

An Examination of the Late Ming Aesthetic of ‘Preserving and Utilising’ through *Yan Xian Qing Shang Jian*

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Abstract:

As a key source for the study of Ming Dynasty artefacts, *Yan Xian Qing Shang Jian* reveals the aesthetic tastes and lifestyle aspirations of scholars in the late Ming period. The artefacts described in the book are not only ubiquitous in daily life, forming an aesthetic imagery, but also embody the aesthetic philosophy of ‘practicality in craftsmanship’, serving as a vehicle for people’s aesthetic and cultural expression. During the late Ming period, with the prosperity of the commodity economy and the development of handicrafts, the concept of “prioritising utility in the creation of objects” gradually gained prominence, emphasising the practicality of artefacts alongside their spiritual aesthetic value. This article elucidates the manifestation of the “prioritising utility in the creation of objects” aesthetic philosophy in *Yan Xian Qing Shang Jian* from three aspects: functionality above all, simplicity and practicality, and making full use of materials. It also explores the socio-economic factors, cultural trends, and shifts in lifestyle that contributed to its formation. Finally, the article points out that the ‘utility-oriented’ aesthetic holds profound implications for modern design, emphasising the unity of function and form, the principle of simplicity, and the importance of the rational use of materials and craftsmanship.

Keywords:

Yanxian Qingshang Jian, Late Ming, Artefacts, Prioritising Utility in the Creation of Artefacts

1. Introduction

During the Late Ming period, the commercial economy flourished and handicrafts developed, resulting in a rich and diverse array of artefacts covering all aspects of daily life and scholarly pursuits. *Yan Xian Qing Shang Jian* is one of the primary texts for the study of Ming Dynasty artefacts. Written by Gao Lian of the Ming Dynasty, it forms part of his *Zun Sheng Ba Jian* and vividly reflects the aesthetic tastes and lifestyle aspirations of Late Ming scholars. The book details the refined pastimes of literati and scholars during their leisure hours at home. Beginning with the appreciation of antiques and cultural artefacts, it meticulously describes the usage contexts, materials, craftsmanship and stylistic forms of various objects. Throughout the work, the concept of the unity of practicality and aesthetics—namely, the aesthetic principle of ‘prioritising utility in the creation of objects’—runs as a central thread.

This concept reflects the simple, utilitarian outlook of people in ancient times. During the late Ming period, these utilitarian objects were ubiquitous in people's daily lives, forming an aesthetic image within their existence; they embodied the aesthetic philosophy of 'prioritising utility in the creation of objects' and became vehicles for people's aesthetic and cultural expression.

2. The Essence of the "Prioritising Utility in Craftsmanship" Aesthetic

In "prioritising utility in the creation of artefacts", "creating artefacts" refers to the fabrication of objects, whilst "prioritising utility" signifies a focus on the practical functions of these objects. The Ming-dynasty literary scholar Wen Zhenheng remarked: "The ancients prioritised utility in the creation of artefacts, sparing no expense; thus their craftsmanship was meticulous, unlike the slapdash approach of later generations. From the grandest items—such as bells, tripods, knives, platters and textiles—to the most humble, such as jade ornaments and rice bowls, they all took delight in excellence." [1] The "prioritising utility in the creation of artefacts" aesthetic philosophy originates from the chapter on artefacts in *The Treatise on Superfluous Objects*; it describes the ancient philosophy of creation, which emphasised function, craftsmanship, technique and quality [2]. Although the aesthetic principle of 'prioritising utility in the creation of artefacts' is not explicitly stated in *Notes on Leisurely Appreciation*, the objects described in the text are largely intended to satisfy people's contemporary demands for both the practical value of artefacts and their spiritual utility—that is, their aesthetic value.

From the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods onwards, the ancients emphasised the unity of practicality and aesthetics in the design of artefacts. The *Analects* (Book 'Yong Ye') records: "If substance overpowers form, the result is rustic; if form overpowers substance, the result is pedantic. Only when substance and form are harmoniously balanced is one a gentleman." [3] It is evident that the broad concepts of 'form' and 'substance' expressed by Confucius—the unity of content and form in creation—represent the unity of practicality and aesthetics. Furthermore, Chapter 11 of Laozi states: "Mould clay to make a vessel; it is the void within that gives the vessel its use. Cut out doors and windows to make a room; it is the void within that gives the room its use. Therefore, the 'form' provides convenience, whilst the 'void' provides utility." [4] Here, Laozi maintains that it is only when a vessel is empty that it can truly fulfil its function of containing. 'Existence' brings convenience to people, whilst 'non-existence' performs its function, emphasising that it is 'non-existence' that truly serves a purpose. Mozi advocated "design according to established standards", that is, the principle of practicality in design. He believed that "the ancient sages, in making garments, sought only to fit the body and harmonise with the skin; it was not to adorn the eyes and ears or to deceive the ignorant masses" [5]. This means that when ancient sages crafted clothing, they focused on practicality and comfort, rather than outward display or decoration. Their purpose in making garments was to meet the physical needs of the people, not to satisfy vanity or mislead the populace. It is evident, therefore, that Mozi advocated a philosophy and set of values centred on simplicity and practicality. In the *Discussions on Salt and Iron*, it is stated: "In ancient times, garments that did not conform to the prescribed standards, and tools that were not fit for use, were not sold in the market." [6] This passage emphasises the ancient emphasis on the practicality of clothing and tools; items that did not conform to standards or were inconvenient to use were not permitted to be

sold in the market. This reflects the Han dynasty society's emphasis on practical value and its opposition to luxury and waste.

It is thus evident that the aesthetic principle of 'prioritising utility in the design of artefacts' is deeply rooted in the design philosophy of ancient Chinese artefacts. From the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods through to the late Ming dynasty, this aesthetic principle persisted in various forms, consistently expressing itself through the functionality, design, materials and practicality of artefacts. It embodies a value that unifies the material and spiritual aspects of artefacts, as well as their practicality and aesthetic appeal. In the 'Essay on Leisurely Appreciation' from Gao Lian's *Eight Essays on Following the Way of Life*, the author examines concepts such as the collection value, practical value and aesthetic value of ancient artefacts, which also serves as a concrete manifestation of the 'utility-oriented' aesthetic.

3. The Embodiment of the 'Prioritising Utility in the Crafting of Utensils' Aesthetic in *Essays on Leisurely Appreciation*

The philosophy of 'prioritising utility in the creation of artefacts' emphasises that the core purpose of crafting objects lies in realising their practical value. 'Prioritising utility' not only reflects material aspirations but also serves as the fundamental guiding principle for craftsmanship, design and manufacture. This is primarily manifested in three aspects: prioritising function, simplicity and practicality, and making the most of one's talents. The 'Essay on Leisurely Appreciation' records numerous ancient artefacts, the majority of which indirectly reflect the aesthetic philosophy of 'prioritising utility in the creation of artefacts' pursued by people during the late Ming period.

3.1. A Design Philosophy Centred on Practicality

In the creation of artefacts, the ancients adhered to an aesthetic philosophy that prioritised function above all else. Artefacts were generally expected to possess practical value; their aesthetic appeal was secondary to their actual utility. In *Yan Xian Qing Shang Jian*, this is primarily reflected in artefacts for daily living and those for scholarly use.

3.1.1. Utensils for Daily Living

In *Yan Xian Qing Shang Jian*, daily living utensils primarily include: porcelain, jade ware, bronze ware, tea sets, wine sets, tableware, furniture, dressing tables and screens. Every single one of these objects embodies the aesthetic view held by the late Ming scholars in this book that 'utility should be prioritised in the design of objects'. Taking the incense table as an example, *Yan Xian Qing Shang Jian* mentions: 'There are two types of incense tables in the study; the taller one measures two feet and eight inches, with a tabletop made of marble, Qiyang stone, agate, or inlaid with douban nan wood; they may be four- or eight-sided, square, plum-blossom-shaped, sunflower-shaped, or lotus-shaped; they may be round, lacquered, or crafted from water-polished zhu wood. They are used to display pu stone, individual decorative stones, or fine stones; or to hold incense trays, or flower vases for arranging flowers, or to hold a single incense burner; this is the high table.' [7] From this account, it is evident that the design height and choice of materials for the incense table fully took into account its practical use in the study; it could serve both to display various decorative objects and to fulfil functions such as burning incense, reflecting a strong emphasis on

practicality. Another example is the bed and couch of the late Ming period. Although *Yan Xian Qing Shang Jian* does not contain a direct, detailed description of these items, by the late Ming period, their design had come to place great emphasis on human comfort. Their dimensions and structure were adapted to the needs of rest and sleep, providing people with a comfortable place to rest. It is evident, therefore, that by the late Ming period, the design of artefacts had already placed great emphasis on functionality, reflecting their practical value and a philosophy of craftsmanship centred on human use, which further embodies the aesthetic concept of ‘prioritising utility in the creation of objects’.

3.1.2. Utensils for the Scholar’s Study

The book *Yan Xian Qing Shang Jian* (Notes on Leisurely Appreciation) appraises the Four Treasures of the Study and provides detailed accounts of the manufacturing methods for sunflower-patterned paper, Song-style paper and pine-flower paper, whilst also elaborating on the construction of over twenty types of study utensils. The author’s descriptions of their structure and methods of use clearly demonstrate a design philosophy that prioritises functionality. Regarding stationery storage boxes, the book records: “Boxes are made with three compartments, or in some cases four; they are used to hold all the tools together on a raised frame. As they are not intended for aesthetic display, there is no need for inlay or carving to seek novelty; rosewood is sufficient.” [8] This indicates that the primary function of a scholar’s storage box is to house tools; provided it fulfils its practical purpose, excessive ornamentation is unnecessary, emphasising the principle of prioritising utility. Consider, for instance, the brush holder: its design must allow for the convenient placement of various brushes, ensuring their tips remain undamaged, whilst also facilitating easy access to meet the practical needs of scholars during the creative process. It is evident that during the late Ming period, people placed great emphasis on the practical value of objects, using them to satisfy daily necessities.

3.2. The Aesthetic Pursuit of Simplicity and Practicality

Among the utensils discussed in *Yan Xian Qing Shang Jian*, whether furniture or other artefacts, their designs reveal a distinctive aesthetic inclination. Firstly, in terms of form, most of these objects pursued simplicity. Take, for example, the round-backed armchair (quan yi) of Ming-style furniture from that period. With its clean, flowing lines and rounded top and square base, it not only embodies the ancient concept of ‘heaven is round and earth is square’ but also conforms to ergonomic principles, offering a comfortable seating experience. This simple form is not only elegant and dignified but also easy to craft and use; it aligns with the aesthetic principle of ‘prioritising utility in the creation of utensils’, which emphasises both practicality and beauty.

Furthermore, in the late Ming period, the decoration of artefacts adhered to the principle of moderation. Items such as lacquerware employed techniques such as carving and inlay, yet the choice of patterns and application of craftsmanship were perfectly balanced; they neither compromised the functional utility of the objects nor detracted from their aesthetic appeal. This measured ornamentation not only enhanced the artistic value of the artefacts but also achieved a perfect fusion of practicality and aesthetics.

In summary, whether through the simplification of form or the moderation of decoration, these elements reflect the ancient Chinese people’s unique understanding

and pursuit of the art of craftsmanship, which is also a manifestation of the aesthetic ideals advocated in *Yan Xian Qing Shang Jian*.

3.3. Optimal Use of Materials and Craftsmanship

During the late Ming period, the exploration and utilisation of local materials reached new heights. As described in *Yan Xian Qing Shang Jian*, the creation of these objects not only made extensive use of locally abundant materials such as bamboo, wood and ceramics, but also placed great emphasis on the compatibility between materials and craftsmanship. For instance, bamboo, with its toughness and lightness, was extensively used in the south for the production of furniture and stationery, such as bamboo chairs and bamboo blinds; these items not only served practical functions but also conveyed a sense of rustic, natural beauty. As for wood, furniture employed intricate mortise-and-tenon joinery, skilfully highlighting the grain and texture of the timber to ensure both sturdiness and the display of the wood's natural beauty. With regard to ceramics, various firing techniques—such as blue-and-white and pink-and-white—were utilised to bring out their colour and texture, resulting in exquisite porcelain wares. The creation of these artefacts not only met the practical needs of daily life but also reflected a fondness for natural materials and the perfect fusion of craftsmanship and material.

4. The Reasons Behind the Formation of the “Practicality-Oriented” Aesthetic in Late Ming Utensil-Making

During the late Ming period, society underwent numerous transformations, and the field of artefacts displayed a distinct aesthetic of ‘practicality in craftsmanship’. This phenomenon was not accidental, but rather the result of multiple intertwined factors acting in concert. The most significant influences were socio-economic conditions, cultural trends, and shifts in lifestyle.

Firstly, there were socio-economic factors. Whilst the Ming dynasty began to show signs of decline in its later years, civil society was developing a commodity-based economy, with the socio-economic landscape shifting towards this model. Economic policies that had previously prioritised agriculture over commerce were relaxed, providing the handicraft sector with greater opportunities and scope for development. [9] The production of utensils became more specialised and diverse. To meet the needs of different social strata, manufacturers had to consider cost and practicality alongside quality and craftsmanship in order to remain competitive in the market. Consequently, the aesthetic principle of ‘prioritising utility in utensil-making’ was, to a certain extent, a product of economic development and market demand.

Secondly, this shift was influenced by the cultural currents of the time. The dissemination of philosophies such as Wang Yangming's School of Mind emphasised the individual's inner experience and authentic perception of life. Under the influence of these ideas, people placed greater emphasis on the practical role of artefacts in daily life, pursuing a simple, practical and natural lifestyle. This was reflected in the aesthetics of artefacts through the prevalence of the concept that ‘utility is paramount’.

Finally, there was a shift in people's lifestyles during the late Ming period. The integration of the scholar and merchant classes at that time led to changes in people's lifestyles, with greater emphasis placed on quality of life and cultural significance. By the late Ming period, figures such as Gao Lian and Wen Zhenheng had turned their attention to everyday life, placing greater emphasis on cultivating a beauty within

secular life. [10] In terms of the living environment, the refinement of garden architecture and interior furnishings demanded that artefacts not only fulfil practical functions but also harmonise with the overall setting, thereby reflecting the owner's aesthetic sensibilities and cultural refinement. Consequently, examining object design through the lens of the 'practicality-over-form' aesthetic and integrating it with the various demands of daily life—such as changes in lifestyle, the application of objects, and leisure activities—became a prevailing trend in late Ming society.

5. Implications of the “Functionality-First” Aesthetic for Modern Design

The 'utility-oriented' aesthetic offers profound insights for modern design. Firstly, it emphasises the unity of function and form, reminding modern designers that functionality must take precedence in the design process. This ensures that design works first meet basic functional requirements before pursuing formal beauty. This approach effectively prevents designs from neglecting practical functionality in the pursuit of form, enabling them to satisfy both people's practical and aesthetic needs.

Secondly, in today's affluent society, people's aspirations for life increasingly lean towards simplicity and comfort. Within the 'utility-oriented' aesthetic of the late Ming period, a minimalist design style emerged as a key design philosophy. This philosophy advocates the removal of superfluous ornamentation, expressing rich connotations through simple forms, thereby allowing design works to embody functionality within their simplicity and perfectly achieving the fusion of design and practicality. This minimalist design philosophy not only aligns with modern people's pursuit of a simple lifestyle but also makes design works more readily accepted and appreciated by the public.

Furthermore, the 'practicality-over-form' aesthetic reminds contemporary designers to prioritise material selection and craftsmanship. Designers should conduct in-depth research into the properties of materials, selecting appropriate materials and techniques to achieve their design objectives. At the same time, designers must also consider the sustainability of materials, adhere to environmental principles, and achieve an organic unity between materials, craftsmanship and design philosophy. This not only drives innovative development in design but also provides robust support for the sustainable development of contemporary design.

In summary, the aesthetic principle of 'prioritising utility over form' offers significant insights for modern design. It reminds designers to focus on the unity of function and form, advocates a minimalist design philosophy, and encourages the judicious use of materials and craftsmanship. These principles will help to drive the innovative development of modern design, ensuring that design works better meet people's practical needs and aesthetic standards.

6. Conclusions

Through our study of *Yan Xian Qing Shang Jian*, we can clearly discern the aesthetic philosophy of 'prioritising utility in the creation of objects' that prevailed during the late Ming period. This aesthetic not only emphasised the practicality of artefacts but also sought a harmonious unity of function and beauty, reflecting the profound understanding of and aspirations for life held by the literati of the late Ming. Late Ming design of utilitarian objects demonstrated superb craftsmanship and a unique aesthetic philosophy in terms of prioritising function, simplicity and

practicality, and making the most of materials. These design principles not only met the daily living needs of the people at the time but also reflected a love for natural materials and the perfect integration of craftsmanship and materials. This aesthetic philosophy of ‘prioritising utility in the creation of objects’ was not only the result of the combined influence of various socio-economic, cultural and lifestyle factors in the late Ming period but also provides valuable insights for modern design.

Looking ahead to future research, studies on the Late Ming aesthetic of ‘utility-oriented furniture design’ should be conducted in a more in-depth and comprehensive manner. On the one hand, we need to further excavate relevant historical documents and physical artefacts to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the background, characteristics and influence of furniture design during the Late Ming period. On the other hand, we should also explore, in conjunction with modern design practices and developments, how to integrate the Late Ming aesthetic of ‘utility-oriented furniture design’ into contemporary design, thereby creating works that possess both a foundation in traditional culture and meet modern aesthetic demands. In summary, the Late Ming aesthetic of ‘practicality in design’ is a fascinating and valuable subject of study. Through in-depth research and exploration, we can gain a better understanding of the historical context and cultural significance of this aesthetic concept, thereby providing valuable insights and inspiration for modern design and the cultural development of contemporary society.

Conflicts of Interest

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

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