

# "The Snake from Multiple Perspectives": Symbolism and Formal Exploration in Artistic

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**Abstract.** In different cultures, the image of a snake can stand for different things. No matter in ancient myths and religions or modern arts, the snake can be the sign of wisdom and life cycles. However, snake can also mean danger and lies. Both ancient and modern artists use the snake in their work. They use different materials and styles to show their own understanding of snake. Despite the snake is such a complex image, it remains to be a crucial part for artists to express themselves in their works. This article looks at the meanings of the snake in art history in a critical way. It studies how different artists think and work. It also compares their works to see what is the same and what is different. The goal is to find out the variety of the symbol, its symbolization and art form. Furthermore, this article analyzes how different cultures influence the attitude to the snake and how artists use visual elements, such as line, color, and form, to highlight these symbolic meanings.

**Keywords:** Snake, Symbolism, mediums.

## 1. Introduction

In the long river of art history, few images can carry a meaning with such contrariety as the snake. It can mean two opposite things at once. It can represent terror, death, and evil, but it can also stand for wisdom, eternity, and healing. For example, in the Bible, it tempts Eve, and should be responsible for the fall from Eden, but in ancient Egypt, it is also the guardian of pharaohs and a symbol of royal power. When we see them in our daily lives, they remind us of the danger from some deadly venom, yet it can also stand for the circle of life through shedding its own skin.

This double character makes the snake different from other animal images. Thus, it makes snake an image that is beyond time, culture, and religion. Until now the snake continues to inspire modern artists, leaving a rich and mysterious legacy in visual arts all over the world.

## 2. Background

Different cultures see the snake in different ways. In Western Culture, the snake represents evil and temptation. As the Bible says, the snake tempts Adam and Eve to eat the apple of sin. So, in this story, it represents desire and the fall of humanity. However, in ancient Greek, the snake is a symbol of healing and wisdom. Hermes' caduceus and the Rod of Asclepius (from which the medical term 'Aesculapius' is derived, another name for the god of healing [1]) are best examples.

In Eastern cultures like Chinese culture, we tend to connect the snake to the cycle of life or power. This should explain why does Chinese dragon have snake-like characteristics. In other places, the snake is seen as a bridge connecting the universe with our world, like Kukulcan, the god that looks like a feathered snake in Mayan civilization.

These different meanings provide artists many ideas to work with. They allow artists to use this complex animal in many forms and styles to express themselves.

## 3. Classical Painting: The Snake as Allegorical and Narrative Element

In many great classical paintings, the snake was often a crucial part of a story. For example, when you look at Michelangelo's fresco *The Creation of Adam* on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, the snake that tempts Eve has a woman's body and a snake's tail. This indicates that it is an intelligent creature, but

has fallen (Figure 1). The way that Michelangelo handled the image of a snake not only fits with the habit of describing religious stories during the Renaissance period, but also criticized the snake as an avatar of evil and temptation [2]. With his proficiency of anatomy, Michelangelo gives the snake a powerful visual tension and a sense of flesh and bone. This made the symbol of temptation even more powerful.



**Fig 1.** Original Sin and Expulsion from the Garden of Eden, Sistine Ceiling Frescoes 1508-1512, Michelangelo [3]



**Fig 2.** Madona dei Palafrenier, 1605-1606, Caravaggio [4]

By contrast, Caravaggio's *The Madonna and the Snake* employs the technique of light and shadow contrast to highlight the image of the Virgin Mary stepping on the snake to demonstrate not only the theme of the struggle between good and evil in Christian faith, but in a Baroque-style dramatic composition, also the negative imagery of the symbolism of the snake is further emphasized (Figure 2) [5]. This heavy reliance on the negative symbolism of the snakes has also been criticized for oversimplifying the complexity and multiplicity of religious symbols, as the snake does not play only a negative role in different cultures and religions, and its symbolic meaning can offer a richer and more diverse range of interpretations.

Hence, the depiction of the snake in classical painting not only reflects the interpretations of religious, philosophical, and moral concepts of different artists but also mirrors the complexity and controversy of the social and cultural context of the time. Through their depiction of the image of a snake, these works reflect the different understandings of good and evil, knowledge, and faith. They demonstrate how art can shape viewers' aesthetic and cognition through symbolic language and storytelling.

#### 4. Abstraction and Expressionism: Reconstructing the Form of the Snake

In abstract and expressionist art, artists have undertaken diverse and profound reconstructions of the form of the snake.

Jean-Michel Basquiat blended African culture, graffiti art, and primitivism into his painting style, so his snake imagery often appears in simplified symbolic forms and carries the powerful presence of primitive tribal symbols (Figure 3). These symbols coexist with other elements such as skulls and crowns, symbolizing the tension between life, death, and power, and reflecting his profound exploration of symbolism [6].



**Fig 3.** Jean-Michel Basquiat [7]

As a representative of abstract expressionism, Georges Mathieu gives a suggestion of the movement of the snake through dynamic brushstrokes and lines. He transforms its form from the figurative into a flow of dynamic energy (Figure 4). As a result, his works emphasize the fluid dynamic form of the snake, encouraging the audience to reconstruct visually through imagination and perception, rather than confining his work to a static image. In contemporary art, Yayoi Kusama and Damien Hirst reinterpret the symbolic meaning of the snake in different ways. With repeated dots and grids, Yayoi Kusama creates a sense of visual infinity, deconstructing the form of the snake into geometric patterns that resonate with the state of her inner world (Figure 5). Her techniques also emphasize the symbolization and abstraction of the snake in modern art, which makes her detached from traditional narrative frameworks.



**Fig 4.** The Supporters of Charles Duc de Loraine - Georges Mathieu [8]

Damien Hirst, however, redefines the symbolism of the snake through installation art. His taxidermy work, *Natural History*, encases a snake as a biological specimen in a glass container, which

can prompt his viewers to reflect on how fragile we are. His work extends the boundaries of traditional painting and elevates the symbolism of the snake to new levels in experimental media, exploring profound themes of life, death, and existence (Figure 6) [9].



**Fig 5.** Love Forever Yayoi Kusama [10]



**Fig 6.** The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living [11]

In brief, both abstract and expressionist artists, by reconstructing the snake's image and its multiple symbolic interpretations, have not only developed the forms of artistic expression, but also profoundly reflected the times and individuals' multi-dimensional cognition of human existence, emotions, and the spiritual world.

## 5. Exploring the Fear and Aesthetics of the Snake

In artistic practice, personal interests are taken as a starting point, and the multiple and conflicting emotional reactions triggered by the snake are explored. At first, the snake was regarded as a real creature that was also captivating. However, during the process of taking care of snakes, it became evident that not everyone can appreciate this animal; many people are afraid of snakes. Though some use snakes to make handbags, taxidermy, or food, intense fear still emerges when encountering a real snake. Therefore, although fear of snakes is not universally shared, the fear of others is amplified in order to encourage reflection on human–snake relationships and to discourage casual harm.

Observation of the snake's posture and appearance was carried out, as its colorful form is often praised as beautiful, yet simultaneously perceived as a threat due to factors such as venom. The snake's diversity and danger are thus expressed through the study of color. Its graceful form and the fear it evokes are conveyed through depictions of the coiling shape, which not only symbolizes confinement but also evokes associations with pain and death. Focus is further shifted to the snake's death, with observation of its skeleton employed to embody this sense of fear. The texture of the bones bears the marks of time, symbolizing the inevitability of death.

To intensify this sense of fear, attention was given to the ratio of humans to snakes. If humans were transformed into snakes, and the snakes grew large enough, they might in turn “dominate” humanity. However, a direct depiction of a giant snake was considered too overt for the audience.

Instead, the process of molting was observed, particularly the snake's growth in size after each molt. The sight of a shed skin is commonly associated with growth and transformation, and the increasing size of the snake with each shedding intensifies its perceived threat. This led to the creation of a huge snake skin to highlight the fear linked with the snake.

Through this practice, not only is the image of the snake magnified, but the audience is also invited to experience the symbolic power of nature. The work aims to awaken recognition and reflection on fear, drawing upon the ingrained associations attached to snakes.

## 6. Conclusion

As a symbolic figure in artistic creation, the snake has undergone an evolution from figurative narrative to abstract symbolism. From Michelangelo to Dali, artists have endowed the snake with multiple symbolic meanings and visual expressions through different artistic styles and techniques. Figurative painting emphasizes the snake's physicality. This paper structure and its correspondence with reality, such as Basquiat's graffiti art and Frida Kahlo's persona symbolism, highlight the snake's specific role in cultural narratives. Abstract art, on the other hand, focuses more on the abstract expression of the snake's lines, curves, and forms, as seen in DaLi's dream-like distortions. The significance of the snake symbol also varies between cultures: in Western Christianity, it is viewed as a negative symbol, while Eastern art imbues it with positive energy, such as the Chinese dragon. By using various media like installation art and biological specimens, contemporary artists have further expanded the snake's forms and symbolic meanings, and extended from visual expression to conceptual exploration. In conclusion, the snake's multiple symbolic representations in art not only reflect the evolution of artistic styles, but profoundly explore human thoughts on deep topics such as life, wisdom, and death.

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