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Research on teaching pathways for ancient architectural murals appreciation based on iconography methods

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Abstract: Ancient architectural murals represent precious cultural heritage and serve as an important resource for university courses in art appreciation and aesthetic education. Traditional appreciation teaching mostly remains at the perceptual level of visual forms. Students can perceive colors yet fail to comprehend connotations, making it difficult for them to deeply grasp the historical and cultural information behind murals. The iconological method emphasizes three progressive interpretive stages: pre-iconographic description, iconographic analysis, and iconological interpretation. Based on clarifying the connotation of the iconological method, this paper analyzes the prevalent problems in current appreciation teaching, such as superficiality, fragmentation and passivity. Starting from the three levels of description, analysis and interpretation, it attempts to construct an appreciation teaching pathway that proceeds from the surface to the essence and from form to meaning.

Keywords: iconological method; ancient architectural murals; appreciation teaching; aesthetic education; teaching approach

1 Introduction

The murals of ancient buildings embody the beliefs, customs, and aesthetics of traditional society, and are an important component of immovable cultural relics. However, in practical teaching, such murals attached to architectural structures are often reduced to decorative patterns that students find difficult to interpret their intrinsic meanings. Introducing iconological methods into the appreciation teaching of ancient architectural murals is precisely to provide students with a set of interpretation tools from formal perception to cultural interpretation, so that mural appreciation can move from sensory observation to rational exploration.

2 The inherent compatibility between iconological method and appreciation teaching of ancient architectural murals

2.1 Theoretical connotation and three-tier interpretation logic of the iconological method

Iconology is one of the core research methods in art history, and its ideological origin can be traced back to the systematic investigation of subject matters and symbolic meanings of artworks in the West. Panofsky divided the iconological method into three progressive levels. Pre-iconographic description focuses on lines, colors, compositions and motifs to answer what is depicted in the work. Iconographic analysis verifies the sources of themes, identities of figures,

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historical allusions and symbolic conventions to identify which story the painting tells. Iconological interpretation delves into the religious, social and ideological context of the work to explore its underlying meanings and cultural orientations. These three levels advance from the surface to the essence step by step. For teaching, the value of the iconological method lies not merely in a research theory, but more importantly in offering an imitable and transferable interpretive path. Students can conduct appreciation in the sequence of observing forms first, examining themes second and comprehending meanings last. This approach prevents students from feeling helpless when facing ancient murals or making only superficial compliments.

2.2 The uniqueness of ancient architectural murals as objects of appreciation teaching

Unlike independent artworks such as scroll paintings and oil paintings, ancient architectural murals always exist attached to architectural spaces including temples, halls and tombs. This feature determines their uniqueness in appreciation teaching. First, murals are not isolated images but organic components of the entire building. Their location and scale are closely coordinated with architectural functions. Buddhist murals serve religious worship spaces, while historical narrative paintings adorn hall and corridor walls. Separated from their host buildings, the pictorial meaning will be greatly diminished [1]. Second, most ancient architectural murals were collectively created by folk painters with obvious stylization of themes. The costumes, artifacts and ceremonial regalia of figures often imply chronological information and folk beliefs. Third, murals and buildings suffer from erosion over time together. Fading, damage and traces of repainting themselves are witnesses of historical accumulation. Appreciation requires examining both the paintings and the architecture.

2.3 Practical significance of the integration of the two in traditional mural appreciation classrooms

Introducing the iconological method into the appreciation teaching of ancient architectural murals has practical significance for transforming the current classroom practice. For a long time, when murals are covered in art appreciation courses, teachers tend to deliver conclusive interpretations directly. Students passively receive judgments such as "this painting is beautiful" or "this is the Tang Dynasty style" without understanding the basis for these assertions. The adoption of the iconological method restores conclusions back to an interpretive process: teachers are no longer the sole transmitters of meanings, but guide students to observe, raise questions, conduct research and engage in discussions following established procedures. In this way, students obtain operable approaches when encountering unfamiliar murals, transforming from passive viewers into active interpreters. Meanwhile, the three-tier progressive framework helps correct two biases: one merely dwells on formal aesthetic perceptions and falls into superficiality; the other piles up historical knowledge and leads to dull exposition. The iconological method builds a bridge between form and meaning, enabling mural appreciation to retain both aesthetic appeal and intellectual depth. It ultimately aims at the simultaneous improvement of students' cultural comprehension and aesthetic judgment.

3 Practical dilemmas in current appreciation teaching of ancient architectural murals

3.1 Appreciation remains at the visual surface with insufficient excavation of iconographic information

The most prominent problem in current classrooms for the appreciation teaching of ancient architectural murals is that instruction generally stays at the visual surface. Students mostly observe mottled color blocks and familiar Buddhist and Taoist figures yet cannot clarify the identities of the characters, the origins of narratives, and the symbolic meanings. Multiple factors contribute to this issue. On the one hand, many teachers lack a systematic understanding of mural theme systems. Their explanations tend to make general remarks from the perspective of formal aesthetics such as lines, colors and composition. When confronted with image-intensive contents including figure groups, sutra transformation paintings and water-land ritual iconographic schemas, they can only vaguely describe them as magnificent scenes and vivid

expressions [2]. On the other hand, textbooks and courseware mostly use high-definition partial images instead of full-wall murals. Students only view cropped illustrations and fail to grasp the holistic relationship between murals and architectural wall surfaces. Consequently, students memorize several stereotyped comments for appreciation but have not truly learned how to interpret paintings. When seeing deities holding ritual implements, they cannot identify their positions within the Buddhist and Taoist pantheons; when viewing scenes of processions, banquets, farming and weaving, they do not realize that these scenes depict the social life of a certain locality.

3.2 Disconnection between teaching content and architectural spatial context, and fragmented interpretation

The second dilemma is that teaching content is often separated from the architectural spatial context, resulting in fragmented interpretation. From the very beginning of their creation, murals are integrated with halls, Buddhist niches, caisson ceilings and fan-shaped partition walls. Their viewing sequence, visual centers and narrative rhythm are predetermined by the architectural space. Nevertheless, in actual classroom teaching, teachers frequently project only one or two cropped mural photographs and introduce them individually by explaining the content and techniques of each picture. Students see only individual fragments rather than the whole picture. They neither know where the murals are located in the building nor understand why they were placed there. Such decontextualized lectures turn many details of murals that could naturally be explained by architectural space into knowledge points for rote memorization. Questions such as why religious murals are arranged in layers along the wall, why inscriptions are placed in specific positions, and why donor portraits are squeezed into corners can be easily understood when considered within the whole building, yet become a learning burden when isolated [3]. A more profound problem is that without spatial context, mural appreciation becomes indistinguishable from general painting appreciation courses. The essential characteristic that ancient architectural murals exist as attachments to buildings is obscured. Students cannot experience the ritual spaces in which ancient people viewed these images, and thus struggle to comprehend the educational, blessing-seeking and decorative functions undertaken by murals.

3.3 Lack of students' subjectivity and difficulty in the transfer of iconography-based interpretive methods

The third dilemma is that students remain in a state of passive reception for a long time, and interpretive methods can hardly be transferred to new artworks. Traditional mural appreciation courses mostly adopt a one-way mode in which teachers lecture and students listen. Teachers prepare materials on a specific wall in advance and introduce its age, creators, themes and artistic characteristics following the materials in class. Students are busy taking notes but rarely get opportunities to independently interpret an unfamiliar mural. Such teacher-conclusion-centered teaching seems efficient, yet it actually reduces appreciation to listening to lectures. What students memorize is specific knowledge about a certain mural rather than a reusable set of interpretive methods. After the course ends, when confronted with murals in another ancient building, students still do not know where to start observation, how to raise questions or conduct verification, and transfer competence cannot be developed. The reason lies in the lack of sessions for students to explore and make trial-and-error attempts in teaching. If students are not guided to first describe the images on their own, then discuss and identify motifs, and finally attempt to interpret meanings combined with historical materials, their iconological interpretation ability cannot be cultivated through practice.

4 Construction of appreciation teaching path for ancient architectural murals guided by the iconological method

4.1 Pre-iconographic description level: guiding students to first observe visual forms

The first step in constructing the teaching path is to implement training in pre-iconographic description and guide students to learn to recognize the formal language of images first. Although this step seems fundamental, it is an

indispensable starting point for appreciation. When presenting mural images, teachers should not rush to explain narrative content. Instead, they may first lead students to simplify their thinking: set aside historical knowledge temporarily and describe what they see merely as ordinary viewers[4]. The practice can be carried out in several aspects. First, observe the overall layout: whether deities are placed in the center or on both sides, how narrative scenes unfold along the wall, and where the sightline is directed. Second, examine lines and forms: the density of figures, styles of garment draperies, and the plumpness or slenderness of images. Third, inspect colors and conservation conditions: which parts are well-preserved, which have faded or darkened, and where traces of repainting lie. To put this training into practice, teachers can design image-description activities. Students are provided with an unannotated partial mural image and required to write an objective description in their own words, without using stereotyped evaluative phrases such as "Tang Dynasty style" or "strong religious atmosphere". Through repeated description exercises, students will realize that what they usually call "having seen" is actually just a casual glance, and they have noticed very few genuine details.

4.2 Iconographic analysis level: examining themes and symbols combined with architectural context

After students are able to describe images in detail, the teaching path proceeds to the second stage —iconographic analysis, namely examining themes and symbols in combination with the architectural context. Its core is to guide students to match motifs captured in the descriptive stage, such as figures, artifacts, animals and architectural styles, with established iconographic schemas, so as to clarify who the figure is, what action is being performed, and which story the scene originates from. Teachers may use identifying features including inscriptions, hand gestures, ritual implements, mounts and attributes to help students confirm the identities of divine figures one by one: the guardian king holding a sword, the celestial musician embracing a pipa, and the ox-headed and horse-faced figures originating from hell transformation paintings. For narrative murals, the beginning, development, climax and ending of the story can be restored following the viewing sequence. Most importantly, murals must be situated within their original architectural space at this stage. Teachers can use panoramic views, sectional drawings and location sketches of ancient buildings to help students understand whether a mural is situated on the eastern or western wall of the hall, and whether it faces worshippers or passing visitors. In this way, students can comprehend why one wall features sutra transformation paintings while another displays water-land paintings [5]. Group inquiry activities can be organized in class. Each group is assigned one wall section to infer the thematic intention in light of the building's function and then cross-verify their findings with established conclusions. Accordingly, students no longer memorize image symbols as isolated knowledge points by rote. Instead, they learn to understand the logic of thematic arrangement within the overall architecture, and fragmented interpretations can be reconnected into an organically integrated whole.

4.3 Iconological interpretation level: understanding spiritual connotations by returning to historical and cultural context

The third segment of the teaching path is iconological interpretation. On the basis of the previous two levels, students are guided to return to the historical and cultural context and understand the spiritual connotations conveyed by murals. This level represents the sublimation of appreciation teaching: students should not only identify who is depicted and how the images are painted, but also explore why ancient people painted such contents in this building and what beliefs, prayers and values of the contemporary society are embodied in the images. Teachers may guide students to conduct discussions by combining the construction age of the building, local folk customs and the identities of patrons. For instance, what views on life, death, good and evil are reflected by the pantheon in temple murals; what social relations are revealed when donor portraits place sponsors within sacred spaces; and what educational functions are undertaken when historical narrative murals appear on the walls of ancestral halls or guildhalls. At this stage, teachers should encourage students to develop

their own interpretations and remind them that any interpretation must be grounded on solid evidence from description and analysis rather than unrestrained speculation. To assess learning outcomes, open-ended assignments can be arranged: students are required to select murals in a nearby ancient building and write a short appreciation paper following the complete path of description, analysis and interpretation, so as to transfer classroom methods to new research objects.

5 Conclusion

Ancient architectural murals are visual documents solidified within architectural spaces. Their appreciative value lies not only in lines and colors but also in the layered historical and cultural information behind the images. Introducing the iconological method into appreciation teaching builds a progressive path for students to observe forms, examine themes and interpret meanings, which helps address the superficial, fragmented and passive problems existing in current classrooms. Admittedly, the iconological method needs to be integrated with field investigations, digital resources, copying practices and other approaches, so that students can truly enter the spiritual world constructed by murals. Only in this way can the precious heritage of ancient architectural murals achieve living inheritance in university classrooms, and students' aesthetic literacy and cultural understanding can develop gradually in the process of reading images, murals and history.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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