

Research on Animal Motifs in Chu Lacquerware of the Warring States Period under the Ideology of “Creating Vessels in Reverence of Imagery”

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Abstract:

“Creating Vessels in Reverence of Imagery” is the principle followed by the ancient Chinese people's traditional artefacts. “Creating Vessels”, that is, to make things, “Reverence of Imagery” can be expressed as the production of imitation images, the image of taking the meaning, the ware to show the image of the three ways. During the Warring States period, the state of Chu flourished and became the dominant state in the south. During this period, the development of lacquer ware in Chu presented a very prosperous appearance, which was both practical and beautiful crafts, and animal modelling was the most common in lacquer wares, which was also the material carrier that reflected the idea of “Creating Vessels in Reverence of Imagery” most clearly. In this paper, based on the analysis of the idea of “Creating Vessels in Reverence of Imagery”, the origin and cultural connotation of the Warring States Chu lacquerware, the aesthetic characteristics of the animal modelling of Warring States Chu lacquerware are outlined, and the expression of the idea of “Creating Vessels in Reverence of Imagery” in the animal modelling of Warring States Chu lacquerware is explored.

Keywords:

Creating Vessels in Reverence of Imagery, The Warring States Period, Chu Lacquerware, Animal Motif

1. Introduction

The concept of “Creating Vessels in Reverence of Imagery” originated from the Zhouyi of the Western Zhou Dynasty, which holds that the forms and decorations of artifacts derive from the imagery of the natural world. From their earliest founding, the Chu people inhabited regions abundant in lacquer trees, and this ample supply of raw materials provided a natural advantage for the development of Chu lacquerware. With territorial expansion, growth in social productivity, technological advancements, and the liberalization of cultural thought, Chu lacquerware flourished remarkably by the Warring States period, evolving into highly functional and aesthetically refined

craftwork. Animal motifs have always been a central theme in the decorative history of Chinese lacquerware. During the Warring States period, the animal designs of Chu lacquerware were distinguished by their mystical and romantic style, with a strong emphasis on revering imagery. The relationship between vessel and imagery manifests richly in the zoomorphic forms of Chu lacquerware.

2. Research Background

2.1. *An Overview of the Philosophy of “Creating Vessels in Reverence of Imagery”*

The concept of “Creating Vessels in Reverence of Imagery” originates from the Xici commentary of the Zhouyi: “The Changes contains four aspects of the sage's way: those who speak esteem its phrases; those who act esteem its changes; those who make artifacts esteem its symbols; those who divine esteem its prognostications.” The notion of “Imagery” constitutes the conceptual core, originally referring to hexagram imagery. This concept encapsulates the ancient creative process transitioning from “form” to “meaning”. Generally, the understanding of imagery is considered to have three progressive levels: Biomimetic modelling, Form following meaning, and The object-as-symbol. of these, Biomimetic modelling is the primary imitation of natural forms, Form following meaning, and The object-as-symbol are the advanced stages of “Creating Vessels in Reverence of Imagery”. These stages synthesise aesthetic ideals and creative principles, and synthesise symbolic representations to transform natural phenomena into artefacts.

Biomimetic modelling is the practice of creating artefacts by imitating nature. It involves taking elements from the natural world and transforming them into utilitarian objects, primarily through the imitation of form and function - two intrinsically linked dimensions that complement and refine each other in organic unity. Form following meaning requires thoughtful consideration of shapes, structures and materials to produce artefacts that embody the intended ideology. The resulting work is aesthetically pleasing, functional, and of deep cultural and spiritual significance. The object-as-symbol represents the ultimate goal of creation - to embody a specific symbolic meaning, such as religious devotion, ritual norms, or ideal aspirations. The main difference between it and the form-following meaning is functionality, where the latter retains utility, while the object-as-symbol transcends utilitarian purpose and exists only as a symbolic representation with no practical use.

2.2. *Overview of Warring States Period Chu Lacquerware*

Lacquerware is the use of lacquer to paint the surfaces of everyday objects, crafts and works of art. The Warring States period was one of the periods when lacquer craftsmanship flourished and lacquerware entered people's daily lives. Chu became an important centre of lacquerware production during this period due to its advantageous geographical location, fine division of labour and strict production standards. Lacquerware from Chu not only had a profound impact on the production of lacquerware in the neighbouring regions, but also set off a wave of new creations for the later Qin and Han dynasties.

During the Warring States period, the lacquerware of Chu became famous for its exquisite craftsmanship and magnificent decorative style. These lacquer wares were made from natural lacquer material, and the craftsmen used a variety of techniques such as carving, inlaying, and painting, to carefully carve out lifelike and intricate patterns and decorations. Among them, the animal patterns of dragons, phoenixes,

deer, tigers, snakes and other images appear frequently, they are not only from nature, but also by the Chu people endowed with power, wealth, good luck and other rich symbolic meanings. These animal shapes are not only a deep reflection of the religious beliefs of the Chu people, but also a symbol of their political power concept. The Chu people were in awe of the gods and supernatural phenomena, and held the religious worldview that everything has a spirit, firmly believing that everything in the world contains a soul. This core belief concept gave birth to those exaggerated and fantastical animal shapes on lacquer wares, which fully demonstrated the mysterious and romantic spiritual qualities of the Chu people. As the material carrier of Chu culture, these animal-shaped lacquerware cohesion Chu people's deep emotional support and the pursuit of firm faith. They are not only exemplary works of the brilliant achievements of lacquer art in the Warring States period, but also have a profound and lasting influence on the development of decorative arts in later generations.

3. Aesthetic Characteristics of Animal Motifs in Warring States Chu Lacquerware

3.1. Functionality

At the early stage of the modelling of Chu lacquerware, due to its influence by certain Shang and Zhou bronzes and pottery factors, it has already possessed a new artefact character and formed its own characteristics in the continuous development. By the Warring States period, the development of lacquer ware in Chu entered the most brilliant period. The Chu lacquerware of this period was very diverse in both types of wares and types of uses, and had many functions. In addition to being used as daily necessities, such as tableware, drinking utensils, boxes and hairpins, lacquerware was also widely used in rituals, ceremonies and banquets.

During the Warring States period, the pig-shaped lacquer box for wine vessels unearthed in Tomb No. 2 of Tianxingguan perfectly embodies the harmonious unity of practical function and artistic beauty of Chu lacquerware. The box is made of two pigs in a row, cleverly fused into an elongated oval body, divided into two parts, the lid and the box, with a subtle design, all in one. At each end of the lacquer box, the craftsman has carefully carved two identical pig's heads in a symmetrical layout, which not only highlights the artisan's symmetrical aesthetics, but also lends the object a vivid visual rhythm. The exterior of the body is coated with glossy black lacquer, while the interior is painted with vibrant red lacquer. The body is also decorated with intricate images made from various colours embellished to create an exquisite three-dimensional aesthetic effect. As an outstanding representative of Chu lacquerware art, this pig-shaped wine box not only demonstrates the superb skills of the Warring States period, but also profoundly embodies the supreme state of harmony between utility and aesthetics.

3.2. Ornamental

As a typical representative of Chu culture, Chu lacquerware shows strong religious beliefs and romanticism. The decorative patterns of Chu lacquer ware are rich and varied, mainly based on natural landscapes, plants and animals and geometric patterns, forming a unique decorative system of Chu style. These patterns are either purely bionic or a combination of bionic and abstract.

Among the animal motifs, the most common are dragons, phoenixes, deer, tigers and snakes. Some of these motifs were inspired by real-life natural observations, while others were fantastical creations created by the Chu people with their vivid imaginations. Through rational composition and painting, these motifs were incorporated into the lacquerware to achieve a harmonious balance between the practicality and aesthetics of the objects. For example, the phoenix motif on a lacquer box excavated from a Chu tomb in Yutai Mountain, Jiangling, bends with the changing contours of the lid and is arranged in a bipartite, continuous, banded composition around the outer edge. The Chu people skilfully blended elements of daily life with sacred symbolism, decorating their wares with these mysterious motifs to create a romantic world full of spirits.

3.3. Colour

The zoomorphic lacquerware of the Chu State during the Warring States period predominantly employed red and black as its foundational color scheme, reflecting the Chu people's cultural principle of "venerating fire and worshipping phoenixes". This distinctive preference for fiery vermilion red embodied the passionate, unrestrained and freedom-loving character of the Chu nation. The striking visual contrast between red and black created a dynamic interplay that symbolized the collision between emotional fervor and ritual solemnity, producing vibrant and lively aesthetic effects.

While maintaining black and red as the primary palette, Chu artisans skillfully incorporated supplementary colors including yellow, blue, green, gold and silver as decorative accents. This sophisticated polychrome technique pursued sumptuous complexity, forming richly layered visual experiences. A representative example is the painted wooden screen from Tomb M1 at Wangshan, featuring three-dimensional phoenix designs: the black lacquer background serves as the base for phoenix feather patterns rendered in red, blue and yellow pigments, while the surrounding frame displays stylized phoenix motifs in red, blue and silver-gray hues. This masterful chromatic application profoundly expressed the Chu culture's reverence and admiration for daily life, religious beliefs and the natural world. The color system not only demonstrated superb craftsmanship but also embodied the Chu people's unique aesthetic philosophy and spiritual worldview, where every hue carried profound cultural symbolism and emotional resonance. Through this vibrant visual language, Chu lacquerware transcended mere utilitarian function to become powerful cultural symbols that have endured through millennia.

3.4. Composition

During the Warring States period, the animal modelling lacquerware of Chu showed extremely rich and diverse forms of composition. Take the phoenix and bird modelling as an example, there are three kinds of compositions: independent, suitable and continuous. Independent composition is generally a separate phoenix bird, which can be independently formed into a chapter or a group of two or two, and is not subject to the limitations of the lacquerware type. Suitable for the composition that is to adapt to the shape and deformation. Continuous compositions are composed of individual modelling elements arranged in a repetitive manner up and down, left and right, with two main forms: bipartite continuity and quadripartite continuity. The phoenix bird shape on the coffin unearthed from Zenghouyi's tomb in Suizhou in the early Warring States period, with two phoenix birds, back to back, appearing in a three-dimensional independent shape, occupies the largest area. In addition, the phoenix bird shape in the tiger seat bird frame drum excavated in the early Warring

States period also appears in the form of three-dimensional independent composition. The middle of the warring states, chu lacquerware in the phoenix bird modelling composition form is the most abundant, three forms of composition have appeared, combined with each other cross use, hubei zaoyang jiulian dun two chu tombs unearthed in the ear cups in the phoenix bird modelling was four-way continuous, ear back part of the phoenix bird modelling the bottom of the curly type of suitable for the form of composition appeared.

3.5. Craftsmanship

During the Warring States period, the production process of Chu lacquerware underwent certain changes and development. The development of the craft is seen from the change of the type of the vessel tyre, starting from the wooden tyre stage, the Warring States lacquer ware is mainly made of wooden tyre, which is firstly made into a vessel and then lacquered. Later, with the development of the process, the emergence of wooden flakes, can reduce the clumsiness of the body, will be rolled into a cylinder after the flakes pasted on the exterior of the linen cloth, thus forming a “wood roll sticky tyre” process. With the advancement of technology, more light and thin Boehmeria and leather tyre process appeared. In addition to the above process, there are also more exquisite gold and silver and gold foil appliqué, the colour of this gold and silver and red and black to form a strong contrast, more able to highlight the beauty of the lacquerware process.

4. The Embodiment of “Creating Utensils by Emulating Forms” in Zoomorphic Lacquerware of the Warring States Period Chu Culture

4.1. Form Emulation in Vessel-Making

“Form Emulation in Artifact-Making” refers to the imitation and representation of natural forms, demonstrating that most ancient artifacts derived their prototypes from nature. This concept of “form emulation” encompasses not only morphological imitation but also functional integration. A quintessential example is the Chu Painted Mandarin Duck Lacquer Box from the Warring States period. Crafted in the vivid likeness of a mandarin duck, the vessel consists of two hollow compartments for storage. Its neck incorporates a mortise-and-tenon joint, allowing the head to rotate freely, while the back features an opening for pouring water. The duck’s wings are elegantly upturned, and its feet curled in a resting posture. Decorated with intricate scenes-on one side, figures striking bells and chime stones, and on the other, drumming and dancing-the piece exudes lifelike vitality, spiritual beauty, and playful charm.

4.2. Meaning Extraction Through Formal Resemblance

The concept of “Deriving Meaning from Form” refers to the creation of artefacts by imitating natural objects and endowing them with spiritual and cultural significance in order to achieve the effect of both form and spirit. The most typical musical instrument in Chu lacquerware, the tiger-seated phoenix drum, is a good example. The lifelike phoenix stands upright with its head held high as if it were crowing loudly, while its claws grip the back of the mighty but docile tiger crouching on the ground. Both animals are painted black and outlined in vibrant shades of red, yellow, blue and silver-grey, outlining the tiger’s stripes and the phoenix’s feathers. The drum stand consists of back-to-back upper phoenixes and lower tigers, with the

drums suspended between the arched necks of the two phoenixes, displaying superb craftsmanship and lifelike vitality. Functionally, this extraordinary work of art serves as both an entertainment tool during the banquet and a decorative ornament afterward, perfectly embodying the harmony of form and function. The detailed and realistic carving of the tiger and phoenix and the skilful use of colours not only show the exquisite beauty of the artifacts, but also reflect the mysterious romanticism unique to the Warring States period. Symbolically, the Chu people's reverence for the phoenix attributes all auspicious and happy qualities to the phoenix, which, together with the tiger's own formidable power and the phoenix's strong combination, creates a magnificent resonance.

4.3. Symbolic Manifestation Through Artifacts

During the Warring States period, Chu animal-shaped lacquer ware in the ware to manifest the performance of the image is mainly through the metaphor, hints, associations, and other techniques to support the human emotions, to express people's aspirations and expectations. At this time, the artefacts no longer have the function of use. Chu lacquerware animal modelling is not only monolithic modelling, there are also a lot of imagery structure and reorganisation, the Chu people this reorganisation method to express the worship of supernatural power, especially in the tomb of Chu burial goods, is the use of this way of representation. The tomb-suppressing beast is a mysterious and supernatural-powered creature, and the wood-carved double-headed tomb-suppressing beast, as a burial object, has a peculiar shape that is a fusion of several animal shapes. The features of mystical animals such as dragons, tigers and snakes are integrated into its image, and the horns of horned animals are cleverly combined to form a grotesque image with intimidating power. This image makes use of abstract forms and spiritual feelings to create a mysterious atmosphere, and emphasises the supernatural power of the tomb-suppressing beasts, which not only protects the tomb owner's body from intrusion, but also prevents the tomb owner's soul from ascending smoothly to heaven and reaching eternity of life.

5. Conclusions

The Warring States period was a time of division and change in Chinese history, and the state of Chu, as an important vassal state during this period, was extremely influential and influential at that time. During this period, the Chu culture, under the influence of the Central Plains culture, continued to integrate with the local indigenous culture, and then formed its own unique cultural connotation. As one of the material carriers of the spirit of Chu culture, the animal-shaped lacquerware of Chu is a vivid display of the skills, aesthetics and spiritual beliefs of the Chu ancestors.

The Principle of "Creating Utensils by Emulating Forms" represents a fundamental philosophy in ancient Chinese material culture, encompassing three distinct approaches: form imitation, meaning derivation through shapes, and symbolic manifestation through artifacts. As the guiding principle of traditional artefact-making, it also has special guiding significance in the Warring States period in Chu, where animal-modelled lacquerware, not only essential practical artefacts in daily life, but also the embodiment of Chu's cultural psyche, spiritual beliefs and aesthetic preferences. Analysing the characteristics of Chu deformed lacquerware from the perspective of "Creating Utensils by Emulating Forms" sheds important light on the formal characteristics and symbolic meaning of these animal motifs. It reveals the distinctive romantic, mysterious and spiritual aesthetic qualities of Chu animal-shaped

lacquerware, highlights the vivid artistic vitality of Chu lacquerware, and reflects the pursuing spirit of Chu culture. The integration of practical function with profound symbolism in these artifacts demonstrates how Chu artisans transformed natural forms into cultural expressions, creating objects that transcended mere utility to become powerful carriers of meaning and identity.

Conflicts of Interest

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

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