



Analysis of the Artistic Characteristics of Ancient-style Images in Dongyang Flower Boards of the Qing Dynasty

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Abstract: Dongyang woodcarving antique flower boards are typical representatives of traditional craftsmanship in the region. Their images often feature a combination of artifacts such as tripods, bronzes, porcelain, and scholarly objects, along with themes of animals and plants. From a design perspective, this study employs iconographic analysis and art archaeology methods to systematically analyze the antique images on Dongyang flower boards from the Qing Dynasty, focusing on their compositional elements, decorative structures, and expression techniques. The research reveals the cultural connotation of the antique images, which cleverly integrate the spirit of epigraphy and textual criticism with folk auspicious meanings, providing theoretical support and practical reference for the modern transformation of traditional craftsmanship.

Keywords: Dongyang flower board, ancient images, decorative patterns

1. Introduction

As an artistic form with ancient artifacts as its decorative theme, the ancient image originated from the rise of epigraphy during the Song and Jin dynasties and gradually matured during the Yuan and Ming dynasties. By the Qing Dynasty, the ancient image had become one of the core decorative elements in the fields of wood carving, ceramics, weaving, and embroidery. The ancient images in the flower board components not only reflect the “ancient-worshipping” sentiment of literati and officials, but also integrate folk aesthetic tastes and auspicious meanings, forming a unique regional cultural atlas. Current academic research on ancient images in Dongyang flower boards mainly focuses on image tracing and style description, lacking a systematic analysis of its artistic characteristics, formal composition, and cultural mechanisms. This study intends to sort out the artistic qualities and design rules of ancient images in Qing Dynasty Dongyang flower boards, with the aim of providing a new academic perspective for the study of traditional decorative arts.

2. Overview of ancient images on Dongyang flower boards

The image of “Bo Gu” (a term referring to ancient artifacts and antiquities) is an important theme in Dongyang flower boards, commonly seen on cabinet door loops, doors, windows, and furnishing components. The term “Bo Gu” can be traced back to the Han Dynasty. Zhang Heng mentioned it in his “Ode to the Western Capital,” which depicts the prosperity of Chang’an and satirizes the extravagant social atmosphere: “I have a refined taste for ancient artifacts and learn from the old historians.” [1] During the Daguan period of the Northern Song Dynasty, Emperor Huizong ordered Wang Fu and others to compile the “Xuanhe Bo Gu Tu” (Illustrations of Ancient Artifacts), which recorded illustrations of artifacts for epigraphy research. During the Yuan and Ming dynasties, academic illustrations shifted to the theme of “Qing Gong” (a type of scholarly painting featuring simple and elegant objects) and “Bo Gu.” From the mid-to-late Ming Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty, the image of “Bo Gu” broke through its recording function and became an independent aesthetic art, popularizing into everyday life through folk New Year paintings and commercial printing.

3. The artistic characteristics of the ancient images on Dongyang flower boards

3.1 Shape and structure of the flower plate

Dongyang woodcarving originated in the Qin and Han dynasties, took shape in the Tang dynasty, and gradually matured in skill from the Song to the Ming dynasties. From the Qing dynasty to the Republic of China, it entered its heyday [2] As an important decorative element in Dongyang’s folk residences, flower boards boast a long historical heritage and diverse artistic expressions. The main types of flower boards include lattice fans, bird perches, and sill windows. They can be divided into rectangular, square, circular, and irregular shapes, with the horizontal rectangular shape being the most common. From a structural perspective, Dongyang flower boards are typically composed of four parts: the frame, the main pattern, the auxiliary patterns, and the bottom board, exhibiting a typical layout feature of “central image” or “surrounding border

decoration”, as shown in Figure 1.

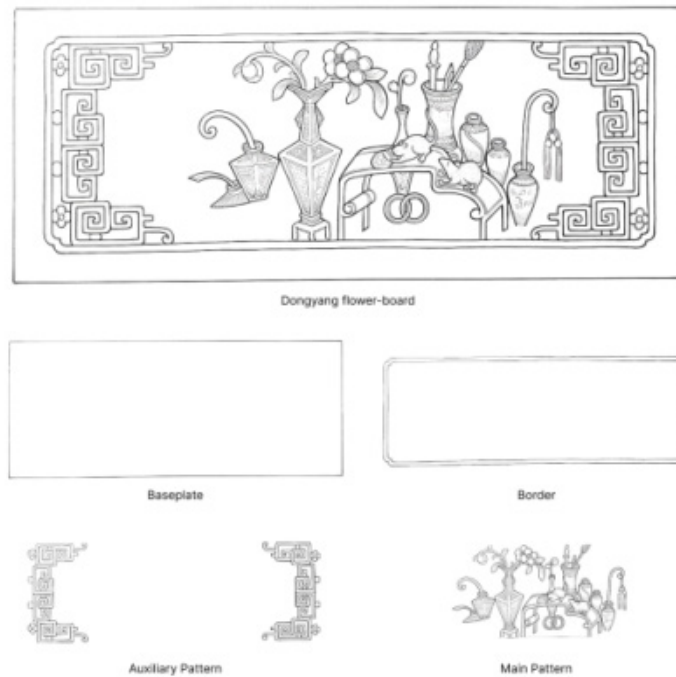


Figure 1. Structure of the flower plate (Source: self-drawn by the author)

3.2 Pogue theme

The antique flower boards in Dongyang flower boards of the Qing Dynasty can be classified into five categories: bronze vessels, flowers and trees, bonsai, furnishings, and auspicious themes. The antique bronze vessels category centers around ancient bronze ritual vessels and is the earliest antique theme, inheriting the tradition of epigraphy from the Song Dynasty. The antique flowers category is related to the literati’s fashion of using ancient vessels to arrange flowers, marking a shift towards a more domestic aesthetic in antique imagery. The antique bonsai category uses the natural philosophy of mountains and waters in pots to express itself. The antique furnishings category simulates the scene of scholarly offerings in the study, constructing an ideal space for the study. The auspicious antique category employs homophones, symbolism, and other techniques to closely combine imagery symbols with folk wishes. The formation and evolution of these five themes constitute a typical paradigm of the localization and domestication of antique imagery.



Figure 2. Ding Yi Bo Gu (Source: Self-photographed by the Author)

3.3 Composition method

The compositional forms of ancient images on Dongyang flower boards primarily encompass two types: still life and

continuity, each exhibiting notable differences in their artistic characteristics.

Still life compositions often adopt typical layouts such as a single object centered, dual objects symmetrical, and triple objects arranged in a patchwork manner. Their characteristic lies in the clear distinction between primary and secondary elements and a stable structure. The single object centered composition, as the most intuitive composition technique, is often used to highlight the cultural symbolic significance of a specific object; dual objects symmetrical composition creates a visually interactive effect through differences in height or orientation of the objects; while the triple objects arrangement creates a sense of depth through a clearly layered spatial layout.

Continuous composition typically adopts a three- or four-sided continuous form, widely used in the design of long strip-shaped or modular flower boards. Its core feature lies in arranging multiple objects with the same theme along the main axis according to specific rules, achieving a smooth visual rhythm through repetition and gradation. This composition technique not only effectively integrates image elements but also significantly enhances the decorative density and structural order of the work.

3.4 Auxiliary patterns

In the design expression of ancient images, auxiliary patterns serve the dual function of filling the composition and deepening the meaning. Especially in ancient images featuring tripods and bronzes, there is extensive use of bronze patterns such as cloud and thunder patterns, vortex patterns, and even more complex beast face patterns and phoenix and bird patterns[3] The artistic characteristics of auxiliary patterns are reflected in their smooth lines and rhythmic variations, which contrast with the steady characteristics presented by the main objects, thereby enhancing the overall artistic appeal of the picture.

3.5 Border design

As the external boundary of the flower panel structure, the frame not only serves as the basic function of delineating the image boundary and constructing the framework, but also profoundly influences the overall rhythm and visual rhythm of the picture. Its forms encompass various traditional styles such as ruyi cloud heads, banana leaf patterns, square patterns, and bead patterns, emphasizing the unity of decorative continuity and compositional symmetry, creating an aesthetic atmosphere of harmony between movement and stillness, and blending the virtual and the real.

4. The artistic characteristics of the ancient images on Dongyang flower boards

4.1 Flexible composition

The composition art of ancient images on Dongyang flower boards embodies the unique aesthetic qualities of “variation within orderliness and order within flexibility”. By establishing a rigorous and orderly overall structure through balanced layout and a stable visual focus, and flexibly adjusting the arrangement of object combinations according to the specific shape and decorative requirements of the flower boards, as shown in Figure 3. This composition concept, which adapts to the shape and structure, fully reflects the profound understanding and innovative practice of traditional craftsmen in formal aesthetic laws. By the end of the Qing Dynasty, some flower boards blindly pursued exquisite craftsmanship, revealing the drawbacks of being flashy and cumbersome, disordered layers, dull composition, and artificiality. Although there were many fine works in the patterns of late Qing flower boards, the overall development was relatively sluggish.[4]



Figure 3. Huabogu (Source: Self-photographed by the author)

4.2 Flexible lines

The art of Dongyang woodcarving demonstrates remarkable aesthetic value in its artistic treatment of lines. By adjusting the length, thickness, density, and curvature of the lines, craftsmen bring a dynamic rhythm to static objects. The outer contours often employ bold and vigorous curves to evoke a sense of gravity in the objects, while the body patterns utilize soft and delicate line-turning techniques to enhance the surface decoration effect. This expression method, which “reveals potential through lines and conveys meaning through lines,” imbues the works with vitality in stillness and demonstrates a spirit of freedom within norms, fully embodying the philosophical concept of “the interplay of movement and stillness” in traditional Eastern craft aesthetics.

4.3 Well-structured

Dongyang woodcarving primarily employs relief carving techniques, incorporating designs such as scattered perspective and aerial perspective in its composition. The layout is rich, dispersed yet not loose, and diverse yet not chaotic. [5]This artistic technique is primarily manifested on three levels: Firstly, in terms of craftsmanship, there is a distinction between primary and secondary elements. The main objects are embossed in high relief, while auxiliary elements are treated with low relief or line carving, creating a contrast between the front and back layers. Secondly, specific principles are followed in the composition and layout, such as “lower in front and higher at the back,” to establish an orderly spatial order. Lastly, the inclination angles of the carved transition surfaces are captured through changes in light and shadow, simulating natural projection effects. These techniques make significant contributions to the transformation of traditional flat decoration into three-dimensional space.

5. Conclusion

The artistic characteristics embodied in the ancient-inspired images on Dongyang flower boards from the Qing Dynasty are condensed in multiple dimensions, including composition of the objects, depiction of lines, presentation of space, and expression of meaning. These images not only reflect the “revival of ancient styles” concept of literati and officials, but also integrate folk aesthetics and auspicious meanings, forming an artistic form that appeals to both refined and popular tastes. As an important heritage of traditional arts and crafts, the artistic characteristics and design principles of ancient-inspired images are of great significance for contemporary design innovation. At the same time, research on ancient-inspired images also helps us better understand the development trajectory and cultural mechanisms of traditional Chinese decorative arts, providing historical support for the construction of a design theoretical system with Chinese characteristics.

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