

An Analysis of Contemporary Lacquer Painting Materials and Traditional Lacquer Craftsmanship Exploration - Taking the Creation of the Lacquer Painting “New World” as an Example

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Abstract:

This article takes the creation process of the lacquer painting work “New World” as its starting point to conduct an in-depth exploration of the development of contemporary lacquer painting materials and the modern transformation of traditional lacquer art. The article employs an empirical research method to analyze the evolution of lacquer painting from ancient to modern times and compares the differences and connections between lacquer painting works domestically and internationally. The study first dissects the commonly used lacquer painting base materials, new lacquer paints, and auxiliary materials and tools such as sandpaper, carving tool sets, and silicone molds in lacquer painting creation, and explores their specific applications in “New World.” Subsequently, the article provides a detailed analysis of traditional lacquerware craftsmanship processes such as material selection, engraving, carving, and polishing, and showcases innovative applications of classic techniques like mother-of-pearl engraving and eggshell in modern lacquer painting. The conclusion aims to promote the innovative development of lacquer painting art in the context of globalization.

Keywords:

Creative Practice, Lacquer Painting Materials, Traditional Lacquer Craftsmanship, Cultural Heritage Preservation

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Contemporary lacquer painting is the product of the integration of traditional lacquer art with contemporary art, new concepts, new materials, and new techniques. New materials and techniques embody the aesthetic spirit of the new era. Traditional lacquer art, with its unique materials and techniques, possesses outstanding and

distinctive qualities. Some contemporary lacquer painters advocate de-crafting, arguing that traditional lacquer techniques constrain artistic creation. However, completely abandoning traditional lacquer techniques would cause lacquer painting to lose its unique characteristics and advantages compared to other painting genres.

This paper will first analyze the current state of contemporary lacquer painting development and the characteristics and current state of traditional lacquer painting materials. It will explore the two important characteristics of lacquer painting art language: craftsmanship and painterly quality. Through a detailed discussion of the transformation and development of painting materials in contemporary lacquer painting, this paper will explore the feasibility and practical significance of contemporary lacquer painting art language.

This paper aims to provide theoretical support and practical guidance for the development of contemporary lacquer painting. Additionally, this paper will provide insights and inspiration for the inheritance and innovation of traditional lacquer painting techniques. Through the exploration and research of contemporary lacquer painting materials and traditional lacquer techniques, we can better understand and develop lacquer painting art, driving its innovation and development in the contemporary art field.

1.2. Research Content

This paper focuses on the exploration of contemporary lacquer painting materials and traditional lacquer techniques, using the creation process of the lacquer painting work “New World” as an example for analysis.

The research focus of this paper is an overview of contemporary lacquer painting and an exploration of traditional lacquer craftsmanship. First, this paper will provide an overview of the development process, characteristics, and primary forms of expression of contemporary lacquer painting. Second, this paper will explore the inheritance and development of traditional lacquer craftsmanship, including the craftsmanship processes, technical characteristics, and artistic forms of expression of traditional lacquerware production.

Based on a systematic exploration of contemporary lacquer painting and traditional lacquer craftsmanship, this paper will conduct an in-depth analysis and interpretation of the actual creation of lacquer painting works. Specifically, this paper will analyze the selection of themes, composition design, material application, and craftsmanship techniques in lacquer painting creation to reveal the artistic connotations and creative concepts of the works.

Finally, this paper will conclude with a summary and outlook. Through the exploration of contemporary lacquer painting materials and traditional lacquer craftsmanship, as well as the analysis of creative practices, this paper will summarize the characteristics and development trends of contemporary lacquer painting art and envision the future direction of lacquer painting art.

The innovative aspects of this paper primarily lie in its exploration of the integration of contemporary lacquer painting and traditional lacquer craftsmanship, as well as its in-depth interpretation of lacquer painting works. Through the exploration of lacquer painting materials and techniques, this paper has studied the creative methods and expressive techniques of lacquer painting art, providing new insights and practical experience for the innovation and development of lacquer painting.

However, it should be noted that this study still has some limitations. First, in the exploration of lacquer painting materials and techniques, there are still some technical challenges that need to be addressed, such as issues related to the adhesion of lacquer with other materials and color stability. Second, in the practical creation of lacquer paintings, there are still some shortcomings in creative concepts that need to be further improved and enhanced.

In summary, this paper takes the exploration of contemporary lacquer painting materials and traditional lacquer techniques as its research content. Through an in-depth analysis of the actual creation practices of lacquer paintings, it provides new insights and practical experience for the innovation and development of lacquer painting art.

2. Overview of Contemporary Lacquer Painting

2.1. Current Status of Lacquer Painting Development

The historical evolution of traditional lacquer art can be traced back to ancient times. According to archaeological research, lacquer was already used as a coating material in China during the Neolithic period. However, the true development of lacquer art originated in the Neolithic period, took shape during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, and matured during the Qin and Han dynasties.

During the Qin and Han Dynasties, lacquer art was widely applied in palace decoration and cultural arts. A typical example is the lacquered wooden coffins from the Han Dynasty, which featured vibrant lacquer techniques, showcasing the high level of artistic creativity at the time. Additionally, lacquerware from the Han Dynasty extensively adopted lacquer painting techniques, significantly enhancing their aesthetic appeal.

Over time, lacquer art reached its peak during the Tang and Song Dynasties. During the Sui and Tang Dynasties, influenced by ceramics, lacquer art gradually faded from everyday life and became a luxury item sought after by the imperial court and nobility. During this period, lacquer art was not only valued in the imperial court but also gradually became a form of folk art. Lacquer art from the Tang and Song Dynasties often depicted natural landscapes such as flowers, birds, and mountains, pursuing smooth lines and vibrant colors, forming a unique style.

The Yuan Dynasty was characterized by carved lacquer, while the Ming and Qing Dynasties saw the maturation of all lacquer techniques. The Ming Dynasty focused on gold, and the first lacquer art treatise, "The Record of Lacquer Decoration," was published. The Qing Dynasty emphasized complexity, giving rise to the inlaid technique known as "hundred treasures inlay." Lacquer art spread from China to Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and Europe. In the earliest lacquer artworks, there were already techniques for painting, which can be considered the early form of lacquer painting. For example, the lacquer screen (Figure 1) unearthed from the tomb of Sima Jinlong (Northern Wei Dynasty). The earliest form of lacquer painting in China appeared during the Republican era in a portrait by Wu Yishan (Figure 2), which used lacquer as the material and employed Western painting techniques. Modern lacquer painting was introduced to China after the founding of the People's Republic of China, originating from Vietnam. In the early years of the People's Republic, Vietnam held lacquer painting exhibitions in Beijing and Shanghai, which were highly regarded by Premier Zhou Enlai. He dispatched a group of artists, including Shen Fuwen and Cai

Kezhen, to Vietnam to study lacquer painting, thereby revitalizing this ancient craft with new vitality. (Figure 3, Figure 4)



Figure 1. Lacquered folding screen unearthed from the tomb of Sima Jinlong (Northern Wei Dynasty).



Figure 2. Wu Yishan, Self-Portrait (detail), 1931, gold lacquer painting, 200 cm × 94 cm.



Figure 3. Shen Fuwen, Goldfish Lacquer Painting.



Figure 4. Cai Kezhen, Lacquer Painting "Red Seaweed".

Since modern times, lacquer painting art has undergone more extensive innovation. In the early 20th century, some Chinese artists began experimenting with combining Western painting techniques with traditional lacquer art techniques, creating more unique works. Additionally, the development of modern technology has provided more possibilities for innovation in lacquer art, with advancements in fields such as AI painting and the metaverse also injecting new momentum into the development of lacquer art.

The historical evolution of lacquer painting art is a rich and diverse process. From the traditional lacquer art of the Qin and Han dynasties to the innovative creations of modern lacquer painting, each period has its own unique style and expression. The development of lacquer art not only showcases the unique charm of Chinese culture but also has a positive impact on the development of world art. We should continue to explore and inherit lacquer painting art to ensure its continued prosperity and development.

The current state of contemporary lacquer painting techniques and styles is an important component of an overview of contemporary lacquer painting and holds significant research value. Modern lacquer painting art has evolved from traditional lacquer art techniques, incorporating improvements and innovations to form unique technical methods and characteristics [4].

Modern lacquer painting techniques differ from traditional lacquer painting in terms of material selection. Traditional lacquer painting primarily uses natural lacquer and natural mineral pigments, while modern lacquer painting incorporates new materials such as chemical lacquer and metal foil. Chemical lacquer is a material with rich

colors and good stability, widely used in modern lacquer painting creation. Metal foil enhances the luster and three-dimensionality of works, making them more vibrant and diverse.

Modern lacquer painting art offers greater creative freedom. Traditional lacquer painting techniques are constrained by environmental factors, as natural lacquer is a material prone to deterioration, requiring careful control of temperature, humidity, and other environmental conditions during the creation process. In contrast, modern lacquer painting is more convenient, allowing for greater freedom in the creative process. Chemical lacquer dries quickly, enabling artists to swiftly realize their creative ideas. Additionally, it can be combined with other materials to create more diverse works.

Traditional lacquer painting styles emphasize clean lines and vivid color contrasts, while modern lacquer painting places greater emphasis on diverse and personalized forms of expression. Modern lacquer paintings feature more abstract expressions, three-dimensional shapes, and light and shadow effects. Artists use and innovate techniques to give their works stronger artistic appeal and expressiveness [5].

The development of modern lacquer painting techniques has also brought some challenges to traditional lacquer craftsmanship. Many artists are now placing greater emphasis on technical research and innovation, introducing new materials and techniques to break through the limitations of traditional lacquer painting and create works with modern characteristics. At the same time, the emergence of modern lacquer painting has also increased public attention and recognition of traditional lacquer painting, promoting the protection and inheritance of traditional culture.

In summary, the current state of contemporary lacquer painting art and style reflects the characteristics and trends of modern art development, characterized by innovation and experimentation. Through in-depth research and practice of modern lacquer painting techniques, traditional lacquer craftsmanship can be better preserved and developed, while also enriching the forms and content of modern art. Research on the current state of contemporary lacquer painting art and style holds significant importance for promoting the development and enhancement of lacquer painting art [2].

2.2. Analysis of Contemporary Lacquer Painting Materials

Contemporary lacquer painting material analysis is an important aspect of studying the materials used in contemporary lacquer painting production. The tools used in the painting process play a crucial role in contemporary lacquer painting production, with common lacquer painting tools including brushes, scrapers, and spray guns. Brushes are indispensable tools for creating lacquer paintings, and different brushes can produce distinct brushstroke effects. Scrapers are flat tools used to scrape lacquer or create textural effects on the canvas. A spray gun is a tool that evenly sprays lacquer onto the canvas, creating unique application effects. Contemporary lacquer painting also involves the use of special materials such as mother-of-pearl, eggshell, ivory, jade, gold, silver, and gemstones. Mother-of-pearl is a material with unique luster and texture, often used for the background or decorative elements of lacquer paintings.

The selection and use of materials in contemporary lacquer painting significantly impact the quality and effect of the artwork. In lacquer painting practice, artists can choose appropriate materials and tools based on their needs and creativity to showcase the rich diversity of contemporary lacquer painting art. (Figure 5, Figure 6)



Figure 5. Eggshell.



Figure 6. Mother-of-pearl.

3. Exploration of Lacquer Craft Materials

3.1. Analysis of Base Materials

3.1.1. Traditional Lacquer Bases

Lacquerware refers to three-dimensional objects decorated with lacquer applied to their surfaces. The objects on which the lacquer is applied are referred to as bases. Traditional lacquerware is predominantly made of wood, such as the Warring States-period lacquerware unearthed from the boat coffin burial site on Chengdu Commercial Street, which are mostly wooden bases. Metal, ceramic, and leather bases are also common types of bases. Bamboo-woven bases emerged during the Warring States period, characterized by their lightweight and ease of shaping. Bamboo-woven bases are the lightest of all base types. The process involves creating an inner mold using clay or thin wooden boards, then applying fabric and lacquer over it. Once dry, the inner mold is removed, forming the base. This technique laid the foundation for later detachable base techniques. A silver-lead lacquered dish unearthed from the tomb of Wang Jian, the king of the Former Shu Kingdom, has a two-layer body, with the inner layer made of silver and the outer layer made of lead, totaling approximately 1 millimeter in thickness. The outer layer has a very rough surface, which was originally lacquered, but the lacquer has peeled off, leaving only traces. The dish surface was not lacquered, so the silver body is exposed. This type of body is a common metal body in traditional lacquer art. (Figure 7, Figure 8, Figure 9)



Figure 7. Lacquered beans, Warring States period, unearthed from a boat coffin burial on Chengdu Commercial Street, wooden core.



Figure 8. Painted lacquer box, Western Han Dynasty, unearthed from the Mawangdui No. 1 Han Tomb in Changsha, Hunan Province, sandwiched between layers of clay.

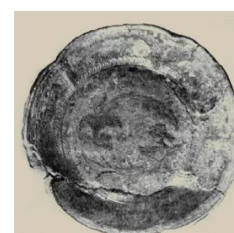


Figure 9. Silver-lead lacquer dish unearthed from the tomb of Wang Jian, King of Former Shu.

3.1.2. Contemporary Lacquer Bases

With the development of society and advancements in technology, the emergence and application of new materials, processes, and technologies have brought about significant changes in the bases used in contemporary lacquer art creation. The widespread use of benzene-based bases, 3D-printed bases, and compressed panels has made contemporary lacquer bases lighter and more precise in design compared to traditional base materials. and offer greater precision and accuracy in terms of form. Technologies like 3D-printed bases enable more complex and precise design, overcoming the limitations of traditional handmade techniques in certain shapes and details. They can produce bases with unique geometric shapes or extremely fine textures, opening up new possibilities for lacquer art creation. Contemporary technology has introduced a wider range of material options, enriching the means and effects of lacquer art expression. The performance and characteristics of different materials can meet the needs of various creative concepts and styles. However, traditional lacquer mold materials also possess irreplaceable value, with their historical and cultural heritage and unique texture being indispensable elements. In the development of lacquer art, contemporary lacquer mold materials and traditional materials can complement each other and develop together, driving innovation in lacquer art while preserving its heritage [1]. (Figure 10)



Figure 10. Demonstration of 3D printing technology.

3.2. Lacquer Art Painting Materials

Traditional lacquer art materials primarily consist of raw lacquer, which is decorated with mineral pigments mixed into the lacquer. Further decoration is achieved using materials such as gold, silver, jade, and mother-of-pearl. Raw lacquer requires specific environmental conditions to dry completely, as it can only fully cure under certain temperature and humidity levels, thereby being constrained by these conditions. With the advancement of technology, synthetic lacquers such as cashew lacquer, polyurethane lacquer, alkyd lacquer, and nitrocellulose lacquer have emerged. Cashew lacquer is derived from the sap extracted from cashew shells with chemical additives, and it can dry completely under natural conditions. Chemical lacquers are modern lacquers made from pure chemical additives. Compared to traditional lacquer, cashew lacquer, polyurethane lacquer, and nitrocellulose lacquer have relatively faster drying speeds, greater convenience, and improved efficiency in artistic creation. For example, contemporary materials may offer greater diversity and vibrancy in color mixing and presentation, meeting the demand for rich colors in modern aesthetics. Generally, some contemporary materials may have relatively lower costs, helping to reduce creation costs. For new artistic techniques and forms of expression, contemporary materials may be more adaptable and integrable. Lacquer, with its deep historical and cultural heritage, possesses a unique texture and charm that cannot be replaced. After prolonged testing, traditional materials often demonstrate excellent durability, enabling works to retain their unique charm over time. They serve as an

important medium for the transmission of traditional lacquer art techniques, carrying the wisdom and skills of our predecessors. Both traditional and contemporary lacquer art painting materials have their value, and they can learn from and integrate with each other in the development of lacquer art, jointly promoting its prosperity [7].

4. Analysis of the Lacquer Painting Work “New World”

4.1. Creation Background and Concept

The work “New World” tells the story of a person’s escape from a “circus.” The various animal figures in the painting metaphorically represent “people” in real society. Using the technique of metaphorical representation, it narrates the frustration and confusion of modern young people in real life, combining the sharpness of arrogance and independence with the confusion and helplessness toward life. (Figure 11)

The work adopts lacquer painting as its medium, combining traditional lacquer art materials with modern new materials and techniques. During the creation process, it explores how new materials and techniques brought about by technological development can be integrated with traditional lacquer art materials and techniques, as well as the outcomes of such integration.



Figure 11. “New World,” color draft.

Throughout the creation of this work, techniques such as relief modeling, painting, glazing, and inlaying were primarily employed. The materials used primarily consisted of raw lacquer, with a small amount of cashew lacquer applied in certain areas to compensate for the absence of white lacquer in traditional lacquer. This was done to address issues such as color saturation being slightly too high and colors appearing too dark and lacking vibrancy.

Pile lacquering: This refers to the method of using lacquer paste or lacquer to sculpt patterns, followed by decorative lacquer painting. This technique has been in use since ancient times. The decorative patterns on the outer coffin unearthed from the Mawangdui Tomb in Changsha during the Han Dynasty were created using this method. By adding color to the lacquer paste, colored lacquer paste can be made, which ensures the thickness of the lacquer while also allowing for easy shaping.

Zhangqiao: Also known as “spotted lacquer,” this technique involves imitating or replicating the unique patterns and textures found in nature. In Japan, it is called “bian tu,” meaning “thousand changes.” Modern Zhangqiao is no longer limited to imitating natural objects; any method that can create patterns can be referred to as Zhangqiao. Based on its operational techniques, it can be divided into tool-based texture creation, medium-based texture creation, and solvent-based texture creation, among others.

Painting Lacquer:

Gilding

This refers to the practice of painting gold or silver floral patterns on a lacquer surface. It is also known as “mud gold painting lacquer.” This technique originated during the Warring States period and reached its peak during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

a. Monochrome gilding: Select a monochrome base that has been ground and polished, copy the design onto it, and use a flexible mouse-hair brush to lightly outline the pattern on the lacquer surface. While the lacquer is still damp, apply gold leaf or use a cotton ball dipped in gold powder to pat it onto the surface, then sweep away any excess gold powder and let it dry to form golden patterns.

b. Raised-relief gilded painting: Raised-relief refers to patterns that protrude from the base surface. These are created by piling up lacquer or lacquer ash to form the patterns, then applying gold leaf or gold powder.

c. Colorful gilded lacquer painting: This involves combining two colors of gold (red gold and yellow gold) with silver to create a colorful effect, which is then applied to the painting.

d. Mud Gold Painting: Prepared mud gold is mixed with kerosene thinner during application, then directly painted onto the lacquer surface with a brush. The process is completed immediately after painting.

Lacquer Painting and Coloring

Like plain lacquer, this technique is relatively simple. Ancient artisans used single or multiple colors to decorate objects with geometric patterns, plant and animal motifs, and natural landscapes. The brushwork is bold, the patterns are exquisite, and the colors are vibrant. For example, most of the lacquerware unearthed from the Mawangdui tombs in Changsha are painted lacquerware. This direct painting technique is diverse, allowing for monochrome, mixed colors, and variations in light and shadow, resulting in a rich and varied palette.

Inlay: Inlay techniques originate from the strong adhesive and curing properties of lacquer. Inlaying is one of the oldest techniques in lacquer craftsmanship. The earliest inlaid lacquerware discovered through archaeological excavations was found at the Liangzhu Cultural Site in Zhejiang Province. Ancient people used a variety of materials for inlaying lacquerware, such as mother-of-pearl, gemstones, jade, and gold and silver sheets. In modern times, inspired by external influences, eggshell materials have also gradually gained recognition and use [6]. These materials complement the lacquer colors, each showcasing their unique material aesthetics. The range of inlay materials has expanded as people's understanding has grown. As long as new materials possess their own unique aesthetic appeal, can be securely bonded by lacquer, and withstand polishing, they can be adopted as new inlay materials [8]. (Figure 12, Figure 13)

The creation background and conceptualization of the lacquer painting works in *The New World* are closely tied to the exploration of contemporary lacquer painting materials and traditional lacquer craftsmanship. Through the application of materials and techniques, as well as reflections on contemporary social issues, the artist creates unique and profound artistic works, enabling viewers to gain insights and reflections while appreciating the works.

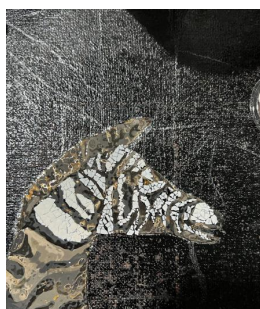


Figure 12. Eggshell inlay in “New World”.

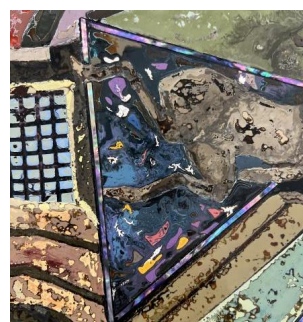


Figure 13. Mother-of-pearl inlay in “New World”.

4.2. Material Selection and Craftsmanship Practice

Material selection and craftsmanship are crucial in the creation of lacquer paintings. In the creation of “The New World,” traditional lacquer techniques were employed. (Figure 14)



Figure 14. “The New World,” pencil sketch.

Lacquer as a base material, lacquer is the key material in lacquer painting. In this creation, lacquer was used as the primary material. Lacquer possesses rich colors and luster, making the artwork more vibrant and three-dimensional. Lacquer also has excellent antioxidant properties and durability, ensuring the artwork's long-term preservation.

In terms of craftsmanship, the creation of the underdrawing is foundational to lacquer painting. The underdrawing is a critical step in the creation process, requiring the determination of the theme and the creation of a pencil sketch. Following this, a color sketch is created, and finally, the underdrawing is printed and transferred onto the lacquer board in a scaled-down format.

Paint application requires meticulous handling and precise color control. Traditional lacquer painting techniques are employed, starting with the base color and gradually adding shades and details to create a more three-dimensional and textured effect. During the coloring process, attention must be paid to the layering and transition of colors to make the entire image more vivid.

The traditional lacquer craft process primarily includes base frame construction, base treatment, and lacquer application. The specific process is as follows:

4.2.1. Lacquer Base Preparation

Preparing the lacquer base: High-quality wooden ribs are used to form the frame, with double-sided plywood panels attached to create the base plate. Adhesives are primarily used for bonding, avoiding the use of nails.

Creating the base layer: The lacquer base is cut to the desired shape and size, then a base layer of zinc oxide and white latex glue is applied to the lacquer panel to enhance its durability and smoothness. (Figure 15)



Figure 15. Wooden board covered with cloth.

4.2.2. Applying lacquer

Preparing raw lacquer: Select high-quality raw lacquer as the topcoat. The selection of raw lacquer and tile ash should be determined based on the specific requirements of the lacquer base.

Filtering raw lacquer: Filter the raw lacquer to remove impurities and particles, ensuring the quality of the topcoat.

Mixing the adhesive paste: Add the filtered raw lacquer to an appropriate amount of clam powder sand adhesive, stir thoroughly to achieve the desired viscosity.

Applying raw lacquer: Use a brush or sprayer to evenly apply the lacquer to the lacquered substrate surface. Apply multiple coats as needed to increase the thickness and texture of the lacquer layer.

Drying: Allow the raw lacquer on the lacquer substrate to dry naturally or undergo special drying treatment to ensure the lacquer layer dries and cures.

Through the above process, traditional lacquer craftsmanship enables lacquer paintings to achieve vibrant colors, lustrous texture, and durable longevity. However, this craftsmanship also requires artisans to possess solid skills and extensive experience to ensure the artistic quality and expressiveness of lacquer paintings. (Figure 16)



Figure 16. Xiao Tiantian, New World, 2024 Lacquer painting, 195 cm × 91 cm.

5. Conclusions

This paper primarily explores contemporary lacquer painting materials and traditional lacquer techniques, using the creation of the lacquer painting “New World” as an example to discuss issues related to the selection and application of lacquer painting materials, as well as the inheritance and innovation of traditional lacquer techniques.

Through a detailed analysis and comparison of the characteristics and applications of different types of lacquer materials, this paper determines that the primary material used in the creation of the lacquer painting “New World” is raw lacquer. Based on the summary of the creation practice of the lacquer painting “New World,” further research and development of new environmentally friendly lacquer materials should be conducted to meet the diverse material requirements of lacquer painting creation. Additionally, in terms of the inheritance and innovation of traditional lacquer craftsmanship, modern technological means should be further utilized to expand the creative space of lacquer craftsmanship and promote the integration of traditional lacquer craftsmanship with modern art. Additionally, lacquer painting education and cultural exchanges should be strengthened to promote traditional lacquer techniques and increase public awareness and appreciation of lacquer painting art.

This paper's exploration of contemporary lacquer painting materials and traditional lacquer techniques has mastered the basic techniques and methods of lacquer painting creation, while also providing new insights and pathways for the development of lacquer painting art. In future research and practice, the author will continue to deeply explore various aspects of lacquer painting art to promote its prosperity and development [3].

Conflicts of Interest

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

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