

From Eastern Mythology to Western Heroes: Character Archetypes and Their Visual Representation in Eastern and Western Cultures

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Abstract:

With the diversified development of social culture, audiences have increasingly higher expectations for modern visual art and design works. To meet the demands of social and industrial development for visual art and design, designers often integrate more cultural elements into modern visual design. Eastern mythology and Western heroes have become elements that modern visual art designers tend to reference frequently in recent years. This paper explores the integration of Eastern mythology and Western heroes in modern visual art design, as well as the techniques used to express them in visual artworks. Based on the analysis of mythological characters and heroic archetypes, the paper examines their areas of appearance and modes of expression in modern visual art design, aiming to provide inspiration and reference value for the field of contemporary visual design.

Keywords:

Mythological Characters; Zeus, Yang Jian, Poseidon, Visual Art Design, Expressive Design

1. Introduction

As symbols of traditional culture, mythological characters carry profound historical depth and spiritual significance, endowing modern design works with rich cultural connotations and emotional resonance. These mythological figures often possess unique characteristics and are rich in visual elements, which can add a distinctive aesthetic style to design works, allowing visual art design to showcase a stronger sense of diversity in both form and content. At the same time, through innovative expressions of mythological characters, modern visual designers can, often imperceptibly, inherit and promote traditional culture and, to some extent, facilitate the integration of Eastern and Western cultures, enhancing the international influence and competitiveness of art design. Therefore, an increasing number of contemporary visual art designers are beginning to explore the use of mythological characters as visual design elements, enriching their own design concepts while enhancing the

value of their creations and promoting the diversified development of modern visual art.

2. The Value of Integrating Mythological Legends into Modern Art Design

2.1. Enhancing the Richness of Visual Art Design Content

From the perspective of enriching design content, the characters, plots, and imagery found in mythological legends possess profound cultural significance and symbolic meaning, providing abundant creative resources for modern visual art design. The diversity and internal conflicts within mythological stories can inject vitality and depth into visual art, transforming the work from a mere visual display into a carrier of storytelling and philosophical reflection. This multilayered design content not only enriches the aesthetic experience of the audience but also significantly stimulates broader emotional resonance, making artistic creations more appealing and endowing them with lasting vitality.

2.2. Preserving and Transmitting Traditional Culture

The integration of mythological legends and characters into modern art design is one of the important ways to preserve and transmit traditional culture. The myths embedded in traditional culture are not only crystallizations of folk wisdom from Eastern and Western civilizations but also important carriers of national spirit. Incorporating these elements into modern visual art design enables a reinterpretation of traditional culture through contemporary expressive techniques, without compromising its original meaning. This approach not only maintains cultural continuity but also breathes new life into traditional elements within the context of modern visual art, thereby enhancing cultural vitality and influence. Furthermore, this form of artistic inheritance helps spark interest and foster a sense of identification with traditional culture among younger generations.

2.3. Promoting the Integration of Eastern and Western Culture

In the context of globalization, exchanges and collisions between different national cultures are becoming increasingly frequent. Incorporating mythological elements into modern visual art design allows such works to serve as important bridges for dialogue between Eastern and Western cultures. During the design process, the modern reinterpretation of mythological elements enables them to retain their national characteristics while adopting internationally recognizable forms of expression. Therefore, integrating Eastern and Western mythologies into modern visual art design not only facilitates the international dissemination of Chinese culture but also promotes the organic integration of diverse cultures within the realm of design, thereby advancing the mutual development and fusion of global cultures.[1]

3. Character Archetypes in Eastern and Western Cultures and Their Visual Representation

3.1. Character Archetypes in Eastern Mythology and Their Expression in Visual Art Design

3.1.1. *The Strange Creatures of Shan Hai Jing and Their Representation in Modern Visual Art Design*

As a remarkable ancient Chinese text, Shan Hai Jing (The Classic of Mountains and Seas) is filled with mysterious descriptions and rich imagination regarding various fantastical creatures. These images of strange beasts not only reflect the ancient people's observations and fantasies about the natural world but also reveal their inner spiritual world and cultural values.

For example, Zheng, one of the prominent creatures in Shan Hai Jing, is described as tiger-like in form, with wings on its body. The existence of Zheng echoes the ancient imagination of hybrid beings that transcend natural boundaries, vividly expressing an aesthetic vision and worldview that surpass the constraints of reality. This kind of hybrid image is both an exaggeration and integration of biological features in nature, as well as a profound reflection on the limitations of human existence.

Another example is the Nine-Tailed Fox, a highly regarded creature in Shan Hai Jing that frequently appears in Chinese mythology and has also spread to other East Asian cultures. The nine tails symbolize multiple sources of vitality, endowing the creature with extraordinary charm and a sense of mystery. This image carries the weight of numerous literary and folkloric traditions, reflecting the ancients' longing for vitality and abundance.

In modern visual art design, the rendering and reinterpretation of Shan Hai Jing creatures showcase a deep integration of traditional culture and contemporary art. The Sichuan-born Chinese artist Qiu Anxiong, in his work *New Shan Hai Jing – Ao Tuo*, draws heavily from the mythical beasts of Shan Hai Jing to create imaginative and contemporary artistic forms. His work exemplifies a dialogue between ancient mythology and modern art. See Figure 1:

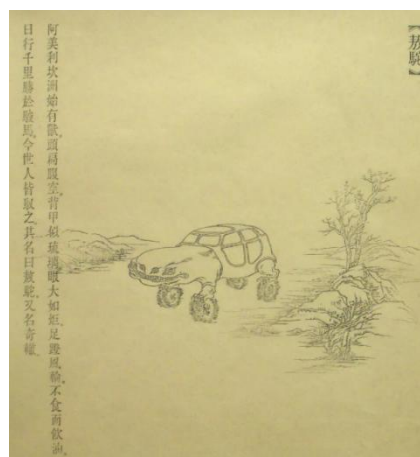


Figure 1. *Qiu Anxiong's Art Print New Shan Hai Jing – Ao Tuo.*

Qiu Anxiong draws inspiration from the Shan Hai Jing, combining its mythological elements with modern visual art techniques. In his print *New Shan Hai Jing – Ao Tuo*, he engages in a dual exploration of ancient texts and contemporary artistic forms, endowing the mythological creature “Ao Tuo” with new aesthetic meaning and visual perception. Within the mythical atmosphere of the work, Ao Tuo—portrayed as a uniquely shaped and extraordinarily powerful being—symbolizes the mystery and unknown of the natural world. Qiu Anxiong adheres to this symbolic significance and

reinterprets it using modern artistic methods, breathing new life into the creature within a contemporary context.

In terms of artistic technique, Ao Tuo profoundly reflects the fusion of Eastern and Western cultures. During the creative process, Qiu Anxiong drew upon Expressionist and Structuralist techniques from Western modern art, reshaping the image of Ao Tuo through exaggeration, distortion, deconstruction, and reassembly. Simultaneously, in the design phase, he infused the work with the Chinese traditional artistic spirit of freehand expression and symbolic methods, achieving a harmonious unity of formal aesthetics and spiritual depth. This cross-cultural fusion and innovation have brought New Shan Hai Jing – Ao Tuo considerable attention and acclaim in the international art world.

3.1.2. The Ancient Mythological Figure Yang Jian and His Representation in Modern Visual Art Design

Yang Jian, a renowned figure in ancient Chinese mythology and folk legends, frequently appears in Daoist classics, the literary work *Investiture of the Gods*, and across various modern visual art forms such as animation and large-scale video games. The image of Yang Jian blends divinity with humanity, presenting the public with a complex and multi-dimensional character. His origin story carries a sense of mystique. According to legend, he is the son of Yaoji—sister of the Jade Emperor—and a mortal named Yang Tianyou. This union between a deity and a human endows Yang Jian with a unique identity, granting him divine powers while maintaining his human essence.

In modern visual art design, Yang Jian's mythological character is particularly favored by contemporary designers. He appears widely in animated series, films, and even video games. Designers from different fields of modern visual art employ creative and distinctive forms of expression to portray Yang Jian, leaving lasting impressions on audiences. Notably, in the recent globally popular AAA video game *Black Myth: Wukong*, designers have reimagined Yang Jian with exceptional craftsmanship, creating a powerful and memorable new depiction of the character.



Figure 2. Visual Art Design of Yang Jian in Black Myth: Wukong.

First, the character design of Yang Jian in *Black Myth: Wukong* is far from a simple replication of traditional imagery. The designers infused the character with a modern aesthetic and a fresh interpretation. While preserving the core mythological elements, they introduced a wealth of contemporary and imaginative details, making the character both respectful of tradition and rich in innovation. Yang Jian's most iconic feature—his third eye, or “Heavenly Eye” on his forehead—remains a central focus of the visual design. This feature is not only rendered with greater intricacy but

also enhanced through lighting effects and dynamic animations to emphasize his extraordinary wisdom and mysterious power.

Secondly, in terms of costume design, Yang Jian's appearance merges the majesty of ancient battle armor with the refinement of modern materials and craftsmanship. Designers employed shimmering metals and flowing silks to create a contrast between toughness and elegance, making every movement of the character in-game appear fluid and visually striking. The details on the patterns and armor are highly intricate, with many totemic designs directly inspired by ancient Chinese art, perfectly reflecting Yang Jian's mystique and power.

Furthermore, in terms of creative direction, the design team drew inspiration not only from traditional mythological texts but also from heroic archetypes across various cultural backgrounds. During the design process, they deeply considered the essence of Yang Jian as a mythological hero, shaping him into a character with modern heroic traits. The qualities of justice and bravery are emphasized, enabling players to appreciate not only his visual appearance but also to gain a deeper understanding of his inner spirit.

Lastly, in the realm of visual dynamics, Yang Jian's design also places great importance on fluid movement and the visual impact of his attacks. The designers applied advanced animation technologies to ensure that each of his moves during combat carries dramatic tension and visual shock value. Whether it is the smoothness of his actions or the integration of visual effects, the result demonstrates a high level of technical excellence, offering players an unprecedented immersive visual experience.[2]

3.2. Heroic Archetypes in Western Mythology and Their Representation in Visual Art Design

3.2.1. Zeus, Hero of Greek Mythology, and His Representation in Modern Visual Art Design

Zeus, the supreme god in Greek mythology and ruler of Mount Olympus, symbolizes absolute authority and power through his immense strength. In Western mythology, Zeus is the son of Cronus and Rhea. He rose to prominence by overthrowing his father Cronus and rescuing his siblings who had been swallowed, thus securing his position as leader of the gods. Zeus's rule is not only marked by his commanding presence but also by his role as a figure of justice and fairness, playing a vital role between the divine and mortal worlds.

Zeus fathered numerous offspring through unions with various goddesses and mortals, representing a fusion of power and wisdom. In art and culture, Zeus is frequently depicted as a majestic figure wielding thunderbolts, embodying sovereignty and governance.

In modern visual art design, Zeus's image has been widely adopted across diverse fields. For example, a Greek company released a handcrafted soap product featuring a visual depiction of Zeus on its packaging.

As shown in Figure 3, the designer skillfully conveys the power, authority, and divine aura of Zeus through clever visual design and symbolic representation. During the design phase, Zeus's line-drawn figure is used as the central motif of the

packaging. This design not only captures attention but also subconsciously associates the product with strength and purity.



Figure 3. “Zeus” Design on the Packaging of Greek Handmade Soap.

At the same time, in the color scheme design, the designer chose a black line illustration of Zeus, paired with golden lightning bolts and a silver-gray background as supporting elements. This combination gives the packaging a sense of nobility and excellence, while further emphasizing Zeus’s extraordinary status and majestic image [3].

3.2.3. Poseidon, Hero of Greek Mythology, and His Representation in Modern Visual Art Design

Poseidon is the god of the sea in Greek mythology and one of the twelve Olympian deities. He is the son of Cronus and Rhea, and the brother of Zeus and Hades. Poseidon is famously associated with his powerful trident, a weapon that symbolizes his dominion over the sea and his immense strength. As the god of the sea, Poseidon not only has the power to cause earthquakes and tsunamis, but he also governs all marine life. His power and influence resonate both in mythology and in real-world symbolism.

Poseidon's personality is characterized by strength and vitality, while also embodying tempestuous and unpredictable traits—reflecting the dual nature of the ocean itself. He plays pivotal roles in many Western legends. For example, in the contest for the city of Athens, he famously competed with Athena. Although Athena ultimately prevailed, Poseidon still left a lasting impact by offering a spring of water—considered a source of life—to the city.

In modern visual art design, Poseidon's image is often applied in the packaging design of high-end products. One notable example is a new beer developed jointly by Coronado Brewing Company and the Surfrider Foundation of San Clemente. The packaging design features an image of Poseidon created by renowned contemporary visual designer MiresBall.



Figure 4. “Poseidon” Design on Beer Packaging.

As shown in Figure 4, the packaging design of the new Poseidon beer from Coronado features Poseidon portrayed as a uniquely charming merman. This innovative incorporation of oceanic elements effectively captures consumer attention. During the design phase, the creative team centered their concept around Poseidon's symbolic power and the mystique of the sea, presenting his majesty and guardianship from multiple angles.

Firstly, the visual focus of the beer packaging lies in Poseidon's merman form. This design breaks from the traditional convention of representing the sea god solely in human form, endowing the visual artwork with a more graceful and fluid quality. The merman Poseidon, depicted as half-human, half-fish and holding a trident—his signature weapon—strongly reinforces his dominion over the sea and his mysterious power. With delicate lines and profound color tones, Poseidon is portrayed as a majestic and charismatic sea king. His fish tail features glimmering, wave-like scales that embody the dynamic beauty of the ocean.

Secondly, this beer design utilizes a cool color palette to shape Poseidon's image. The pairing of silver-gray accessories with Poseidon's deep blue skin not only represents the vastness and tranquility of the ocean but also naturally complements the refreshing nature of beer. Furthermore, to enhance the product's visual layers, abstract wave and foam patterns are used to form Poseidon's beard. These elements not only echo Poseidon's marine identity but also add a strong artistic flair to the packaging [4].

4. Conclusions

To summarize, based on the analysis of mythological prototypes such as the mythical beasts in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* (Shan Hai Jing), the deity Erlang Shen (Yang Jian) from Eastern mythology, and the heroes Zeus and Poseidon from Western mythology, it becomes clear that in modern visual art and design, designers tend to interpret mythological figures through abstract artistic forms.

This fusion of ancient mythology and contemporary visual design not only successfully captures the essential attributes of mythological characters but also bestows upon them renewed artistic value. By simplifying and distorting the forms of these figures, designers are able to highlight their symbolic features and amplify the core meaning of the imagery. For instance, reimagining traditional mythological characters with a modern aesthetic allows for the retention of their cultural significance while incorporating innovative elements from contemporary art.

This novel approach breaks free from the constraints of traditional figurative representation, creating visual impact and emotional resonance. As a result, mythological characters and heroic figures are revitalized within the realm of contemporary art, leaving a lasting impression on audiences and enriching the field of modern visual art design.

Conflicts of Interest

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

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