

An Exploration of the Development of Subject Matter in Chinese Door Painting

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Abstract:

The tradition of door paintings has been handed down to this day because the Chinese people continuously integrate life creation and preserve the excellent traditions and the essence of national culture of ancient people in terms of innovation and ideology, forming a unique artistic style and characteristics. To this day, at the beginning of the New Year, the folk still retains the custom of door paintings. With the development of the times, the content and form of door paintings are also changing rapidly. This article mainly explores and studies the historical origin and development of door paintings in Chinese folk art, the subject matter, content, and form of door paintings, as well as the innovation of contemporary door paintings.

Keywords:

Door Paintings, Subject Matter, Development

1. Historical Origin of Door God Paintings

Door paintings are one of the important visual carriers of traditional ethnic culture. All the wooden color paintings posted or painted on doors, related to door festivals and customs, with decorative, functional, and spiritual beliefs, are collectively referred to as “door paintings.” [5] According to the written records mentioning door gods in “Dongjing Menghua Lu,” it can be seen that door paintings originated from the Song Dynasty and, like New Year paintings, are part of the customs of the Spring Festival. They were initially referred to as “door gods” or “door god paintings.”

The folk belief in door gods originated from ancient people’s adoration and respect for deities. People believed that doors could block tangible objects in the world but could not stop the unpredictable and omnipresent demons and ghosts. Therefore, they hoped that the door gods, who were like “guards standing at the post,” would protect their family’s happiness, health, and harmony. Gradually, the concept of door gods took shape. The predecessor of door gods was peach wood charms. Ancient people believed that peach wood, as the essence of the five woods, had the effect of dispelling evil spirits. [7] The most common method was to carve the names of Shentu and Yulei on peach wood or carve peach wood into the shape of Shentu and Yulei, hanging them in front of the door to give folk people spiritual sustenance and pray for peace and happiness. Subsequently, the belief and culture of door gods also

spread among the people. As people's living standards improved relatively, the themes of door paintings became more diverse and folkloric, and their content expanded from driving away ghosts and gods to pursuing good career prospects and auspicious wishes. [2]

2. Classification of Door Paintings' Subject Matter

2.1. Door God Paintings

Door God paintings are the main form of door paintings, divided into martial and civilian Door Gods. Martial Door Gods are primarily placed above the street-facing front doors, serving the purpose of guarding the door and protecting the facade of the house. Most martial Door Gods are depicted as warrior heroes, with robust and sturdy bodies, wearing golden helmets and armored suits, wielding various weapons, and often having solemn and ferocious facial expressions. [2,3] For example, the early Shen Shu and Yu Lei, as well as the Taoist deities Qinglong and Baihu. Among them, Zhong Kui, the ghost-catching saint who emerged in the Tang Dynasty, is often placed at the rear entrance of residences due to his peculiar appearance with a leopard-like head and ringed eyes. The styles of various regions are similar but each has its unique characteristics. The costumes of Qin Qiong and Yu Chi Gong in Yangliuqing are painted with a strong decorative effect. Their armor and robes are rich and elegant, with exquisite patterns and carvings. The bright sapphire blue and golden-like bright orange are chosen to match each other, creating a strong decorative color that is noble, elegant, and luxurious. The patterns on the clothes, the accessories, the ornaments on the clothes and hats, and the background patterns are all delicately depicted. Almost all available spaces are filled with patterns, except for the background of the painting, as if everywhere is filled with people's good wishes. [6] There are differences in sparsity, density, thickness, and lightness in traditional Chinese paintings, emphasizing the main characters and creating a strong decorative atmosphere. There are also Qin Qiong and Yu Chi Gong with a background of piled gold powder and colorful clouds. The red tassel helmets of the warriors and the lion monsters on their shoulders holding red tassels create a strong visual impact. The background is laid with a bronze green color, similar to the green of copper, giving a sense of richness, tranquility, and harmony. The warriors' clothes are also intricately designed colored, with strong color contrasts and lively brightness. [6]

With social stability and economic development, civilian Door Gods dressed in court attire, wearing black gauze caps, and holding symbols of fortune, prosperity, longevity, and wealth began to appear. Typical representations of civilian officials include Tian Guan Bi Gan and Zhuge Liang. These civilian Door Gods, often depicted as Tian Guan Bi Gan, are mostly pasted on the doors of the inner chambers of the yard, symbolizing the welcoming of fortune and prosperity. Most civilian Door Gods are associated with promotions and wealth, so they are usually depicted wearing gauze caps and embroidered crane court attire, exuding an air of elegance and nobility. [8] With the emergence of civilian officials, the characters and combinations of Door Gods pasted on the doors of residences became more diverse, including the Tang Dynasty's military and civilian generals Qin Shubao and Yuchi Gong; the Song Dynasty's husband-and-wife combination Han Shizhong and Liang Hongyu; and the father-and-son combination Guan Yu and Guan Sheng. [7]

2.2. Door painting with children's themes

In traditional folk beliefs, children themselves are symbols of good luck, representing “auspiciousness and surplus” and prosperity. Dolls are characters in door paintings that symbolize both happiness and fertility worship. Child door paintings and doll-themed paintings used for decoration are widely welcomed by the people. Dolls symbolize the continuity of life, “more children, more blessings,” “prosperity of the family,” and “flourishing of the clan. [6]” Child-themed door paintings emerged during the Tang and Song dynasties. They were not large in size and were often combined with beauty-themed door paintings, being posted on interior doors or backyard doors, mainly serving as a moral and cultural educative function within the house. These child-themed door paintings mainly represent longevity, happiness, and fertility. The emergence of child-themed and beauty-themed door paintings reflects a change in people’s old perceptions of door paintings, transitioning from ensuring household security, avoiding evil spirits, and protecting the home to pursuing ideals and emphasizing quality of life. The child figures in child-themed door paintings often exhibit rosy complexions, plump bodies, lively and cute expressions, and vivid movements. [7] Their actions, such as hugging, jumping, and running, highlight their lively poses, coupled with cheerful expressions, as well as diverse accessories like wearing purple gold crowns, adorned with auspicious flowers, holding ingots, coins, or vases, all contribute to enhancing the festive and dynamic atmosphere of the door paintings, creating an auspicious scene that infuses the festive atmosphere.

2.3. Female-themed Door Paintings

Female-themed door paintings mainly focus on the subject of beautiful women and court ladies. Such door paintings are often posted on the doors of bedrooms of couples or unmarried young women, mostly depicting the harmonious life within households, emphasizing the laws of life, and pursuing the idea of happiness and prosperity. After the mid-Qing Dynasty, female-themed door paintings began to emerge and became popular among the people. There were door paintings of female generals incorporating opera styles, such as “Mu Guiying,” “Huang Yinggu and White Lotus,” and others. There were also door paintings purely depicting the delicate and graceful features of women, such as “Fish and Joy”, “Beauty” and so on. Additionally, there were door paintings depicting wives’ responsibilities of supporting their husbands and educating their children, nurturing life, and blessing children. Except for a few door paintings of female generals, most door paintings focusing on women are anonymous, often expressing the meaning of having many children and blessings. In traditional door paintings, women symbolize good luck, joy, and fertility in different roles and identities. They are the embodiment of beautiful things, with unique cultural connotations, representing the folk aesthetic images in folk door paintings [1]. Meanwhile, the changes in female images also stem from the social atmosphere and the recognition of female identities by the spirit of the times. For example, during the period of reform, female door paintings underwent significant changes, displaying new trends and novelties of the times, as well as changes in production techniques. However, women, as a beautiful and harmonious theme for door paintings, have maintained consistent characteristics. [5]

2.4. Door paintings with other themes

Other themed door paintings refer to those with themes of opera, flowers, birds, fruits, vegetables, and animals. Animal-themed door gods include tigers, chickens, lions, fish, and so on, which are chosen for their symbolic meanings expressed

through homophonic pronunciation to convey the wish of exorcising evil spirits and ensuring peace and safety. [5] For example, folk paintings with tiger themes often feature styles such as “tiger ascending the mountain,” “tiger descending the mountain,” and “mother and child tigers.” In the modern Hebei tiger-themed door painting “Facing Tigers,” the tigers depicted are “mother and child tigers.” There is a poem by Ni Qian of the Ming Dynasty titled “Mother and Child Tigers” that reads: “Although fierce and intimidating, they still recognize the bond between mother and child... Showing no anger or resentment, only a sense of constant affection through nursing.” The image of mother and child tigers in the New Year paintings transforms from fierce and powerful to warm and affectionate, especially with the little tiger looking up to and depending on its mother, which is portrayed in a way that evokes compassion. The symbolic meaning of seeking and protecting offspring has always been an important reason for the popularity of folk arts featuring tigers. Tigers are known as the gods of protecting houses, and tiger door gods are worshipped as protectors of human beings across various regions. Tiger door paintings enter every household through the use of woodblock printing techniques, bringing visions and blessings for the new year.

Opera-themed door paintings originated in the Song and Yuan dynasties. During the late Yuan dynasty, the prevalence of opera further promoted the prosperity and development of door paintings. Opera-themed door gods often utilize opera facial makeup and select storylines and scenes from operas and novels as material for door god paintings, such as “Immortals of the Eastern Zhou,” “The Romance of the Western Chamber,” “The Single-Sword Gathering,” and so on. Opera themes have transformed the function of door god paintings, adding decorative effects. [5] The costumes worn in some traditional opera performances directly influence the image of the door gods in the paintings of military generals. For example, the costumes of military generals in the door paintings of the Yuan Dynasty were deeply influenced by the costumes of opera characters, and the image of military generals wearing armor and snake patterns, with flags on their backs, can be seen in various door god paintings. The door god figures in Sichuan more obviously show the influence of folk opera characters on the door painting characters. From the clothes of the generals standing in the palace, it can be seen that their modeling concepts directly come from the character modeling in Sichuan local operas, especially the costumes of Qin Qiong, Jingde, and the rare Qing dynasty officials’ clothing features in the “Tian Shui Jiao” door paintings. They are also the only images in all door paintings wearing Qing dynasty official uniforms, with “warm hats” on their heads, which are mostly round with an upward curling brim around them. There is a hat band installed on the top of the hat, and a “haogua” is worn over the robe, which is a kind of clothing worn by soldiers in the Qing Dynasty. Their feet wear Qing dynasty official boots. [7] The door painting “Double Joy Ushering in Spring” is a basket composed of various flowers with auspicious meanings, along with a pair of magpies, symbolizing new atmospheres and fortunes for the new year. However, this theme is relatively rare and will not be elaborated in detail. [7]

3. Changes in Door God Paintings Since the Republic of China

From the emergence of the concept of door sacrifice to the gestation of the Han and Tang Dynasty door painting styles, and then to the development of wooden door god paintings in the Song Dynasty, through the Yuan and Ming dynasties, the art of door paintings reached its peak in prosperity in the Qing Dynasty, with a history of

development spanning two thousand years. [5] In the 1930s, the themes of wooden door paintings gradually changed, and they began to decline. In the early Republic of China, door paintings began to exhibit new themes and artistic forms, with the representation of “gods” gradually diminishing. During this period, monthly calendar-style (also known as monthly advertisement paintings) door paintings emerged. Fashion models became the primary images in these door paintings, initially rendered in pastel or bold colors, and later developed into a watercolor technique, exhibiting bright and vivid hues. Among these, Zheng Mantuo’s “Evening Makeup” and “Half-length Lady” paintings stand out particularly. Simultaneously, the portrayal of great men was also a theme for monthly calendar-style door paintings, as evidenced in the work “Sun Yat-sen.” It is evident that the content and form of door paintings have evolved with the changing times. Before and after the reform and opening up, door paintings closely aligned with the pulse of the times, mostly using real people and events as creative themes. For instance, Jin Meisheng’s “High Building on a Winter Melon” and Shang Lusheng’s “He Is the Strongest Laborer” focus on portraying figures of the new era, differing from the representational styles of the Republic of China era. During this period, the door painting characters exhibited a healthy and unadorned aesthetic, possessing a unique charm. [5] These works underwent significant changes in content, form, modeling, and color, reflecting social life in a very realistic manner. Overall, contemporary door paintings have largely retained the compositional form of ancient door paintings, with more realistic and lifelike depictions of facial features. They have also been influenced by Western painting in terms of modeling and color.

4. Conclusions

The culture of door paintings, which has a history of more than a thousand years, visually records a large amount of humanistic information in China. Through homophonic and symbolic techniques, the ancients expressed people’s inner aspirations for dispelling evil spirits, ensuring a long life and prosperity, and bringing good luck and happiness, which are the carriers of folk spiritual beliefs. Since door paintings are different from ordinary festival decorations and have their own unique history and meaning, reflecting people’s customs and original beliefs, and carrying the fundamental national cohesion of Chinese culture, it is necessary for modern people to inherit the culture of door paintings. In conclusion, changing door paintings annually reflects people’s enthusiasm for bidding farewell to the old year and welcoming the new year, as well as their prayers and confidence in averting disasters and bringing good luck. [3] Door paintings serve as a spiritual solace to compensate for the difficult living conditions of early people and inspire everyone to create an ideal living environment. People satisfy and regulate their psychological and spiritual needs by creating and appreciating art, thereby empowering themselves to face reality and overcome difficulties.

Conflicts of Interest

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