

Exploring Zhu Xianzhen Woodblock Prints

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Abstract:

Zhu Xianzhen woodblock printing is a traditional art originated from folklore, and as an art rooted in folklore, its characteristics and artistic aesthetics must reflect the aesthetic pursuit and value tendency of the general working people. This paper examines the artistic value of Zhu Xianzhen woodblock prints in terms of its development process, characteristics and aesthetic value, and thus analyzes the causes of the current situation faced by Zhu Xianzhen woodblock prints, the significance of people's efforts to this end, and the future development of Zhu Xianzhen woodblock prints.

Keywords:

Zhu Xianzhen, Woodblock Prints, Subject Matter, Five Elements Of Colour, Shape, Aesthetics

1. History of Woodblock Prints in Zhu Xianzhen

Located in Kaifeng, Henan Province in the Central Plains of China, Zhuxian Town is one of the four ancient towns in China. [1] The woodblock prints of Zhuxian Town are also one of the four major folk prints in China, and are also known as “the originator of Chinese woodblock prints”, with a very long history. It was born in the Tang Dynasty, developed rapidly during the Northern Song Dynasty, and reached its heyday during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, when it was said that there were as many as three hundred families engaged in woodblock prints in Zhuxian Town, and as many as three hundred workers mastered the printing of woodblock prints. As a product of its time, it is not only used for the practical function of posting on the doors of homes during the New Year to pray for a happy life in the coming year and to avoid harm, but also contains profound cultural connotations and artistic elements. The study of Zhu Xianzhen woodblock prints allows us to understand the culture and customs of the era and to explore the changes needed in the future development of Zhu Xianzhen woodblock prints.

2. Analysis of the Characteristics of Woodblock Prints in Zhu Xianzhen

2.1. The Five Elements of Color

The “five elements of color” is the color concept of Zhu Xianzhen’s woodblock prints, with the five elements and the five colors matching each other, with green, red, yellow, white and black as the representative colors of the five colors. [2] The colors in the picture mainly take the way of flat painting, the hues are bright but gaudy, and there is an original beauty. In the New Year painting red is the main color, which is related to the traditional culture of China, and it is divided by black lines to make the picture gaudy without losing solemnity. When making color matching, more contrasting or complementary colors are used, with red and black, yellow and green, red and purple as the main tone, and then other colors are added as transitional colors to complement the picture. To this day, Xianzhen woodblock prints still uphold the concept of “five elements and five colors” and have been passed down from generation to generation, becoming an indispensable factor in Xianzhenwoodblock prints.

In Xianzhen woodblock prints, the color red has been used a lot, which is related to the legend that the ancient beast “Nian” will eat people at the end of the year, but Nian is afraid of “red”, “loud”, and “light”. In order to chase away the “Nian”, people put up a lot of red New Year paintings during the New Year, hoping to deter the “Nian”. The second is related to our cultural traditions, in the five elements “fire” corresponds to red, with the meaning of dispelling evil and eliminating disasters, so in the New Year, red has become the main theme, red New Year paintings, red firecrackers, red couplets, etc.

The main color tone of the picture is yellow-green, such as the large area of green on the clothes of the characters and the bright yellow on the cart and the flag, and then purple and orange are interspersed in various positions of the picture as a match. Although the color saturation of each color is very high, but after the clever combination of the whole picture color is very harmonious, neither because of bright colors and fancy, nor because of the small variety of colors and feel monotonous, to meet the visual enjoyment of people.

2.2. Folkloric Nature of the Subject Matter

From the beginning of its development to the present, the subject matter of Zhu Xianzhen woodblock prints has continued, and although some changes have occurred in the course of its development, it is still relatively stable in general. New Year paintings are an art rooted in the folklore, and the door gods are the main theme of Zhu Xianzhen woodblock prints, so the images of the “door gods” are inextricably linked to the people's spiritual pursuit. In folklore, the door god is a symbol of righteousness and force, which can drive away ghosts and evil spirits, and dispel disasters. With the development of the times, the themes of New Year paintings have been enriched, and some gods and goddesses have become popular, such as the statue of the God of Zao in the kitchen of a home to pray for good luck in the New Year; the picture of “Kirin sending children” in the room of a married couple, hoping to have more children and grandchildren; the room of an elderly person with a picture of longevity. In the old people’s room, there are paintings of longevity, such as “Three Stars in the House”, which refers to the three gods of happiness, wealth and longevity. There are also opera stories, such as “Qin Qiong Fights”, “San Niang Teaches”, “Tian He Match” and other opera stories as the theme of the New Year paintings.

These changes in subject matter indicate that the New Year paintings have become more than functional and have a decorative role. The images in the New Year

paintings have been given auspicious meanings and have become symbols representing traditional culture through the testimony of history. But no matter how varied and rich its subject matter as well as its content, it carries people's aspiration for a better life.

2.3. Rough Styling Style

Most of the figures in the woodblock prints of Zhuxian Town are ancient and exaggerated, robust and rugged. I think this has something to do with the local people's customs, as Henan is a central plain region with a developed agriculture and a large number of working people, so the figures in the New Year paintings deeply reflect the bold and simple characteristics of the local people. In terms of the proportion of the figures, the figures in the New Year paintings usually have big heads and small bodies. This is one of the most important rules of Xie He's six methods, which is to pay attention to the rhythm of the painting and to convey the spirit of the brush and ink. At the same time, the creator of woodblock prints usually adopts the way of enlargement in portraying the facial expressions of the characters, and we can obviously find that the character of the characters is more obvious after enlarging the facial expressions, and the expressions of different characters are different. For example, in the New Year paintings of the God of Doors, the expression of the characters is more majestic and their movements are flexible and exaggerated, while the characters of the Gods of Fortune, Longevity and Wealth have amiable expressions and gentle movements. [4]

In the woodblock print "Yuchi Gong and Qin Shubao", the two door gods Yuchi Gong and Qin Shubao are sturdy and robust, with their bodies in a backward twisting posture, holding their respective weapons in their hands in a battle posture. A closer look at the processing of the characters' facial expressions reveals that their heads are tilted backwards and their eyes are tilted upwards, as if in defiance, and as if they are taking a closer look, their noses are treated with a lot of red below, their mouths are tightly closed, their expressions are majestic and their aura is brilliant, with a kind of imposing aura of a military general.

2.4. Full Composition

In terms of composition, the most important feature of Zhu Xianzhen woodblock prints is the fullness and symmetry, the pursuit of completeness, the avoidance of some mutilated images, and the overall rich and tight layout, reflecting the Chinese mentality of seeking completeness and fullness. The overall layout is rich and dense, reflecting the Chinese mentality of seeking for completeness. It satisfies people's expectation of a better life in the future and the psychological trust of pursuing all things smoothly. Although the layout of the picture is tight and full, it does not appear to be cluttered and crowded, but has a sense of hierarchy, with clear priorities and less white space, and can be roughly divided into three parts: the main object, the decorative objects and the background. The shape of the main object basically occupies the whole picture, and then some symbols of auspicious patterns are added in the surrounding space, which not only can enrich the picture content but also play a decorative role. [5] In general, the composition of Zhu Xianzhen woodblock prints is flexible, and this flexible composition provides a very convenient condition for the creator to organize the characters and scenes, and the creator can freely organize the picture and make trade-offs.

The Five Sons of the Emperor (as shown in the picture) adopts a “starry-eyed” composition, with the father in the middle of the picture and the five sons around him occupying all corners of the picture, but in addition to satisfying the full composition of the picture, it also leaves “air holes” for the picture. However, in addition to satisfying the full composition of the picture, it also leaves “air holes”, that is, a little gap on either side of the head of the central figure above the picture, so that the composition of the picture is sparse and dense. The five children are holding lotus leaves, which symbolize a bright future, implying a very auspicious meaning. Many people post the five children to pray for many children and blessings at home, and also hope that their children and grandchildren can soar.

2.5. Bold and Concise Lines

In a work of art, the handling of the lines is particularly important, its thickness, twist and length all require careful consideration by the creator and are one of the basic elements of the art. In the woodblock prints of Zhu Xianzhen, we can find that the lines are generally rough, but they are not unchanging. When depicting different subjects and characters, the lines will change, thick and thin, with a combination of tension and relaxation. The lines of woodblock prints are transferred from the manuscript to the wood panel and then carved out with a carving knife, so compared to the fine hand-painted ones, the lines of woodblock prints add a unique sense of simplicity.

For example, in the work “The Teaching of the Three Maidens”, the mother’s facial lines are more fluid and rounded than the child’s. In the treatment of the clothes, the mother’s clothes have more patterns and are therefore handled more carefully, and the contrast between the two figures can be seen in the complex variations of the headdress, collar, cuffs, patterns and skirt. The child’s clothes are simple and are handled more loosely than the mother’s, with the folds of the dress outlined in a concise manner. Two insects have been added to the top left of the image, the flower held in the child’s hand and the shuttlecock on the ground, which both enrich the image and give it a warm visual feel.

3. The Artistic and Aesthetic Value of Woodblock Prints in Zhuxian Town

The richness of Zhu Xianzhen’s woodblock prints signifies that it is not only used as a functional New Year’s painting, but also as a gradual decorative item. Its artistic and aesthetic value can be appreciated from the following aspects: firstly, from the materials, Zhu Xianzhen woodblock prints are made of purely natural materials from the very beginning of their creation. Perhaps the beginning is due to the limitations of the material conditions, but after a long time of development, it still maintains this natural beauty. The wood plates for carving are selected from pear wood, and different plates are printed with different contents. A piece of artwork often requires many plates and is printed many times to complete. Also due to the limitations of the plates, the colors of the New Year paintings are relatively stable, which requires the creator to use a few simple colors to highlight the characters and create the atmosphere of the picture. The processing of the lines of the characters is relatively rough and the shape is relatively simple, and this simple and uncomplicated expression precisely reflects the simple character traits of the working people.

Secondly, Zhu Xianzhen woodblock prints have formal beauty, and its pursuit of full, full composition constitutes its unique beauty. Therefore, in order to satisfy people's beautiful emotion of pursuing a complete life, Zhu Xianzhen woodblock prints are often large, complete and full in the treatment of the main objects, but the picture is layered while satisfying the auspicious meaning of complete and full. The main object, decorative objects and background each have their own roles and match each other, thus giving the picture a harmonious sense of rhythm. Thirdly, it has deep meaningfulness. The works of woodblock prints not only contain the creator's ideas and hard work, but also send people's aspirations for a better life, both to meet the functionality of the general public and to have the artistry that art works have.

4. Current Status of Woodblock Prints in Zhuxian Town

4.1. The Development of Woodblock Prints in Zhu Xianzhen

As a long-established art, its existence must have its rationality. The invention of engraving and printing made it possible to produce woodblock prints in large quantities at low cost, and they were liked by the working people. However, due to the rapid development of science and technology, various high-tech machines have replaced manual work, which has brought a fatal blow to the traditional hand-made New Year paintings. In addition to the change in hardware facilities, people's aesthetic concepts have also changed dramatically in the changing times. The word "traditional" seems to have imprisoned the creators, and they are unable to integrate new elements with the times, thus slowly losing touch with young people and even the general public. Therefore, in today's fast-paced society, not only the creators of woodblock prints, but also the young art practitioners who keep up with the trend of the times should think about how to integrate traditional culture with modern elements to make woodblock prints come back to life. [6]

4.2. National Policy Drive

As China's intangible cultural heritage, Zhu Xianzhen woodblock prints have been protected and supported by the state in many ways. In 2004, the Kaifeng Museum established the "Kaifeng Zhu Xianzhen Woodblock New Year Painting Research and Protection Center"; in 2006, it was designated as a training base by major universities; in November 2019, the "National Intangible In November 2019", the Kaifeng Cultural Museum was qualified to protect the woodblock prints of Zhuxian Town in the list of representative projects of the national intangible cultural heritage.

4.3. Exploration of Innovation

In order to bring the traditional woodblock prints of Zhu Xianzhen back to life, many people have been exploring how to combine traditional culture with modern creativity. One of the more successful ones is "Yu You Ji", which takes the Forbidden City, the most successful domestic traditional culture innovation, as its basic direction, mainly combining traditional elements with goods. products, such as mobile phone cases, silk scarves, backpacks and so on. There are also innovations that combine traditional elements of New Year paintings with modern design, such as reworking the traditional characters of woodblock prints into Q-format characters that meet modern aesthetics, which retains traditional elements but is also modern and interesting.

5. Conclusions

Zhuxianzhen woodblock prints are not just a traditional art, but they also carry our rich national culture and the public's aspiration and longing for a better life, and are the crystallization of the people's wisdom, with high artistic research value, playing an important role in the study of our national culture. [7] In order to protect traditional art, the government and society have made a lot of efforts, and now more and more people are concerned about the woodblock prints of Zhu Xianzhen, but traditional culture should not only be "protected", but also encouraged to develop. Society is constantly evolving, traditional culture should not be limited to "traditional", but should move forward with the pace of the times, only to develop and innovate in order to make woodblock prints and the times, in order to make woodblock prints come to life, which is the responsibility and obligation of each of us. Only when traditional culture is combined with people's life, so that more people can see it and love it, can traditional culture be truly inherited, which is the real protection of woodblock prints.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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