

Comparative Study on Lacquer Art Coloring During Ming and Qing Dynasties

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Abstract:

The study adopts the socioeconomic development of Ming and Qing dynasties as the main research background to elaborate the influences and effects of social structure and cultural thoughts towards lacquer art coloring. Intensively expound the national aesthetics, imperial attitude and lacquer art materials of the day via method of comparative study and of documentary analysis to clarify the inextricable relation between coloring habits and social culture of Ming and Qing dynasties. Upon the relatively infrequent discussion orientation and research approach in literature field, this Study shall be of significant scientific research value.

Keywords:

Period of Ming and Qing Dynasties, Lacquer Art Coloring, Comparative Study

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

As the last feudal dynasty ruled by the Han nationality in Chinese history, the Ming Dynasty recuperated in the early days of its founding, and then the domestic demand gradually expanded, the overseas trade became more and more prosperous, and the folk lacquer workshops also emerged and flourished. After Zhu Di, the Emperor Yongle of Ming Dynasty, moved the capital to Beijing, the imperial court established an orchard factory in Beijing. And meanwhile, with the government-controlled lacquerware gradually dominating a strong place, a large number of southern craftsmen were transferred to the north. In addition to fulfilling the order requirements provided by the government, the lacquer craftsmen in the Ming Dynasty also had greater freedom of operation, which also promoted the development of lacquer art design. During their period, the lacquer industry in all around the country was very huge [13].

From the Mid-Ming Dynasty to the early Qing Dynasty, the urban consumer market prospered, and luxury prevailed from the palace to the folk society, especially in the Kangxi Period, Yongzheng Period and Qianlong Period. Lacquerware was made and used in all aspects of people's life, especially the nobles and rich businessmen at that time, whose daily ritual instruments were most lacquerware. With the population

growth and adjustment of land tax policy in the Qing Dynasty, a large number of landless farmers turned into craftsmen, which promoted the division of labor in handicraft industry more and more fine. Some farmers even became businessmen, who traded in the noisy metropolises. The market competition also led to the prosperity of the lacquer art design market [18]. From the royal family to the ordinary people, most of them were willing to spend a lot of money on exquisite lacquerware as long as conditions permit.

The development of urban economy has greatly promoted the prosperity of lacquer art. Due to the difference in social structure and cultural basis between the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the development characteristics of lacquerware in the two dynasties are also slightly different, so the differences in coloring habits are also obvious. This Study will discuss the national culture, Emperor's taste and material characteristics of Ming and Qing society from the outside to the inside.

1.2. Research Purpose

By sorting out the development context of lacquer art in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the author has found that the coloring habits of lacquer art are different, and the styles of the lacquerware of the two dynasties are different. Focusing on the coloring differences of lacquerware between the Ming and Qing Dynasties, this Study mainly studies and discusses the three important factors in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, including the national aesthetics, rulers' attitude and media uniqueness, so as to explore the influence of the differences of social structure and cultural thought in the Ming and Qing Dynasties on lacquer art design. This Study is very interesting and valuable, being of high innovative significance.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Traditional Coloring and Cultural Origin of the Ancient Chinese Lacquer Art

Since ancient times, lacquerware has been decorated with color [19]. Black is the natural color of the natural raw lacquer. Due to the production cost, the background color of most lacquerware is black. After the Pre-Qin Period, the color matching of lacquerware with black as the background and red as lines gradually stabilized [2]. Han Dynasty lacquerware was decorated with brown, gold and yellow on the basis of "black outside and red inside" [10].

The traditional lacquerware often takes "red, black and gold" as matching, being full of time factor and cultural connotation. Firstly, in traditional Chinese culture, black has been a symbol of dignity since ancient times. In the so-called "Tian Di Xuan Huang", "Xuan" means black, representing the heaven, and that's why the emperor's clothes, official clothes, gowns and sacrificial clothes in the Qin and Han Dynasties were mainly black [21]. Secondly, "yellow" is considered as representing "the color of earth" [24]. "Yellow" and "gold" are similar in hue performance, and gold is richer in noble texture. Expensive gold foil can show the noble identity of the owner of lacquerware. And moreover, as early as ancient times, human worship of the sun and awe of blood have had great guiding significance for real life [9]. As a color symbol of the sun and blood, red is naturally endowed with transcendent dignity and has become a color worshipped by people [3].

2.2. The Traditional Coloring Habit in Ming Dynasty

The Ming Dynasty has inherited the coloring habit of traditional Chinese culture and had an special favor for the color of red. And the awe of “red” color in the ancient times has gradually faded, while “red borrows the light of fire” [15]. As a symbolic color of turning bad luck into good luck, red was widely used in festive occasions and specifically chased by Chinese people with its commendatory emotions of “success, value and celebration” [11].

In the early Ming Dynasty, the founding emperor advocated bold, rich, concise and elegant collocation, and was also keen on simple red and black in coloring [14], which would be occasionally decorated with white representing sunlight. And meanwhile, there would be clear restrictions on the use of color for the ordinary people. According to the Records of Emperor Taizu of Ming Dynasty, that “in a letter to the province (August of the third year of Hongwu Period), it was restricted to adopt yellow as decoration in the officer and ordinary people’s clothes, and also color paintings of ancient emperors, concubines, sages and sages, such as the shape of the sun, the moon, the dragon, the phoenix, the lion, the unicorn, the rhinoceros and the elephant, which should be destroyed within 100 days” [6].

2.3. The Traditional Coloring Habit in Qing Dynasty

Manchu originated from the nomadic people in Northeast China. Due to their long-term suburban living environment and unique national aesthetic psychology, their attitude towards color has changed from the simplicity and elegance of the previous dynasty to more beautiful colors, such as red, green, blue and purple [20]. Manchu people were very sensitive to color and were used to the collision between different colors. Just as the “Eight Banners System” in the Qing Dynasty, which, based on the colors, was composed of the upper three banners, including Plain Yellow Banner, Bordered Yellow Banner and Plain White Banner, and the lower five banners, including Plain Red Banner, Plain Blue Banner, Bordered White Banner, Bordered Red Banner and Bordered Blue Banner. Manchu had a strong collocation of traditional colors, and was keen to show the elegant, gorgeous, bright and romantic style in the overall application of colors.

The main colors commonly used in court utensils and costumes in the Qing Dynasty were bright yellow, orange, red and white. Due to the boundaries between social classes, the folk coloring habit was very different from those in the Forbidden City, which would more prefer black and green [5].

3. Research and Analysis

3.1. Color Aesthetics of Han and Manchu National Culture

The Ming and Qing Dynasties not only had differences in social structure and economic background, but also had obvious differences in the national composition of their ruling class. Therefore, their cultural connotation and traditional heritage had their own characteristics, especially in the difference of color aesthetics. The Ming Dynasty belonged to the Han nationality and originated in the Central Plains, which had a clear direction to the symbolic meaning of each color. Influenced by the scholar class, the coloring habit of Han nationality tended to be pure and elegant; while the Aisin Gioro Family in the Qing Dynasty belonged to the Manchu nationality and originated in the suburbs of Northeast China. As we all know that the nomadic people have independent and courageous excellent quality. Their preference in bright colors

can be easily seen from the color as the basis for distinguishing the Eight Banners System in the Qing Dynasty.

Since ancient times, the Central Plains Culture has integrated the concept of “five directions and five colors” with religion, which not only shows the religious spirit of the Han people, but also has rich scientific imagination, gradually forming a complete belief ideological system [15]. According to the Color Superstition in Chinese Culture by Cheng Yuzhen, the so-called “five directions and five colors” means the “five directions”, namely “east, south, west, north and center” and the “five colors”, namely “cyan (wood), red (fire), white (metal), black (water) and yellow (earth) as the sky is round and earth is square in the concept of the universe of the Han people” [4].

Now those ancient times, it has been a common means for the ruling class to show their noble identity through color. As mentioned earlier, the rulers of the Ming Dynasty had a “red” complex, while “yellow” represented the integrity and nobility of the monarch [5], which was the color of the earth and symbolized the wealth [24]. “Black” had a solemn and quiet historical meaning, which was extended to fortitude and dignity [21]. Therefore, red, yellow and black were common noble colors in the Ming Dynasty.

Compared with the Han nationality, the Manchu people were nomadic in the wild all year round and got along more closely with the nature. In the eyes of Manchu people, white means purity and represents peace and holiness, which is one of the most noble, mysterious, beautiful and auspicious colors, and moreover, the sense of rhythm and formal beauty composed of white creations are the cornerstone of Manchu visual symbols [12]. In addition, the Manchu people also had a special passion for the natural primary colors derived from all things in the world, such as red, green, blue and yellow [5].

Until the Qing Dynasty was established by the Manchu nationality, the ruling class inherited the tradition of the previous dynasty and gave the supreme meaning to the color of yellow. Blue belongs to the cyan category, which is homonymous with “Qing” (meaning clear) and is similar to the color of the sky, implying nobility and cleanliness. And red symbolizes good luck and has the characteristics of enthusiasm like fire. Thus in the Qing Dynasty, the Eight Banners System was established in four colors of yellow, white, red and blue and bordered yellow, bordered white, bordered red and bordered blue, which laid the color tone of the Manchu people.

Generally speaking, the Ming Dynasty inherited the tradition of the Han nationality and often pursued red, yellow and black, especially products of the imperial court, so as to highlight the noble social identity of users and express the distinction of dignity and inferiority [24]. The Qing Dynasty continued to adopt the Manchu custom, not only advocating the four colors of yellow, white, red and blue, but also retaining the original coloring custom of the nomadic people by matching colors together.

3.2. The Attitude of the Rulers towards Color

The existing lacquer art products of the Ming and Qing Dynasties mainly came from the palace relics and users handed down from generation to generation. Products of the palace would usually be marked with the production year. The lacquerware of the Ming Dynasty was mainly made in the Hongwu, Yongle and Xuande Periods. It can be inferred that the rulers of the three Periods should have a strong guiding role in the production of lacquer art at that time. Similarly, a large number of lacquerware were produced during the reign of Yongzheng and Qianlong in the Qing Dynasty.

According to various historical records, the aesthetic consciousness of these two royal father and son had a far-reaching impact on the development of lacquer art at that time.

The comparatively representative rulers of the Ming and Qing Dynasties often showed distinct aesthetic taste and had their own color preferences or taboos. For example, in the twenty fourth year of Hongwu Period, the imperial court issued three prohibitions to the folk society that “the clothes and curtains of officials are not allowed to use black, yellow and purple, nor can they weave and embroider dragon and phoenix patterns, which is a crime, and so is the person who dyed them”; “the beds used by officials and ordinary people are not allowed to carve dragon and phoenix patterns or golden decorations”; it is not allowed to use vermilion, paint gold, carve dragon and phoenix patterns, and nor dragon patterns and coloring lacquer can be used in the costumes, beds, screens and partitions. In other words, according to the regulations of the imperial court, since the beginning of the Ming Dynasty, ordinary people could not adopt black, yellow and purple and wood with golden patterns on vermilion paint was also prohibited. In addition, as the emperor’s throne of the Ming Dynasty was mostly dark green, green was also banned by officials and people in the Yingzong Period of the Ming Dynasty [16].

Therefore, the ordinary people’s clothes or daily utensils in the Ming Dynasty would try to avoid using black, yellow, purple, gold and green alone. Although red could be used along, it should avoid coexistence with gold. In the Ming Dynasty, only the imperial court could use the overall golden lacquer furniture, but the civilians could not. Even when the royal family wanted to sell the golden lacquer furniture among the people, it had to scrape off the gold foil on its surface first to avoid infringing on the royal authority [22].

It can be seen that pure red was the main tone of lacquerware in the Ming Dynasty. In addition to the subjective preference of the rulers, it also combined various objective factors at that time, including hierarchy, national background, cultural taboos, and material development and so on. Until the lacquer art manufacturing in the Qing Dynasty, people’s attitude towards color aesthetics still followed the development law dominated by the ruler and the coexistence of objective environmental factors. (Figure 1)



Figure 1. *Camellia Pattern Lacquer Box by Carved Red, Ming Dynasty (Yongle), National Palace Museum Collection.*

Source: <https://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/lacquerware/232877.html>

The use of color in the Qing Dynasty was different from that in the Ming Dynasty. Although the craft manufacturing in the early Qing Dynasty absorbed the simple and elegant style of the previous dynasty and developed to the peak in the Yongzheng Period, the Manchu Qing Dynasty’s attitude towards color has changed dramatically from top to bottom since the reign of Qianlong, and turned to matching of various colors.

As mentioned earlier, the Manchu tradition advocated the four colors of yellow, white, red and blue. However, due to the Emperor Yongzheng's persistence in the "simple and elegant" style, the aesthetics of daily palace utensils did not pursue matching of various colors. Moreover, he attached great importance to his "orthodox" identity, so he paid special attention to the color of yellow symbolizing imperial power, just like the yellow robe of the emperor of the Qing Dynasty, that is, the gold foil made of gold was wrapped with raw paint, and then woven with gold thread [23]. The essence of yellow on lacquerware is to show the effect of "gold". Most of the imitation foreign paints produced during the reign of Yongzheng used pure black or red as the base, and then gold powder was used to decorate all kinds of delicate patterns. The use of black symbolizing majesty or red symbolizing auspiciousness as the background was quite low-key, which could effectively set off the golden theme pattern. (Figure 2)



Figure 2. Dragon Pattern Lacquer Case by Imitation Foreign Paint, Qing Dynasty (Yongzheng), National Palace Museum Collection.

Source: <https://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/gear/228947.html>

As mentioned by Lai Huimin in *Foreign Currency and Citizen Life in Suzhou* (1736-1795) that, unlike the Ming Dynasty, the imperial court was the first to lead the social fashion in the Qing Dynasty [8], which was particularly obvious during the Qianlong Period. Emperor Qianlong was young and successful, which coincided with the prosperity of national strength, long rule time and profound cultural cultivation, opening up a new aesthetic standard. During the reign of Emperor Qianlong, the craft products pursued magnificence, festivity, exquisite shape and colorful. At that time, lacquerware manufacturing was often combined with a variety of colors, and the production quantity of color painting and color carving accounted for the most. Due to the large demand of the imperial court, the paint production of the manufacturing office of the interior government has been overwhelmed. A large number of manufacturing orders were dispatched to folk paint workshops, or directly purchased by local imperial merchants to the capital. Therefore, the palace aesthetics represented by the emperor naturally followed to the folk people, widely affecting the public's interest and becoming the object of popular pursuit. (Figure 3)



Figure 3. Dragon and Phoenix Pattern Lacquer Plate by Carved Color, Qing Dynasty (Qianlong), National Palace Museum Collection.

Source: <https://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/lacquerware/231117.html>

Since Qianlong Period, the national power of the Qing Dynasty has gradually declined. Later rulers did not have the appreciation ability of Yongzheng and Qianlong in the field of art. And meanwhile, they had no time to take into account the creation of a new artistic style. Therefore, the color matching habit with rich levels and strong contrast created in the Qianlong Period continued to be adopted until the end of the Qing Dynasty.

3.3. Analysis on the Media Characteristics of Lacquer Art in Ming and Qing Dynasties

The raw material of lacquer art in the Ming and Qing Dynasties was “raw lacquer”, which is a pure natural plant material extracted from lacquer tree. Its natural color is ochre, which is transparent, that is, the so-called “raw lacquer”. With the increase of placing time, the color of raw lacquer gradually becomes darker, and if carbon powder is added, it will show a pure black hue [23]. If cinnabar is mixed, the effect of red paint can be obtained. The official lacquer art in the Ming Dynasty was mainly red and black. On the one hand, it was due to the inheritance of the coloring habit of the traditional lacquer art. On the other hand, as mentioned above, it was dominated by the aesthetic of the ruler. Moreover, because the price of cinnabar was more expensive than carbon powder in ancient times, the cost of making lacquerware with red paint was higher. The expensive price could meet the psychological superiority of users and derive the symbolic differences of the upper class in society. Therefore, most of the court carved lacquers in the Ming Dynasty took red as the main tone.

Due to the short duration of the official “orchard factory”, the lacquer art manufacturing in the middle and late Ming Dynasty mainly originated from the folk society. As mentioned earlier, normally, black, yellow, purple, gold and green were the colors that the ordinary people in the Ming Dynasty need to avoid. However, since the secular atmosphere began to prevail in Chenghua Period, the ordinary people also obtained considerable wealth through the development of urban economy [1], and the luxury atmosphere popularized the middle and lower classes of society on a large scale for the first time [17], the social trend also transited from “advocating simplicity” in the early Ming Dynasty to “advocating luxury” in the middle and late Ming Dynasty [7]. At that time, the folk color taboo began to be relieved, the public's aesthetic pursuit became diverse, all kinds of painted lacquerware emerged, and a variety of inlaid materials were widely used. Most of the handed down painted screens and inlaid lacquer works were created under such a social background.

The uniqueness of the lacquer art of the imperial court in Qing Dynasty became to emerge in Yongzheng Period and was significantly influenced by the lacquerware from Japan [14]. At that time, the production quantity of official imitation foreign paint was the largest, which was mainly based on black or red, inlaid with foil and painted with golden patterns. Realistic modeling and decorative patterns coexisted, and the artistic effect was relatively pure. During the Qianlong Period, carved lacquer was the first major form of lacquer art, both in the palace and among the people, which was mainly pure red in the early time and then was called “carved red”. Later, influenced by the rulers' pursuit of complex and gorgeous aesthetic concepts, they gradually tended to match a variety of colors, mostly combined with black, purple, green and other colors, namely “carved color”.

As mentioned earlier, Manchu people have advocated yellow, white, red and blue since ancient times. In the deductive effect of lacquer art, “red” has always been a

classic paint color, “yellow” is expressed by metal foil, while “white” and “blue” can be presented by hard materials. For example, pasting eggshells or white shells to obtain clean white, and inlaying deep-sea mother of pearl can obtain a deep purple blue effect.

In fact, it has been a long time since the application of natural hard shell materials to the production of lacquer art to extract its cold color, which is not an exclusive product of the Qing Dynasty. However, in the past, under the influence of traditional Chinese culture, “white” and “blue” always made people feel too simple and pure, and failed to reflect the meaning of celebration and wealth. Therefore, the scope of use was narrow, mostly used by literati and refined scholars, and rarely used for official lacquerware.

After the Manchu people dominated the world, with the Manchu royal family’s preference in “white” and “blue”, the use frequency of natural materials such as eggshell, white shell and mother of pearl increased greatly. Meanwhile, due to their wear-resistant characteristics, they were often used on court painted furniture to set off with the deep paint color or the primary color of the wood.

4. Conclusions

This Study has researched and analyzed the color aesthetics, the rulers’ attitude towards color and the media characteristics of lacquer art in the Han and Manchu culture in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, applied the comparative study and literature analysis methods to explore the characteristics and differences of the coloring habits of lacquer art in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, so as to detect the coloring habits of lacquer art design were influenced by the economic background, national thought, aesthetic consciousness, objective materials and other aspects, further reflecting its ethical causality with the social culture.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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