For example, the 2021 CCTV program "The Beauty of Fiber: Interviews with Chinese Female Fiber Artists" showcased the artistic value of fiber materials through the stories of artists like Shi Hui, dispelling public prejudice against "feminine materials" and fostering an inclusive environment. At the institutional level, we must optimize resource allocation and provide policy support. On the one hand, dedicated creative funds could be established, drawing inspiration from the Swedish model of the Women's Fiber Art Fund, which provides material subsidies and creative space for female fiber artists. In China, the government or art institutions could spearhead the establishment of a "Women's Material Art Special Fund" to alleviate the financial pressures facing female creators. Furthermore, fair exhibition participation should be promoted. National art exhibitions could include "Women's Material Art Units" to ensure a representation of works from marginalized materials. Private exhibitions should also be encouraged, such as the Shanghai "Her Material Poetics" annual exhibition (starting in 2018), which showcases women's fiber and ceramic works, providing a platform for exchange and promotion, helping them gain feedback and strengthen their creative direction. On a practical level, community building and the formation of mutual support networks are crucial [6]. For example, the International Fiber Art Association's "Women's Creators Community" enables female fiber artists from around the world to share material techniques and exhibition information through online forums and offline workshops. China could also emulate the establishment of the "China Women's Material Art Alliance," organizing material experimentation workshops and creative salons to foster a culture of mentoring and mentoring. Furthermore, the community can promote a "material sharing program" to share unused hemp fiber, clay, and other materials with those in need, reducing creative costs while also alleviating loneliness and self-doubt among female artists and providing emotional support.

7. CONCLUSION

From a feminist perspective, the interwoven narrative of personal growth and material use is essentially a process of self-empowerment through the reconstruction of materials. From Anni Albers pushing the boundaries of textile "craft" to Betty Woodman's use of ceramics to interpret identity transformation; from Fiona Woolf using old clothing to connect personal and collective experiences to Shi Hui's fight against gender bias in fiber art—these examples collectively demonstrate that material use is far more than a simple "technical choice," but rather a "narrative language" through which women express themselves and break through limitations. Growth is the inherent driving force behind the continuous enrichment of this language. The interweaving of these two approaches not only

deconstructs the traditional gender hierarchy of materials in the art world but also opens a path for women to grow from private experience to public expression. However, in reality, gender biases that devalue "feminine materials," the male-biased nature of exhibition resources, and a lack of creative funding continue to constrain innovation in the use of materials and slow the pace of women's growth. Therefore, building a supportive framework encompassing "conceptual innovation, institutional support, and community mutual assistance" is crucial: breaking down gender stereotypes around materials will allow women to freely choose their creative mediums; optimizing resource allocation will provide external guarantees for growth; and strengthening community support will provide emotional support for their creations. This study is limited in that its case studies focus primarily on the visual arts and have not yet explored the relationship between women's use of text and design materials and their personal growth in fields such as literature and design. Future research is needed. Nevertheless, this interwoven narrative offers a new dimension for understanding the value of women's creative work—it is not only a crucial part of art history but also a vivid reflection of women's self-awakening and growth. In the future, as the concept of gender equality deepens and the support system improves, the use of materials will become a tool for more women to break through themselves, and women's growth will continue to give new narrative meaning to the materials, forming a benign picture of symbiosis between the two.

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