

A Comparative Aesthetics Analysis on Song Dynasty Lacquer Dish in the Form of Plum Blossoms with a Red-brushed Pattern of Two Phoenixes

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Abstract: The Chinese artcraft in Song and Ming Dynasty set a standard that is understood as both unique and influential. Through comparative research, the lacquered Artcraft in East Asia and Europe would provide a holistic view of how Chinese lacquer art craft transferred through dynasties. Two Chinese crafts, Ming Yongle red-painted tea flower round plate and the Song dynasty Lacquer dish in the form of plum blossoms with a red-brushed pattern of two phoenixes are illustrated. It then presents a gilt-bronze inlaid lacquer vessel from France in the reign of Louis XV, made by the Japanese and European Lacquer Bureau, and one can see the great difference between it and the two previous ones made in China. It is inlaid on the top surface with figures, carriages, and horses, as well as with figures of mountains, rocks, and trees, with most of the figures concentrated on the left side, while the right side is left relatively empty of white space. It is argued that from several aspects, the comparison is worthwhile.

Keywords: Japanese and European lacquer, Chinese lacquer, perspective relation

1. Introduction

There is quite a trend for scholars to compare authentic Chinese art crafts with those collected by Western culture and appreciated by their aesthetic thoughts [1-3]. This study follows this research trend with a two-fold comparison. A comparative aesthetics analysis of the Song dynasty Lacquer dish in the form of plum blossoms with a red-brushed pattern of two phoenixes would be illustrated and well-focused. Today when people look into the details of the Song dynasty Lacquer dish in the form of plum blossoms with a red-brushed pattern of two phoenixes, the main body of this dish is in the shape of a plum blossom, and the dish is carved with floral motifs and two phoenixes through a red-picking process. The white space on this plate is very interesting. First of all, observe the whole lacquer plate in general. It can be seen that the carvings on the lacquer plate have very little overlap, and there are not a lot of overlapping carvings that can reflect the perspective relationship. For example, the rightmost tail feather of the phoenix above the lacquer plate presses a leaf, the beak of the phoenix above presses a part of the leaf, the floral pattern on the left side has a little overlap, and the petals of the flower below press the leaf from the front to back, but instead of overlapping the leaf and petal, the carver chose to sacrifice the integrity of the leaf to make way for the petal. Looking at the entire lacquer plate, one can even notice that the artist seems to have deliberately avoided forming

a perspective relationship through overlapping carvings, so much so that the shapes of many flowers and leaves have been sacrificed in order not to obscure other flowers and leaves as well as the phoenix, and have been distorted and carved by the artist, such as the flower next to the wings of the phoenix in the upper left corner, whose petals have been distorted. While sacrificing the shape, the artist placed the patterns with a perspective relationship on the same layer even though the picture became very crowded, such as the pattern of flowers interspersed between the gaps of the phoenix's tail feathers in the upper center, which looks very crowded, but the artist arranged the picture in such a way.

2. Specific Analysis

2.1. Phoenix Tail Feather and Leaf

Compared with other leaves, it can be found that this leaf pressed by the tail feather of the phoenix is carved extra vividly.

The curvature of this leaf's shape is very similar to the way leaves curl in nature, making it more recognizable than other leaves. At the same time, the undulation of this leaf is also very similar to the natural form of a leaf in nature: the leaf stem is represented by carving, and the inner part of the leaf with the stem is depressed downward as a whole, while the edge of the leaf is clearly higher than the inner part and slightly turned outward, in line with the natural form of a leaf with a depressed center and curled outward at the edge. In addition, most of the leaves of the same shape on the lacquer plate have a tip that turns directly from a wider width to a tip, but this one has a relatively long transition process, slowly turning from a wider width to a tip, which is more natural.

In terms of shading relationships, this group of phoenix tail feathers and leaves are the only shading relationships that exist in the entire lacquer plate that are incrementally overlapping and carved out, while no other shading relationships exist in terms of overlapping front and back patterns. It can be seen that the intersection of the tail of the phoenix feather and the edge of the leaf is clearly at right angles to each other, the shadow of the leaf is below the phoenix feather, and the tip of the phoenix feather follows the concave and convex trend of the leaf across the entire leaf.

Why is this leaf so vivid? Because this leaf is obscured, so to better express the leaf to diminish the problem of it being obscured, the technician deliberately carved the leaf to make it more vivid. Or, because this leaf has an obscuring relationship with the visual theme of the phoenix, it attracts people's attention, and to enhance people's enjoyment, the artist has made this leaf extra vivid by carving it [4].

Why is this shading relationship carved overlapping? Because the end of the phoenix tail feather itself is thin, and the center part of the leaf is supposed to be concave, so even if the phoenix tail feather and the leaf overlap, it will not affect the thickness of the whole lacquer plate, so the craftsman carved the phoenix tail feather directly on top of the already carved leaf. This carving adds a sense of authenticity [5].

2.2. Phoenix Beaks and Leaves

If you look down at the phoenix, you can see that the beak of the phoenix and a leaf are shaded, but the relationship between the beak of the phoenix and the leaf is not shown by overlapping carvings, but by giving way to the beak of the phoenix when carving the leaf to reflect the shading relationship between the two.

Here, the phoenix's beak blocks part of the foliage. But there are two more interesting points here. First, in the part we can see, the lower part of the beak of the phoenix follows the trend of the outer contour of the leaf and blocks it. The outline of the lower part of the beak of the phoenix almost perfectly overlaps with the outline of the leaf, and the craftsman seems to have carved the division between the beak and the leaf with a single line.

The shading relationship here does not overlap, as the artist carved the phoenix first and added the leaves later, unlike the shading relationship in Figure 8. We may be able to infer from these two shading relationships the order in which the craftsmen carved this lacquer plate thousands of years ago. Here, the artist carved the beak of the phoenix at the same height as the leaves, but with a portion of the leaves missing to reflect the shading relationship. This seems to explain why the beak of the phoenix and the outline of the leaf almost perfectly coincide: since the craftsman carved the phoenix first and found that the relationship between the two was obscured when carving the leaf, but could not block the phoenix as the main body, and since lacquer carving was not very developed at that time, the craftsman chose to sacrifice the integrity of the leaf and carved it in an obscured relationship with the phoenix, and the outline of the exposed part of the leaf and The outline of the exposed part of the leaf was then attached to the outline of the phoenix, and the craftsman then followed the curvature of the phoenix's mouth to carve the remaining part of the leaf.

3. Ming Yongle Red-painted Tea Flower Round Plate

The main body of the plate is round, and the plate is carved with a tea flower pattern through the red-picking process. The white space on this dish is very different from the previous lacquer dish in the shape of a plum blossom with a red picket pattern of the Song Dynasty [6].

A general observation of the whole lacquer plate shows that there is a lot of overlap in the patterns. It can be seen that there is a great deal of overlap in the patterns on the lacquer plate, and there is a great deal of overlapping carving out of the overlap, and the perspective relationship of the whole pattern is also formed by these overlapping layers. For example, the tea flower in the middlemost part of the plate completely obscures the flower stems and leaves below. At the same time, the overlapping of the flower stems and leaves below the middle of the lacquer plate shows that the pattern of the plate has been carved in many layers, creating a very three-dimensional shading and perspective relationship after the layers of carving have been superimposed, at least three layers in this one place.

3.1. Flower Stems and Leaves below the Middle Camellia

As can be seen, the form of this middle camellia is complete and unobstructed. However, there are incomplete leaves, buds, and flower stems carved below it. Moreover, the distinction between the pattern below and the overlapping part of the camellia is very obvious, so it can be ascertained that there is absolutely no case of sacrificing the integrity of the pattern below and carving the pattern with a different perspective to the same height, but rather carving the camellia located in the first layer first, and then avoiding the camellia pattern to carve the part behind to form the appearance of overlapping layers.

3.2. Flower Stems and Leaves at the Bottom of the Middle

It can be seen that the overlapping layers of the flower stem and leaves below the middle are extraordinarily large [7,8]. The first layer of large leaves obscures the small leaves and flower buds and stems below. The second layer of small leaves and buds obscured the lower stems and buds. Eventually, the bottommost bud is partially obscured, revealing the top of one bud, while the bottommost stem is obscured to the point where only a very thin section can be seen. This shows the difference between this lacquer dish and the Song red lacquer dish with two phoenixes in the shape of a plum blossom.

The previous analysis shows why there are few shading relationships on the Song red lacquer dish with double phoenixes and only one shading relationship is shown by overlapping carving, while this Ming Yongle red lacquer dish with tea flowers is filled with several layers of overlapping carving, which reflects the progress of the industry. Thinking from the perspective of the carving process, the

overlapping shading relationship should be carved out from the top down, since the red-picking process requires the stacking of raw lacquer onto the wooden tire first, and then the wooden tire is carved afterward. Therefore, carving out the next layer of obscured patterns after carving out the upper layer requires a certain amount of skill. During the Song Dynasty, which was the early stage of the development of the red carving process, sophisticated carving techniques were not yet available, so there were very few overlapping carvings on Song red lacquer dishes with double phoenixes. After a period of development, the Ming dynasty had a more sophisticated and complex technique to support the carving of such overlapping and complexly obscured patterns [9].

In addition to the overlap, the depth of carving on this lacquer dish is also very different from that of the red lacquer dish with the double phoenix pattern in the shape of plum blossoms: obviously, the carving on this lacquer dish is much shallower. For example, the outline of the petals of the camellia flower in the center is very shallow. At the same time, there is also a gap between the vivid carving of the leaves on this lacquer plate and the red lacquer plate with the plum blossom pattern: the leaves on this lacquer plate lose some of their vividness. For example, the leaves of the camellia in the middle are very different from the leaves of the camellia in nature.

3.3. Camellia in the Middle

It can be seen that all the carvings of this middle Camellia are very shallow, and some of the patterns have been smoothed out after the wear and tear over time, and there is a long transition section, resulting in less difference between the outline and the depth of the pattern inside.

However, in contrast, the patterns on the Song lacquer dish with a red and double phoenix pattern and plum blossoms. In contrast to the Ming dynasty, it is clear that the Song dynasty is a much more recent rescue. But why is the pattern of the more recent Ming Yongle red lacquer dish with camellias shallower? One possible idea is that during the Song dynasty, the tools used to carve lacquer ware were not as advanced, so they were not able to soften the pattern after carving, leaving deeper, sharper incisions. However, during the Ming Dynasty, the lacquer production process was advanced, and after carving, there were differences [10].

3.4. Middle Camellia Leaves

The outer contour of the camellia leaf in nature is not so curved, but a relatively gentle curvature. However, it can be seen that the outer contours of the leaves in the lacquer tray all have very obvious zigzagging, which is not in line with the natural form. Moreover, the entire leaf form is also not in line with the natural form and is very curved. Take the leaf of the middle camellia for example, the leaf stem of this leaf protrudes upward, and the whole leaf curves upward, with the upper and lower outer contour lines forming several bumps to the outside respectively (Fig. 19). The technician carved the entire leaf form with artistic color, but without paying much attention to and restoring reality. This may be related to the concept of artistic expression. Since this is a floral pattern carved on a lacquer plate, the artist needed and wanted the owner of the plate to know what kind of flower it is, so to express the leaf as much as possible, the artist chose to sacrifice realism and increase the degree of curvature to reflect vividness.

4. Mid-18th Century a Louis XV Gilt Bronze-mounted Japanese and European Lacquer Bureau En Pente

This is a gilt-bronze inlaid lacquer vessel from France in the reign of Louis XV, made by the Japanese and European Lacquer Bureau, and one can see the great difference between it and the two previous ones made in China. It is inlaid on the top surface with figures, carriages, and horses, as well as with figures of mountains, rocks, and trees, with most of the figures concentrated on the left side, while

the right side is left relatively empty of white space. On each of the four sides, inlaid with figures of mountains, trees, and houses, the figures on each side are concentrated on one side, while the other side flows out with more white space.

This piece of lacquerware does not use the red-picking process, and its three-dimensionality comes from the inlay, and the color of the inlay is somewhat different from that of Chinese lacquer inlay crafts. Since it was made by the “Japan and Europe Lacquerware Bureau,” it is reasonable to assume that the lacquerware’s patterns were influenced by Japanese culture. For example, the housing element on the left side of the lacquerware is not a traditional Chinese house but rather has a similarity to the style of ancient Japanese architecture. The pattern on the top of this lacquerware piece also shows that it was consciously made to imitate the composition of Chinese landscape paintings, and the large white space on the right half of this side of the pattern is very similar to the composition of Chinese landscape paintings with large white space. At the same time, the inlay process used in this lacquerware also creates some interesting shading relationships, creating a more natural and realistic perspective than the carving.

4.1. The House on the Side

On this side of the decoration, there is a house. This one house has two levels, with an inverted teardrop-shaped ornament in the center of the roof above and a protruding eave-like section on the lower level. Several steps continue from the house, leading directly to the river. This decoration on the roof is not common in Chinese architecture, but it is also not common in Japanese architecture, so it can be assumed that the craftsmen probably tried to imitate Chinese-style architecture, but made a mistake in doing so because they did not know Chinese architecture. Other features that are found in Chinese architecture are also found in Japanese architecture, so it can be speculated that this lacquerware was influenced by Japanese culture. Also, the shading relationship of this house is very interesting. Since this lacquerware uses the inlay process, there is no restriction on the color of the decoration, so the top surface of the mountain behind this house uses dark inlay items, which well distinguishes the house from the mountain behind it and highlights the house. At the same time, the edge of the mountain on the right side of this house is blocked by the house, and the position and visual transition between the mountain on the right side of the house and the mountain behind the house are well handled through the blocking of the house.

4.2. Transition and White Space in the Middle of the Top Surface

Although the subject of this lacquer top is not a landscape painting, it also imitates the white space of Chinese landscape paintings. Looking at the top panel, one can see that the size of the figures in the pattern gradually decreases from left to right, eventually transitioning to white space. This is very similar to Chinese landscape painting, which has a large number of such transitions, from the tall rocks to the shallows, and finally to the water with white space. The pattern below is also a transition from bottom to top, from solid to virtual. The right part of the pattern has another mountain rock in the white space, which visually balances the white space.

5. Conclusion

Since the process of this lacquer is inlaying, it can form an interesting perspective, unlike the perspective formed by the red-picking process, where the patterns overlap more compactly and vividly. First of all, since the inlay process allows for more colors, the front and the back of the house on the front side of the drawing are chosen in different colors, which better distinguishes the foreground and the back of the house, and better highlights the main part of the house. In the perspective of this side of the drawing, as the European artist is already very skillful in the use of

perspective and shading, the front and back of the drawing are completely reflected pictorially: the three houses in the drawing slowly become shorter from far to near, although they do not follow the principle of large near and small far, but reflect the height of the original houses; behind the trees on the back side of the second story house, two branches protrude from the roof. The dried branches of the trees behind the second-story house protrude from the roof, forming a shading relationship with the trees and the house in front while balancing the openness of the mountain and the high house on the left. The trees on the hill behind follow the perspective theory of large near and small far, and eventually fade into the hill, which also reflects the proficiency of European craftsmen in mastering perspective techniques. By analyzing the white space and perspective relationships of three lacquer pieces from different periods, different techniques, and different countries, we can see that Chinese lacquer carving techniques, the understanding and application of perspective relationships, and the presentation of perspective on lacquer carvings have developed and progressed over time. Western lacquer works, on the other hand, have a different technique and a stronger foundation of perspective, and are more exquisite and have a more vivid and rich perspective than Chinese works of the same period. The analysis of these three works leads to the conclusion that Chinese lacquer carving techniques have a long history, but there was a long period of development, and that China lacked the foundation of perspective techniques, and it took a long time before relatively mature perspective techniques were developed and applied to lacquer carving. The lack of lacquer carving techniques in the West, on the other hand, did not prevent them from using mosaic techniques to create white space and overlapping perspective relationships on lacquerware. At the same time, it is clear that the West had a solid foundation of perspective and a deeper understanding of perspective relationships when it began to embrace lacquer, due to the accumulation of multiple art forms, and that the use of perspective on Western lacquer was significantly more proficient than that on Chinese lacquer.

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