

Study on the Aesthetic Ideology of “WenQiBinBin” in the Design of Warring States Band Hooks

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Abstract:

Band hooks from the Warring States period were an important part of ancient Chinese clothing, containing deep cultural symbolism and demonstrating the advanced metalworking technology of the time. Not only practical, these belt hooks also reflect the ancient Chinese understanding of aesthetics through various design elements. The concept of “WenQiBin” implies a balance between refinement and substance, and plays a key role in its aesthetic significance. This paper first explores the significance of the concept of “WenQiBinBin” in art, and analyzes the two aspects of “Wen” (refinement) and “Quality” (connotation) of the Warring States belt hooks. The book understands its delicacy in terms of form, craftsmanship and decoration, and reveals its connotation in terms of function and cultural connotation. Through specific examples of craftsmanship and art, the paper concludes that the Warring States belt hook realizes the harmonious unity of “wen” and “zhi”, and is an art form that embodies elegance and balance. The Warring States belt hook is a masterpiece of perfect combination of aesthetics and functionality, representing the precious cultural heritage of the Chinese nation.

Keywords:

Warring States Belt Hook, Wen Zhi Bin Bin, Aesthetic Philosophy

1. Introduction

The design of the Warring States belt hooks reflects the unique characteristics of the era and embodies the spirit and culture of the time. These belt hooks were finely crafted and employed a variety of techniques, combining practicality and aesthetics. The band hooks of the middle and late Warring States period show a unique artistic style in terms of modeling, patterns and decorative techniques, providing a valuable reference for the development of later generations. “Literary quality” is an important concept put forward by Confucius regarding the cultivation of a ‘gentleman’, referring to both literacy and quality. It describes a person’s intellectual and moral qualities, highlighting elegance and nobility. The philosophical idea of “wenzhibinbin” has an important aesthetic value, especially in terms of design. By analyzing the essence

“wen”) and quality (“zhi”) in the design of Warring States belt hooks, we can explore the cultural connotations behind their forms and gain a deeper understanding of their shapes, manufacturing processes, decorative patterns and functional roles.

2. Warring States Band Hook Design

The Chinese have always emphasized dress. As stated in the Zhouyi: “The Yellow Emperor, Yao and Shun took the law of heaven and earth by the virtue of their dress.” [1] As an indispensable part of the dress and etiquette system, the belt hook is an important element of ancient dress and etiquette culture, reflecting the splendor of Chinese civilization.

Belt hooks, known as xi bi in ancient times, were used by nobles, scholars and warriors to tie their belts. Traditionally made of bronze, belt hooks evolved over time into gold, jade and other precious materials. The craftsmanship of these belt hooks was exquisite, utilizing techniques such as gilding, inlay, and intricate marquetry (gold and silver inlay). These methods created a colorful art form for belt hooks. In addition to the practical function of fixing the belt, the belt hook is also a symbol of social status.

3. The Aesthetics of “Literacy and Refinement”

It is mentioned in the Analects of Confucius that “If connotation is greater than cultivation, it is unwritten; if cultivation is greater than connotation, it is empty. Only when one has both connotation and cultivation can one be considered a true gentleman.” [2] Here, “wen” originally refers to the pattern, texture, or decoration on the surface of an object. Here, Confucius uses it to describe a person's literacy or polished image. “Quality” refers to the inner quality of things and symbolizes a plain, natural and unadorned appearance. “Wild” denotes roughness or coarseness, while ‘quality’ refers to an ancient official in charge of administering paperwork, usually knowledgeable and experienced, but not necessarily sincere, and sometimes associated with smoothness or cunning: Thus, Confucius words can be understood as: “If simplicity exceeds refinement, it will appear crude; if refinement exceeds simplicity, it will appear superficial or insincere. Only by balancing refinement and simplicity can one become a true gentleman.” [3]

In the book, this refers to the cultivation of a gentleman, where inner qualities and outer behavior must be consistent. If one's learning is outstanding, but one's inner qualities do not meet the appropriate standards, one cannot be called a gentleman. Only when inner qualities and outer behavior are in harmony can one be called a true gentleman.

This idea has continued to develop and evolve and has become an important guiding principle in the development of art. This idea was further extended to traditional aesthetic thought, which emphasized the dialectical unity of form and content in artistic creation. In the field of art, this principle has been interpreted as the need to focus on the harmonious unity of form and function.

4. The “Wen” of the Warring States Hook Design

The design of belt hooks in the Warring States period was heavily influenced by traditional Chinese aesthetic ideas. This design not only emphasized practicality, but also embodied the concept of “literacy” (the harmonious unity of refinement and

substance). The shape and decoration of belt hooks often combine elegant artistic style with simple functionality, showing a harmonious balance between external beauty and internal practicality. This design concept not only conforms to Confucius' aesthetic standard of "literate and refined", but also reflects the pursuit of a gentleman's character in society at the time, emphasizing the balance between external refinement and inner substance.

4.1. Formal Characteristics of Warring States Band Hook Designs

The design of belt hooks from the Warring States period is rich and varied. Based on shape, they can be classified into biomorphic, geometric, and human-shaped forms, with each shape carrying its own symbolic meaning. A typical belt hook consists of three parts: the hook head, hook body, and hook knob, which together form the overall structure of the belt hook. The design of these belt hooks was primarily functional, so the form of the belt hook is closely aligned with its intended use.

The biomorphic category includes bandhooks styled in the shape of animals, such as dragons, phoenixes, snakes, tigers and bats. For example, the goose-headed jade belt hook unearthed in Zeng Houyi's tomb in Suizhou, Hubei Province, has a head designed in the shape of a goose, while the overall shape is similar to a lute, which is both aesthetically pleasing and interesting. Some of these animals are naturally occurring and signify good luck, while others come from mythical animals such as dragons and phoenixes. The Warring States bronze dragon head belt hook is representative of this, inlaid with gold and turquoise to mimic the shape of a dragon. The head of the hook is in the shape of a dragon, and the face of the hook is decorated with two coiled dragons in relief, making it a classic of the dragon-shaped belt hook. In addition, there are also pipa-shaped, rope-shaped and plow-shaped band hooks that resemble artifacts. For example, the bronze zheng-shaped belt hook with animal head from the Warring States period exhibited in the Cangzhou Museum is made of bronze and consists of three parts. The head of the hook is shaped like an animal head, and the body of the hook resembles an ancient zither with a string pattern engraved on it. The whole is curved with smooth and rounded lines. After thousands of years, it still maintains a smooth as new appearance. [4]

Geometric belt hooks include shapes such as rectangles, squares and circles. There is a wide variety of geometric belt hooks, and the overall design is simple and smooth, with a focus on functionality. For example, the bronze belt hook inlaid with gold and turquoise in the collection of the Henan Museum is 3.3 centimeters wide and 25.5 centimeters long. The overall shape is long and rectangular, and the structure is simple and smooth. The hook adopts a colorful gold inlay process, with fine, orderly gold lines on the surface, outlining six sets of triangular cloud patterns interspersed with geometric motifs, demonstrating a high level of craftsmanship. In addition, the belt hook is inlaid with turquoise, whose bright color contrasts with the golden light of the bronze, adding a sense of hierarchy and visual impact to the work. [5]

The Warring States period also saw the emergence of band hooks inspired by mythological stories, often with rich cultural connotations. For example, the Warring States Fuxi Sterling Silver Gilt Belt Hook is made of sterling silver with a design of Fuxi, demonstrating extraordinary craftsmanship. This integration of culture into daily life reflects the role that Warring States belt hooks play in preserving and passing on China's cultural heritage.

Composite belt hooks are generally larger in size and consist of several parts, including belt hooks and belt loops, with unique designs. For example, the design of a bronze chain jewelry belt hook from the Warring States period unearthed at the Wanxiu District Museum in Chongqing is significantly different from that of a traditional belt hook. Its hook head is shaped like a duck's head, similar to a traditional belt hook, but its tail is particularly unique in design. It consists of two layers of short conical knobs with four chains attached to the lower layer. Each chain is subdivided into two parts below the center. Notably, the six chains on the right side end in a complex and elaborate structure. This belt hook not only has a practical function, but also has a high decorative value, reflecting the diverse social needs and aesthetic trends of the time. It highlights the innovation of Warring States bronze craftsmanship in form and function.

4.2. Technical characteristics of the Warring States belt hook design

The design process of belt hooks in the Warring States period was very delicate, using a variety of techniques to create rich artistic effects. Some belt hooks of this period were made of a combination of materials, thus providing complex and varied artistic effects. Decorative techniques were used on the surface of the raw materials of the belt hooks. These techniques included gilding, gold and silver inlay, engraving, openwork, inlay and gilding. In some cases, multiple processes were used simultaneously, adding to the “wen” (delicacy) of the Warring States belt hooks.

Inlay holds an important place in the history of ancient Chinese craftsmanship, as it was used in many different designs in ancient China. Inlay can combine various materials to create a unique artistic effect by combining different textures and substances. The inlay process generally consists of several steps: first, selecting the inlay material; second, drawing the relevant design on the base material of the belt hook and carving the grooves using a special tool; third, embedding the selected material (e.g., turquoise or silver) into the grooves; and, fourth, polishing the surface so that it is smooth. Many bandhooks from the Warring States period employ inlay techniques, using a variety of materials to create exquisite patterns. For example, the gilt and jade-inlaid silver belt hook excavated from Tomb No. 5 in Guwei Village, Huixian County, Henan Province, employs both gilding and inlay techniques, demonstrating a combination of materials. The body of this belt hook is inlaid with jade, and the silver body is gilt, making this silver belt hook finely crafted and luxurious. The inlay process enriches the artistic effect and formal characteristics of the hook.

Gilding is a craft created by ancient Chinese working people through research, continuous exploration and summarization during the production process. Gilding originated in the Warring States period, and it can produce a dazzling luster and a rich and magnificent effect. For example, the gilt bronze bandhook from the Warring States period in the collection of the Northwestern University Museum is 14.4 centimeters long, 4.7 centimeters wide, and 1.2 centimeters thick. The hook is 14.4 centimeters long, 4.7 centimeters wide, and 1.2 centimeters thick, with a protruding round knob and a dragon head gilded and decorated with intricate floral motifs, producing a brilliant luster.

Gold and silver inlay craft is an exquisite craft of metal decoration in ancient China, which first appeared on bronzes during the Shang and Zhou Dynasties. The craft involves casting shallow grooves or patterns on the surface of the bronze vessel first,

and then embedding gold and silver flakes or wires into the grooves. The surface is then polished to achieve a shiny finish. The difference in luster between the gold, silver and bronze creates a rich contrast that accentuates intricate designs or inscriptions. The steps of the process are as follows: First, a shallow groove or inscription is pre-cast on the bronze, and then the bottom of the groove is roughly engraved so that the gold or silver is firmly attached to it. Then, the gold or silver sheet or wire is heated to make it easier to handle. A tool made of jade or onyx is used to press the gold or silver piece into the groove. The artisan then meticulously polishes it using fine tools such as fine marquetry stones or charcoal and adds water for a fine finish. Finally, the piece is polished with leather or cloth to give it a smooth and shiny surface. [6]

4.3. Decorative Features of Warring States Band Hook Designs

The decorative patterns of the belt hook motifs of the Warring States period are rich and varied, with realistic themes dominating the patterns. Animal motifs, cloud motifs, plant motifs, geometric motifs and figure motifs are all important decorative elements on the belt hooks, each of which produces different visual effects. Animal motifs include dragon motifs, phoenix motifs, coiled dragon motifs and animal face motifs. These animals are usually presented in a mysterious and exaggerated manner, conveying a strong sense of movement and vitality. Botanical motifs include persimmon stalk motifs and lotus motifs. Geometric patterns such as triangular, parallel and chevron patterns are arranged in a rigorous and orderly manner, reflecting the people's pursuit of symmetry and proportion at that time. The hooks were usually decorated with cloud and thunder patterns, spiral patterns and triangular patterns, and incorporated a variety of materials and techniques to create rich artistic effects. For example, the jade belt hook in the collection of the Shaanxi History Museum is decorated with curling clouds throughout the body; the diagonal line pattern, which is a kind of simple decorative pattern, usually does not appear as a decorative pattern alone, and it appears at the same time with patterns such as the grid pattern and the S pattern, which can play a role in filling in the details, and the diagonal line pattern is capable of enriching the decorative effect of the picture and enriching the decorative level. The diagonal line pattern can enrich the decorative effect of the picture and the decorative level of the jade belt hook. The pattern is simple and often appears in the position of the hook head and body of the jade belt hook through the technique of negative line carving. For example, the jade belt hook found in PM5 of the burial pit of Alcove Tomb is lined with diagonal lines on the thin part of the hook body. The grid pattern is often used as a decorative pattern on jade objects, and it is a pattern consisting of horizontal and vertical lines intersecting vertically or diagonally. The grid pattern can be used as a boundary separator, and it can also be used to fill in the blanks, and the direction of the grid pattern can be divided into a positive and a diagonal direction, which is mainly used for edging, boundary separating and filling in the blanks. The grid pattern on Warring States jade belt hooks is often used as a filler to enrich the decoration of the head or body of the hook. [7]

The compositional principles of Warring States period belt hook designs include center composition, repetition composition, scatter composition and symmetry composition. In general, when a single motif is used as decoration, the center composition method is usually adopted, either engraved on the hook head or on the pipa-shaped hook body. For example, a bat-shaped silver belt hook has a single bat motif on the hook body, symbolizing good fortune.

Repeating compositions can be categorized into two types: two-way continuous and four-way continuous. Bidirectional continuity refers to the expansion of a single pattern in a vertical or horizontal direction. Four-way continuity refers to the expansion of a single pattern in four directions. These continuous patterns produce an orderly decorative effect, giving a sense of rhythm and order. For example, in the case of a bronze belt hook in the shape of a dragon's head staff with silver inlaid thunder pattern from the Warring States period, the cloud and thunder pattern on the hook adopts a two-way continuous composition, producing a unique decorative effect.

Scattered Dot Composition is a type of scattered composition, such as a belt hook with a circular pattern. It consists of a combination of a continuous pattern of circles and dots. These circles and dots are arranged in a scattered fashion, some are hollow and others are inlaid with turquoise, alabaster or other materials. Circle motifs are not used alone; several hollow circles can form a single motif. Circle-patterned belt hooks inlaid with turquoise or white jade are usually located in the center of the hook body. The scattered composition creates a densely decorated effect.

5. The “Quality” of the Warring States Jade Belt Hook Design

5.1. Functions of the Warring States Band Hook Design

The development of the belt hook is closely related to the evolution of the tunic. The main function of the belt hook is to hold the tunic in place. In addition to this, belt hooks also have the function of hanging decorations or accessories. Some people also believe that belt hooks can function as buttons, in which case they are often referred to as “collar hooks”.

To secure outerwear, belt hooks are usually used in conjunction with silk or leather belts. In ancient times, people usually chose different types of belts for different occasions. Belt hooks made of materials such as gold, silver and jade were usually worn with silk belts, while bronze belt hooks were usually worn with leather belts. The most common way to use a belt hook is to insert the hook and buckle into one end of the belt, with the body of the hook facing outward and the head of the hook through the hole at the other end of the belt.

Belt hooks also have the function of hanging jewelry. In ancient times, people often wore items such as jade pendants, swords, needle cases, and kindling on their belts. These ornaments were usually hung from the ends of the belt hooks. When worn, the head of the hook usually faces down and the curved part of the hook is used to hang the jewelry.

Belt hooks are also status symbols. Belt hooks were not only a necessity for daily wear, but also a status symbol, especially among royalty, nobility and the social elite. The belt hooks used by these people were usually exquisitely crafted, decorated with gold or inlaid with jade, reflecting their noble status and the unique trends of the time. The materials used for belt hooks varied according to social class. The nobility usually chose materials such as jade, gold, onyx and turquoise, and their decorative techniques were very complex, including casting, forging, soldering, molding, gold plating, silver plating, inlaid gold and silver, carving, inlaying and painting methods. The Emperor could use any color or style of bandhook, while other members of the royal family could only use yellow bandhooks. Belt hooks for kings, nobles, officials and commoners varied in form, material and workmanship.

Belt hooks with stamps serve a dual function. In addition to their primary role as belt fasteners, these hooks have a stamp engraved on the flat surface of the hook and buckle that can be used as a seal. Initially, the seal inscriptions were in negative relief, but later changed to positive relief. The origin of seals with hooks can be traced back to the decorative patterns on the hook buttons. During the Warring States period, some valuable strap hooks were not only carved and inlaid with patterns on the body of the hooks for the sake of decoration, but also attached decorations to the hook buttons. The hook clasp was a small, flat surface that was often used for this purpose. Some hook buckles were even engraved with inscriptions. The style of carving on the hooks of the Warring States period set the stage for the development of the hook seal, although it was the hooks themselves that were the origin of the seals. The multiple functions of these strap hooks can be seen as a reflection of the “quality” of the Warring States strap hooks.

5.2. The Cultural Connotation of the Warring States Band Hook Design

The cultural connotations embedded in the design of the belt hook. The shapes of the Warring States belt hooks include animal shapes and geometric shapes, each of which contains its own cultural connotations. The typical shape of the belt hook is “S” shape, which has a specific symbolic meaning. Curves are more commonly used than straight lines in the styling of belt hooks, reflecting the close connection with the national characteristics of Chinese culture. For example, the beautiful and subtle design of the “Warring States Gilt-Silver Band Hook” bears some resemblance to the Chinese cultural trait of “warmth, goodness and frugality”.

Patterns have cultural connotations. Different patterns have different cultural connotations. Patterns on belt hooks can convey several meanings: totem worship, symbols of good luck, reverence for divine power and loyalty to the king, etc. For example, the “Taotie” motif on the beast-face belt hooks of the Warring States presents a fierce and imposing aesthetic, symbolizing the power and mystique of the ruling class of the slave masters. On the other hand, the dragon and phoenix motifs symbolize the supreme authority of the monarch and signify good fortune. Cranes and deer, which symbolize longevity, also appear frequently. All these different motifs contain rich cultural connotations, highlighting the functionality of the Warring States belt hook motifs.

6. “Binbin”, a Warring States Design with a Hook

The belt hook of the Warring States period is not only a practical tool, but also full of the emotions of ancient craftsmen. Its functionality is reflected in its design features, while its beauty is expressed through various patterns and craftsmanship. The design of the belt hook embodies the unity of “literacy” and “quality”, and thus has lasted for ages and become a symbol of the times. The “text” of a belt hook includes its form, craftsmanship and characteristics. It is through the “wen” that the belt hook has its exquisite form, while the decoration of the belt hook is built on its practicality. The “text” and “the” of the belt hook complement each other, and together they create the art form of the Warring States belt hook, reflecting the unity of practicality and aesthetics. [8]

7. Conclusions

With its unique artistic charm and profound cultural connotation, the design of band hooks in the Warring States period has become an important entry point for understanding ancient aesthetic thought and social culture. From the viewpoint of the aesthetic thought of “literacy”, the band hooks of the Warring States period are not only practical decorations, but also symbols of identity, mediums of transmitting social values and works of art showing exquisite craftsmanship. The design of the Warring States belt hook is not only a reflection of material culture, but also a profound embodiment of the aesthetic thought of “literate and refined”. It provides a valuable historical heritage for us to understand the ancient art aesthetic system through its exquisite modeling and rich cultural symbols. From it, we can not only feel the pursuit of beauty in that era, but also gain a deeper understanding of how ancient works of art found a perfect balance between material and spirit, form and content, thus demonstrating the harmonious beauty of ancient Chinese craftsmanship and philosophical thought. [9]

Conflicts of Interest

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

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