

A Study of the Formal Language of the Warring States Chu Lacquered Tiger-Seat Bird-Stand Drum

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Abstract:

This paper examines the formal language of the Warring States Chu lacquered tiger-seat bird-stand drum, a distinctive ritual and musical object of Chu culture. Taking morphological composition, craft and materials, and color and ornament as its main analytical dimensions, the study explores how the drum body, tiger seat, and phoenix-bird stand form an integrated visual structure rather than a simple combination of parts. The analysis shows that the object constructs an ascending rhythm from the stable, weighty tiger base to the rounded drum body and the light, dynamic phoenix-bird form. Its carving, lacquering, painting, and mortise-and-tenon structure transform functional construction into an expressive craft language, while the contrast of black and vermilion, together with cloud-and-thunder, feather, triangular, and rhombus patterns, produces a balanced relationship between tension and order. The study argues that the formal language of the tiger-seat bird-stand drum allows form to generate meaning through line, volume, color, material texture, and structural logic. This perspective helps clarify how Chu lacquerware embodies both ritual function and aesthetic vitality, and offers a useful path for understanding the expressive mechanisms of ancient Chinese object-making art.

Keywords:

Chu Lacquerware, Tiger-seat Bird-stand Drum, Warring States Period, Formal Language, Morphological Composition, Color and Ornament

1. Introduction

The tiger-seat bird-stand drum of the Chu state is a wooden lacquer object distinctive to the Chu region during the Warring States period. Guo Dewei, a specialist in Chu cultural studies, once pointed out that the tiger-seat bird-stand drum is one of the Chu artifacts that “most fully reflects the ideas and consciousness of the people of the time and is richest in Chu characteristics.” Since its excavation in the mid-twentieth century, it has gradually become an important object in the study of Chu culture, especially in research on lacquerware from the Chu region. Existing scholarship may be reviewed in several main areas. First, in terms of dating and periodization, Xiang Mingwen, in “A Study of the Dating and Related Issues of Lacquered Wooden Tiger-Seat Bird-Stand Drums Excavated from Chu Tombs,” divides the development of the tiger-seat bird-stand drum into three periods: it

emerged in the early Warring States period, flourished from the early phase of the middle Warring States period to the early phase of the late Warring States period, and declined from the middle phase of the late Warring States period to the Qin. Second, with regard to cultural attributes and nomenclature, Chen Zhenyu, in “On the Tiger-Seat Bird-Stand Drum,” argues that the object is not an “image of a mountain deity” but should be classified as a musical instrument; more specifically, it may be called a “tiger-seat bird-stand suspended drum” in order to distinguish it from the bird-stand suspended drum. Fan Changxi’s “A Brief Discussion of the Naming of the ‘Tiger-Seat Bird-Stand Drum’ Frame Based on the Xinyang Inventory Slips” correlates the drum frame of a tiger-seat bird-stand drum excavated from a Chu tomb at Xinyang with the contemporary name recorded in the inventory slips as “yi mi meng zhi gui, chan tu lou, qi qing huang zhi hua.” Zhang Qibin, in the volume *Art and Elegance of the series Passing Years of the Chu Capital*, examines the cultural meanings represented by the images of the tiger and phoenix-bird in the tiger-seat bird-stand drum. [1,2,3,4,5]

In addition, some studies have also addressed the form and aesthetic characteristics of the tiger-seat bird-stand drum. Wang Can, for example, discusses its shape, function, and aesthetics on the basis of excavated examples. Judging from current research on the morphology of the tiger-seat bird-stand drum, however, most studies remain limited to descriptive analysis, and a systematic framework for analyzing its formal language has not yet been established. The term “formal language” here refers not only to the external morphological composition, craft techniques, and decorative elements of the object, but also to the organizational logic and expressive mechanisms among these formal elements - that is, how form generates meaning and how it carries aesthetic experience. Taking this as its point of departure, this paper places the tiger-seat bird-stand drum within the research perspective of formal language and examines its formal characteristics and aesthetic expression in three dimensions: morphological composition, craft and materials, and color and ornament. In doing so, it seeks to broaden the ways in which the art of Chu lacquerware may be understood. [6]

2. Formal Language in Morphological Composition

The morphological composition of the tiger-seat bird-stand drum consists of three major components: the drum body, the tiger seat, and the bird stand. The relationship among the three is not a simple superimposition, but rather an organic logic of organization. In terms of scale, excavated examples generally measure nearly 1.5 meters in both width and height. Their size is moderate: they are neither monumental ritual objects so large as to compel an upward gaze, nor small craft pieces intended only for appreciation on a desk. This scale itself suggests their position within ritual space. They could be displayed in a hall for viewing, while also possessing the practical functional attribute of being struck and played.

The drum body is flattened and round, forming the visual core of the entire object. This choice of form has a dual character. From the perspective of acoustic principles, the flattened circular shape enables the drum sound to be fuller and deeper. From the perspective of formal language, the rounded, shallow-dish curvature gives the static drum body a sense of three-dimensionality and layering, creating a subtle transition of light and shadow between the drum face and the drum rim. In this way it acquires a kind of visual “tension,” a formal quality in which stillness seems to contain movement.

The structure of the tiger seat may be divided into two types: one in which the tiger's belly touches the ground, and one in which it is lifted from the ground. For example, in the tiger-seat bird-stand drum M294:42 excavated from the Jiudian Eastern Zhou tombs in Jiangling, the tiger seat has the limbs and belly touching the ground. By contrast, in the tiger-seat bird-stand drums M1:1, 2, 4, 7, 8, and 16 excavated from Chu Tomb No. 1 at Mayishun Lane in Changsha, the tiger assumes a crouching posture, with both legs supporting the body and the belly raised above the ground. Whether the tiger's belly touches the ground or is lifted from it, the reclining tiger form displays a formal language that combines hardness and softness. The lines of the tiger's head are lively and fluid, with rounded, gentle curves, while the angular turns are strong and forceful, revealing the firmness of the bone structure. The eyes are wide open and intense, the mouth is opened wide with interlocking teeth, and the ears are upright and refined. Through the carving of these facial details, the tiger head is given a dignified expression. The tiger's body and limbs are thick and powerful, and the slightly arched back, like a small hill, establishes a stable base for the whole object. The tail, either bent and trailing backward or curled upward, breaks the heaviness of the base and gives the static tiger seat a sense of motion. In the posture of the two tigers sitting back to back, there is a vitality that seems ready to burst forth. This state of "gathered momentum" is an extremely important expressive mechanism in formal language: it presents not the result of action, but the potential for action, thereby producing psychological tension and expectation within stillness.

The bird stand rises above the tiger's back, and the body of the phoenix-bird is organized around an S-shaped curve that runs in one continuous movement from the top of the head through the neck and back to the tip of the tail. The tiger-seat bird-stand drum M354:28 excavated from a Chu tomb at Yutaishan in Jiangling is a representative example. In ancient Chinese plastic arts, the S-shaped curve occupies a special formal position: it is neither a completely symmetrical static balance nor an unrestrained disorderly flow, but rather a regulated variation that preserves an internal sense of order within its winding movement. The phoenix tail spreads outward in radiating lines, slender yet resilient, forming a contrast of density and openness and a rhythmic echo with the S-shaped curve of the main body. In terms of local modeling, the head of the phoenix-bird is oval, the beak is slender and slightly hooked, and the line gradually tapers from base to tip. The change in thickness in the neck is natural and fluid, while the dual treatment of a concave front and an S-shaped side further enriches the expressive force of the form. The feathers along the wing edges turn slightly upward, creating a natural curling effect that gives the static phoenix-bird a lightness suggestive of movement in the wind.

Between the drum body, tiger seat, and bird stand there emerges a vertical formal narrative: the calm heaviness of the tiger seat below, the rounded fullness of the drum body in the middle, and the lively upward flight of the phoenix-bird above form an ascending rhythmic sequence that moves from heavy to light and from solid to ethereal. This sequence not only embodies a structural logic of mechanics, but also completes, at the aesthetic level, a visual elevation from earth to sky and from matter to spirit. This is precisely the key by which formal language is able to convey meaning.

3. Formal Language Embedded in Craft

The tiger-seat bird-stand drum integrates three crafts - lacquering, carving, and painting - and the expression of its formal language is deepened through the interaction among these different techniques.

In terms of carving, artisans used relief carving, carving in the round, and intaglio techniques to treat the images of the tiger and phoenix-bird in layers. The contour of the tiger's head is emphasized through relief carving to highlight volume, while the facial features are meticulously shaped in the round, making the eyes appear intense and the nostrils slightly open, as if the tiger were about to roar. The muscular texture of the tiger body is rendered with incised lines that rise and fall with the direction of the form, so that line itself becomes a visual carrier of power. The feathers of the phoenix-bird, by contrast, combine line engraving with shallow relief; the textures of the wings and tail are as light as silk strands, while the slightly raised edges create the visual effect of a faint trembling in the wind. It is worth noting that the tiger and the phoenix-bird form a clear contrast in carving language: the tiger's carving emphasizes mass and depth, whereas the phoenix-bird's carving emphasizes line and shallow undulation. This vocabulary of hardness and softness corresponds precisely to the different cultural symbolic orientations of the tiger and the phoenix.

Lacquering is the most distinctive formal feature of the tiger-seat bird-stand drum. Natural raw lacquer was applied and polished through multiple procedures, with black and vermilion as the principal tones. In ancient Chinese color concepts, black carries deep symbolic implications, while vermilion is warm and vivid; set against each other, the two create strong visual tension. Colors such as golden yellow are used as accents, including gilded details along the edges of the phoenix-bird feathers and on the tiger stripes, adding an air of richness and splendor to the object. After being built up and polished, the lacquer layers have a smooth and stratified surface that presents soft and restrained variations under different lighting conditions. This luster is not merely a decorative effect; rather, it makes the object's surface seem to possess a "sense of breathing," a halo-like effect akin to the surface of a living body. At this level, formal language has already moved beyond the visual and touched the imaginative dimension of tactility.

Mortise-and-tenon construction plays a key role at the structural level. The combination of dovetail tenons and straight tenons secures the connection between the tiger seat and the bird stand and provides strong resistance to pulling forces. More complex structures, such as zongjiao tenons, are used to connect the bird stand and the drum body; multidirectional tenons interweave to bear weight while allowing the transitions between components to appear natural and fluid. The significance of mortise-and-tenon construction in formal language lies in the fact that it is both a functional guarantee and an organic component of form. The traces of the joints are not deliberately hidden, but exist as the visible manifestation of structural logic, giving the object a quality of being "truthful to itself." Movement appears within solidity, and variation is contained within composure. This structural language forms an internal consistency with the rhythmic sequence at the level of modeling.

4. Formal Language in Color and Ornament

The color configuration of the tiger-seat bird-stand drum displays a clear logic: black serves as the ground, red as the principal pattern color, and other colors as accents. For example, on the tiger-seat bird-stand drum M2:351 excavated from Tomb

M2 at Jiuliandun in Zaoyang, Hubei, the whole object, in addition to its striking red and black main colors, is decorated throughout with vermilion, reddish brown, golden yellow, and pastel colors on the patterns covering the birds, tigers, and other parts. Black occupies the largest proportion of the surface area and establishes a calm and mysterious tone for the entire object. The tiger patterns and phoenix-bird patterns painted in red leap out against the black ground, and the contrast in brightness and hue between them produces a strong visual pulse. Golden specks and yellow halos are distributed among them, both moderating the intense contrast between black and red and enriching the overall layers of color. From the perspective of formal language, the core mechanism of this color configuration lies in “harmony within contrast.” The contrast between black and red creates visual tension and excitement, while the introduction of gold and yellow provides transition and buffering, so that the overall color effect is both forceful and balanced.

The ornamental system is more complex and richly layered. The cloud-and-thunder patterns decorating the tiger body are composed of looping and turning lines; the continuity of the lines and their directional changes give the image of the tiger a sense of flow. Ornament is no longer passively attached to the surface of the form, but actively participates in expressing the “movement of the tiger.” The feather patterns on the phoenix-bird are woven from dense fine lines; their arrangement alternates between closeness and openness, creating the fluffiness and drifting movement of feathers. Among the geometric patterns, triangular motifs provide stable visual anchors, while the interlacing of rhombus motifs introduces a rhythm of variation. The flow of the cloud-and-thunder pattern, the lightness of the feather pattern, the stability of the triangular pattern, and the variation of the rhombus pattern - these different types of ornament are juxtaposed on the same object, yet they do not appear disorderly, because they follow unified organizing principles: the quality of line (fluid, continuous, and directional) and the logic of composition (clear hierarchy and balanced density).

The synergistic effect of color and ornament in formal language deserves special attention. When red cloud-and-thunder patterns are painted on a black ground, the sense of flowing line is strengthened by the visual emergence of the color. The use of gold outlining along the edges of the phoenix-bird's feather patterns allows the originally dense line engraving to retain a recognizable contour even when viewed from a distance. Color enhances the visual force of ornament, while ornament provides color with an attached structure. The two complete and support each other, together constructing a highly organized visual text.

5. Conclusions

The system of formal language in the Chu tiger-seat bird-stand drum is constructed through three dimensions. At the level of morphological composition, the drum body, tiger seat, and bird stand are organized in an ascending rhythm from heaviness to lightness, while the S-shaped curve and the linear vocabulary of hardness and softness endow the static form with motion and tension. At the level of craft and materials, the depth and shallowness of carving, the luster of the lacquer layers, the mortise-and-tenon connections, and the natural properties of wood and leather together constitute a craft-language system that both serves function and expresses independently. At the level of color and ornament, the color contrast of the black-and-red main scheme and the hierarchical organization of cloud-and-thunder patterns, feather patterns, and geometric motifs establish a refined balance between order and variation. These three dimensions are not independent of one another, but are interconnected through an internal aesthetic mechanism. In other words, this mechanism may be understood as follows: the organizational relationships among formal elements produce an overall

effect that exceeds the sum of the parts. The rhythm of line, the contrast of volume, the tension of color, the texture of materials, and the logic of structure - all these means of formal language point toward one goal: to make the object not merely a “thing,” but a formal existence with a sense of life. Understanding the compositional logic of the formal language of the Chu lacquered tiger-seat bird-stand drum therefore offers a path toward the aesthetic experience of ancient Chinese object-making art: how “form” speaks, and what “form” says. (Figure 1)



Figure 1. Chu lacquered tiger-seat bird-stand drum. (Dimensions: height 135.9 cm, width 134 cm, drum diameter 60 cm; collection of the Hubei Provincial Museum)

Source: Hubei Provincial Museum collection/exhibition.

Conflicts of Interest

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

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