

A Study on Theme Category and Artistic Expression of Lacquer Painting in Ancient China

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Abstract:

The expression form of lacquer painting art in ancient China featured unique distinction in each past dynasty. The study will carry on research on the theme category and artistic expression of lacquer painting in ancient China by adopting historical approach and document analysis method. As shown by the research, the lacquer painting in ancient China was strongly interlinked to value orientation and aesthetical trend of the society at that time, as well as the users' living custom. The research and category on the expressive themes could effectively enhance the academic circle's comprehension on the lacquer painting in ancient China; and the analysis on the artistic expression of ancient lacquer painting could further present the indispensable role of this artistic form in the history of Chinese painting.

Keywords:

Lacquer Painting in Ancient China, Theme Category, Artistic Expression

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Chinese lacquer culture features thousands of years' historical accumulation. The vermilion lacquer wooden bowl discovered in Hemudu Site in Yuyao, Zhejiang Province just functioned as the historical testimony in lacquering technological development [1] and had opened the development process of China's lacquer art, though have no definite conclusion for the application. As said in Ten Faults · Han Feizi, "Emperor Yao abdicated the crown to Emperor Shun; tableware used in the imperial palace during that period was made of lumbered wood via cutting, sawing and finishing with lacquering and inking on the surface" [2]. It can be inferred that lacquerware was used as a kind of living supplies during ancient times and the lacquered bare woods were no longer rare to see.

The lacquer painting during the Spring and Autumn period featured relatively mature design. According to current archaeological excavation, the earliest lacquer

graphic works with clear pattern could only be traced back to the Western Zhou Dynasty and were normally used as sacrificial vessels or daily utensils. As recorded in *Appreciation of Ancient Chinese Lacquerware*, “depictive and decorative technology of lacquerware was age-old and lacquer was used for color matching or replaced by oil for pigment modulation early in the Pre-Qin Period” [3]. The natural lacquer was the easiest element to be modulated into black and mineral substances such as vermilion were used for color modulation with gold foil and abalone shell embellished inside and presented the enriched artistic effect of lacquer painting.

With the vigorous development of modern lacquer painting art, fruitful achievements are obtained focus on the discussion in lacquer art in ancient China, commonly in researches on materials, device types, time and creation of lacquer art. With respect to the artistic expression in ancient lacquer painting, mostly of the scholars in theoretical category are not familiar with the complication of the lacquer art production and the may evade important issues during research process as a result; while the lacquer art experts in practical category, though better understanding in the artistic performance of the lacquer painting pattern, mostly taking personal practical creation as the main point as the research focus rather than greater analysis on the lacquer painting art from the theoretical viewpoint. Therefore, achievements taking the theme and expression of lacquer painting as the purpose of research are very rear, or only with simple introduction of the depicted objects but no digging of the presented regularity in some conclusion of lacquer painting themes. As to fill the vacancy of the research field, this study will focus on analysis and research on the theme category and artistic expression of lacquer painting in ancient China.

1.2. Research Objectives

The lacquer art in China features long history and wide range of use for lacquerware. There're lots of factors that influencing the theme and expression of lacquer painting. In addition to those inheritance of traditional decorative styles, a great many factors are originating from users' status and affects of life style. The study takes theme category and artistic expression of lacquer painting in ancient China as the breakthrough, aims to probe into the similarities and differences of the development of lacquer painting art in various dynasties under the different social environment and public aesthetic.

The study will adopt historical approach and document analysis method to carry out objective analysis on the differences in age, gender, career, interest, geographical feature, economic capability and educational status in different sectors of the society via referring to all kinds of documentary sources, images of calligraphy and paintings and folk novels [4] to elaborate cultural accomplishment, aesthetic judgment, hobbies and interests of different social classes in various dynasties.

The categorization of creative themes of lacquer painting helps to pry into ancient people's faith and pursuit in different stages; the assistance of artistic expression effects of lacquer painting could lead to further analysis of the difference among the aesthetic conceptions in various dynasties in China. What's more, the study analyze the ancient lacquer painting art in a brand new perspective and available to present more comprehensive and deeper understanding of the value of ancient lacquer art remains and the great benefits therein towards the contemporary lacquer art education for the scholars currently engaged in lacquer painting creation or lacquer culture research.

2. Literature Review

Based on the existing academic works, researches on lacquer art in ancient China were mainly focused on the discussion in the tridimensional modeling or skill practice, but not so many in the aspect of the fantastic lacquer painting art expressed by attaching on some two-dimensional lacquerware (such as lacquer coffin, lacquer screen, lacquer casket, lacquer plate ...). The First Exploration on Lacquer Painting in Tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng [5] and Colored Painting on Guyuan Lacquer Coffin [6] published in 1980s in Art Research were very few of the studies focusing on lacquer painting art, and after that, the lacquer art field turned into nearly 20 years' settling period. Until the 21st century, along with the rising of China's contemporary lacquer painting, achievements of lacquer painting in ancient China were successively emerging in academic circle with the research contents of theme category and artistic expression mainly focusing on the lacquer painting before and after Han Dynasty.

2.1. Discussion on Theme Category of Lacquer Painting in Ancient China

The prevailing lacquer painting images before and after Han Dynasty were mainly divided into two major types, realistic thematic content and decorative symmetrical pattern [7]. The creation materials of realistic thematic content were derived from daily custom and life, just as said by Gao Zhanying, "emergence of the artistic form as genre painting reflects the public's great passion towards the real life. Main content composition of genre painting are figures, animals, plants and riding facilities, all of which were the author's direct observation of the real life, rather than free depiction upon imagine" [8]. Large-scale lacquer painting remains were mostly attached on lacquer screens, where the depicted ancient life style functioned as the most powerful historical testimony [9]. Culture of Han Dynasty was heavily influenced by the one of Chu State [10] with great romantic themes. As mentioned by Lan Tian in Research on Artistic Characteristics of Lacquer Painting of Chu State, "lacquerware paintings of Chu State were of strong spiritual function purpose and this was closely bound up with the human survival there" [11]. The decorative symmetrical pattern absorbed the romantic elements and achieved gradual development. Those were commonly in unearthed burial objects from tombs in Han Dynasty for soul assumption for the departed. This kind of lacquer painting adopted a large number of clouding patterns symbolizing good luck and happiness and featured elegance and grace in the overall style with decorative modeling of various mythical creatures [12].

2.2. Discussion on Artistic Expression of Lacquer Painting in Ancient China

The research on the artistic expression of lacquer painting by the academic circle are mainly conducted in three aspects, composition, modeling and color. The composition of lacquer painting is mainly attached on the lacquerware's shape, that is, the more plane space for image expression, the richer sense of depth for the composition of lacquer painting art. The common long-roll composition in China's early painting is also applied in round lacquer box painting, which featured earlier time of emergence and unique composition layout [13]. Large-scale lacquer paintings were mainly attached on lacquer screens with the depicted realistic character modeling featuring distinct posture, great lifelikeness and carefree look [14]. The abstract decorative patterns were mainly pure line sketch with curves and straights in exquisite workmanship [15]. The natural color of natural lacquer is black. The comparison of black and red was mostly used in ancient lacquer painting. As the increase of the materials in use, such as gold from foil, cyan from raden and white

from eggshell, lacquer painting was developed to be in rich color. Just as Chen Naihui mentioned, “from the view of lacquerware remains unearthed in Mawangdui Han Tombs, they are in great production, large scale, wide application, far propagation, as well as ‘beautiful color’, ‘bright appearance’ and ‘exquisite workmanship’, deeply touched people’s hearts” [16].

3. Research and Analysis

3.1. Theme Category of Lacquer Painting in Ancient China

As mentioned in A brief history of Chinese Art, “episodic lacquer the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period” [17]. The lacquer painting art at that time were commonly attached on coffins or living supplies with three main theme forms: (1) unmixed pattern design expression with strong decorativeness; (2) fairy stories of sacrifice and being deity with rich religious and sacrifice significance; (3) mundane scenes of daily life with certain trend of genre painting [18].

Throughout the lacquer painting art of ancient China since the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, the above-mentioned three theme types presented diverse emphasis under different influence of historical conditions along with the thousands of years’ development of Chinese lacquer culture. The first mentioned of three maintained the aesthetic orientation towards ancient painted pottery and bronze of Shang and Zhou Dynasties, presenting the preference in totem type pattern, where the decorative forms were conforming to the aesthetic pursuit of arts and crafts in successive reigns and dynasties; the middle mentioned one reflected the social spiritual consciousness of that time with common ideological significance with “Silk Painting of Woman, Dragon & Phoenix”, the earliest existing silk painting works in China. Due to the cultural infiltration of Buddhist art during the Northern and Southern Dynasties, the sacrifice-type artistic works premised in funeral were unreachable with the grandiose expression as flamboyant dragon and phoenix in Qin and Han Dynasties, but still activated another window to the thought that expressing people’s faith; the last-mentioned one initiated a brand new people-oriented painting theme, which was closely linked with diverse aesthetic trends.

The creative themes and techniques of lacquer painting had been followed and used by descendants since Han Dynasty. Whether the ‘abstract’ emotion expression, the ‘faith’ presentation, or the ‘concrete’ realistic reflection, the three major lacquer painting themes dominated in decoration, faith and life for long time are marching in a common historical process of Chinese painting, along with the development of Chinese lacquer culture.

3.1.1. Abstract Theme of Lacquer Painting in Ancient China

Chinese lacquer culture can be traced back to 7,000 years ago. The ancient lacquerware has two main functions, life purpose and sacrificial burial [19]. With the development of Chinese painting art, our ancestors have created geometric decorative patterns full of tension and generality over a long period of time. The creative inspiration of early humans originated from the things they saw with their own eyes, including the flowers, plants, trees, birds, animals, the sun, moon and stars, as well as the activities of humans in nature, which were all objects of depiction. Modern astronomical phenomena, such as torrential rain, thunder and lightning and diurnal variation, would often bring fears to the ancient humans. With a sense of awe, they would summarize the objects they worshiped in their hearts and form a large number

of symbolic patterns, which then were painted on utensils to pray for safety. Although the descriptive ability of the ancestors can not be compared with that of the later generations, there are still many remains of painting full of childish interest.

As described in *The Path of Beauty*, that "they (referring to some geometric patterns) are gradually abstracted and symbolized from the realism of animal images. From reproduction (simulation) to representation (abstraction) and realism to symbolization, this is a process of accumulation from content to form, which is also the original formation process of beauty as 'a meaningful form'" [20]. From this point of view, we can say that the birth of this pattern-rich decorative pattern is not limited to a certain artistic form (Figure 1), but originated from various instinctive needs of human beings.



Figure 1. Lacquer painting of decorative pattern.

Upon a long time of experience accumulation, ancient people gradually showed their admiration and love for some special elements, such as the sun, clouds, colorful birds, fish (Figure 2) and so on. They used the shape characteristics of these elements to create and integrate, and gradually summed up a set of patterns with strong decorative aesthetic feeling, such as plant pattern, animal pattern and mythical creature pattern, which were commonly used to decorate daily lacquer ware in Qin and Han Dynasties, including lacquer caskets, lacquer bowls, lacquer ear cups and lacquer tables. More than that, the ancestors would also decompose and reconstruct many elements, and take their own essences to form various patterns beyond reality, among which the images of dragon and phoenix were the most representative.

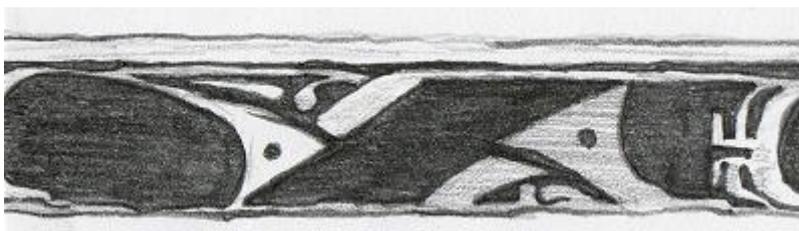


Figure 2. Lacquer painting of fish pattern.

3.1.2. Faith Theme of Lacquer Painting in Ancient China

From the ancient totemism, witchcraft ritual sacrifice, to mythical creatures symbols during the Western Han period, religious worship after the Northern and Southern Dynasties and until today, the spirit of faith displayed artistically still comfort the people, ease the hearts hurt by natural and man-made disasters in various degree and also bring endless hope to those nobility that wishing to become immortal upon dragon and phoenix. "As shown in the objects unearthed, lacquer-painted images are commonly drawn on funeral utensils" [21]. During the process of

continuous imagination and creation, certain images with deities protection are coming into being thereupon. Moreover, based on the demand of eulogized spread, some relevant story lines are also developed and gradually evolved into the myths, legends and religious stories available today with unique romantic mood.

Depictions in faith theme are normally with certain contents, thus to explicitly deliver the deep significance of worship, admiration and pray. Just as mentioned in Brief history of Chinese Fine Arts, episodic lacquer painting works were developed during the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period...two sides of the colored-lacquer painted inner coffin of Marquis Yi of Zeng depicted the exorcising drawing of Fangxiangshi led mythical creatures with dagger-axe holding in the hand for pestilence elimination, as well as numerous gods and spirits [22]. The red background color-painted lacquer coffin in Mawangdui Han Tombs was described as follows in the Essence of Chinese Lacquerware, “brighter colors such as green, white and brown are adopted to draw the patterns like two dragons passing through the wall, battle between the dragon and the tiger, celestial being, celestial mountain, celestial deer, rosefinch and cloud pattern to present the theme of becoming immortal auspiciously” [23].

Under the direct influence of funeral custom in Han Dynasty, abundant themes of lacquer painting in ancient china presented a religious theology thought of the departed saints wishing to join the paradise [24]. Also auspicious sign, mythical creatures and fairy stories became commonly seen (Figure 3, Figure 4). Due to the strong ceramic development in Tang Dynasty, simple but elegant style in Song Dynasty and focus on carved lacquerware technology in Yuan dynasty of Mongolia, very few lacquer painting remains of these three dynasties was discovered and only got gradually inherited until Ming and Qing Dynasties. The faith theme could also be discovered on the funeral utensils with more mature modeling and shape, such as the colored-painted lacquer coffin unearthed from the family's tomb of Zhu Bingju, the general of Ming Dynasty in Xi'an, “a statue of Buddha was painted in the middle of the head-end baffle of the wooden coffin, wavy shape hair with topknot, round back light behind the head, both eyes slightly closed, moustachio on the upper lip and under the jaw, in cassock and putting palms together devoutly, sitting on the lotus seat in lotus posture” [25].

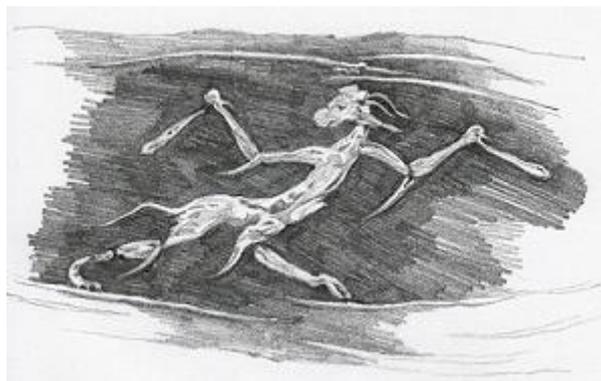


Figure 3. Lacquer painting of mythical animal.

No matter the fairy gods or propitious animals in early times, or the depiction of God and Buddha shape in Buddhism and Taoism, the faith theme had been in a certain status during the long improvement history of lacquer painting in ancient china and deeply impacted the development of Chinese Art.

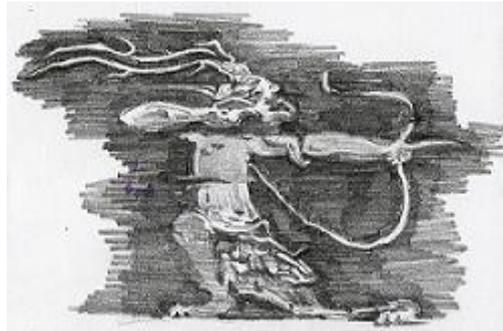


Figure 4. Lacquer painting of mythical creature.

3.1.3. Concrete Theme of Lacquer Painting in Ancient China

Tangible people and objects in life were taken as things-in-picture in ancient China. The concrete expression represents the morphological features and essence of objective things via a simulation [26], thus to achieve the state of “Coming from Life, Superior to Life”. This is only just the pursuit of lacquer painting art, but also functions as the essence of the development of entire Chinese painting (Figure 5). In author's opinion, among the artistic category created by human being, the so-called depiction of life is the realistic human-associated things, objects and sceneries; and the ‘borrowing lyrics’ is just borrowing the ‘objects’ in our life to express people’s feeling of ‘lyrics’ at that time. The depictions of life themes in Chinese lacquer painting art include three major types, people & people, people & things, and things & things.



Figure 5. Lacquer painting of the daily life.

Theme of ‘People & People’ is common in the depiction of some representative figures, such as “Lacquer Box Figure of Dutiful Sons” in the Eastern Han Dynasty and “Lacquer Screen Figure of Colored Character Story” were mostly depict on lacquer screen in large scale. According to the social styles during Han and Jin Dynasties, screen was a significant decoration for house building and strongly interlinked with people’s lifestyle. Therefore, great importance was attached on “morality is based upon the utensil---painting of famous women and ancient sages modeling with glorious deeds and regarding as an example for highlighting the added value of Confucian culture” [27].

Theme of ‘People & Things’ presents relatively richer relationship and mostly describes the scenes of people’s social life (Figure 6). Some of these works are concluded as genre paintings by descendants, such as the Graphic Carriage Horse and Person Going and Walking in the Warring States Period, Graphic Colored Painting Conviviality on Lacquer Plate in the Eastern Jin Dynasty, and so on. As mentioned by Gao Zhanying, “As the decoration on funerary objects, genre paintings also present the deceased’s attachment to the real life. This is in stark contrast with the weird fancy

world depicted on the coffin burger or streamer at that time, and thus makes the former of more human kindness and secularization” [28].

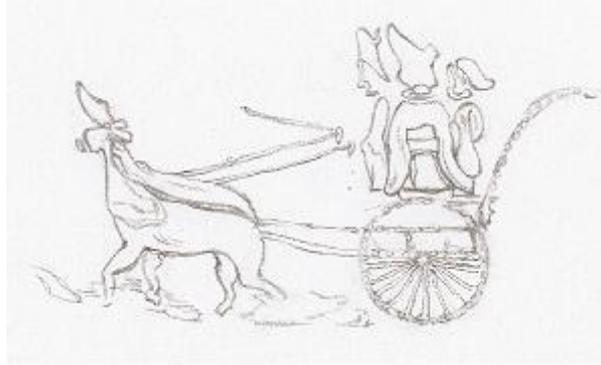


Figure 6. Lacquer painting of the true life.

The design with depiction of ‘Things & Things’ can be divided into landscape, flower & plants, as well as insects, fish birds & animals in terms of content. Traditionally, those with insects, fish birds & animals are normally featuring lucky implied meaning and commonly seen after Song Dynasty. Due to the preference of inlay and lacquer engraving technology, pure lacquer painting was less common in Yuan Dynasty. Along with the demand of social prosperity and architectural structure in both Ming and Qing Dynasties, as well as scholars’ pursuit of elegance and freedom, lacquer art supplies and screen furniture with depiction of natural objects such as landscape, flowers and plants were favored among the public.

3.2. Artistic Expression of Lacquer Painting in Ancient China

The artistic expression of lacquer painting of ancient China is closely related to the characteristics of materials and social aesthetic habits. Chinese traditional lacquer materials are extracted from natural lacquer tree saps, with many unique properties, such as thick texture, hard paint film, thick color, waterproof and insect repellent, which are very suitable for making furniture, tableware, coffins and burial objects [29]. However, due to the long time to dry, the production is not high and the cost is expensive. In addition, the materials are easy to cause allergy to the human skin, and the sticky texture is difficult to control. Unlike the other common painting materials, ordinary workers have to undergo many years of professional training before they can become real lacquer art craftsmen.

Due to the difficulty of creation and limitation of materials generated from the characteristics of lacquer art, the artistic characteristics of lacquer painting of ancient China have strong uniqueness and stable development trend. "Pitch-dark" is the purest color of Chinese lacquer materials, "vermilion red" has always been a symbol of good luck in China, and together, "black" and "red" have laid an important tone of Chinese traditional lacquer aesthetics [30].

In ancient times, there were not many kinds of colors used in lacquer paintings. There were few lacquer paintings inlaid with materials such as gold foil, eggshell and mother-of-pearl inlay in early stages. Therefore, the lacquer art from Pre-Qin Dynasty to Han Dynasty was mainly based on the contrast of "black" and "red". In order to balance the images, in addition to showing the contrast of large color blocks, a large number of fine lines and patterns were adopted and organized to present the specific shapes of the contents and create the richness of the images.

Moreover, the lacquer paintings of ancient China were basically attached on the practical utensils and the compositions must be conforming to the shapes of lacquerware, therefore there were mostly symmetrical compositions of high decoration and seldom the complete scroll layout. By the Ming and Qing Dynasties, there were more and more decorations and screen emerged, which could almost be regarded as independent lacquer paintings, and thus these plot patterns became more and more diversified.

3.2.1. Color Expression of Lacquer Painting in Ancient China

As mentioned by Xiao Shimeng in “Research on the Color of Lacquerware in the Pre-Qin Period”, “the color usage in lacquerware had been finalized in the Pre-Qin Period with color features dominated in black and red” [31]. In addition, the early lacquer painting in China, was not only using red and black, but also added with colors such as white, yellow and cyan [32]. Due to the particularity of Chinese lacquer material, black lacquer is the one added with powdered carbon and red lacquer is added with vermilion, both of which are stable in color and not liable to change color under the environment temperature or humidity. While, other lacquer painting colors are unstable, for instance, Chinese lacquer is naturally brown and hard to modulate pure white, which is also hard for some cool colors to reach [33]. As far back as Pre-Qin Period, the lacquer art techniques were basically remaining in the stage of lacquer coating and depicting with rare adding inlay materials, and objectively settling the effect of red-black matching. After the Song and Yuan Dynasties, the inlay technology obtained progress, successively combined materials such as gold foil, raden and eggsheel into the lacquer painting creation to form bright yellow, bluish green and white, and lacquer painting works with rich colors were gradually emerged.

When looking back into the colors of lacquerware in early China, we could also see the concept of Chinese traditional colors. In slave societies with rigid stratification, black is the symbol of political power and religious authority [34]. As is called “Black Heaven & Yellow Earth”, black is the color of the sky, featuring quite high status; while red is the color of blood and that is deriving from the worship to the sun, the fire in the nature, as well as the recognition of human’s own righteous blood [35]. In the very beginning of the original perception, red was of the honorable significance of life and hope [36]. Apart from the national symbolic signs formed by color itself, according to Xiao Shimeng’s view as, “black and red feature the strongest irritation and the most conspicuous effect”, “red flower on black background or black flower on red background, this is the most intensive expanded visual effect contrasting to the most intensive contracted visual effect, or otherwise, expand or contract the visual effect to present stronger visual stimulation than solid colors” [37]. Lacquerware in ancient times were mostly used as sacrifice vessels with alternation of solemn black lacquer and fresh red lacquer, presenting the scene as like raging flames for gods worship in the night sky and better display of sacrifice vessels’ magic power and redoubling human’s the admiration to the god.

With China’s entry to feudal society, red was all the more propitious color symbolizing the power. Taking the Tang Dynasty as the example, the red-lacquered doors symbolized the governing class at that time. If the front door of the mansion was painted with red lacquer, that functioned as identifying the social identity of the nobility [38]. Throughout the portraits of emperors of Tang and Song Dynasties, red was mainly the dominant tone of their garments. Until the period of Ming and Qing Dynasty, “yellow is the representative color of palace and nobility, and is in obvious

expression in lacquer art works. The widespread application of decoration with liquid gold in furniture was another key factor for the extensive use of yellow color in the lacquer art works during Ming Dynasty” [39]. The trend of luxury was prevalent in the prosperous periods both in Ming and Qing Dynasties. The technique of decoration with liquid gold or inlay of gold foil obtained greatly rising proportion in the lacquer painting creation during that period. Red, black and yellow became the significant colors for the lacquerware at that time, matching with the cyan of raden and white of eggshell, which performed as the response of traditional handicraft to the palace aesthetic sentiment.

3.2.2. Linearity Art of Lacquer Painting in Ancient China

As outlined above, based on the material characteristics and aesthetic trend, consistently-used colors for lacquerware technology features high pureness and strong comparability. It was difficult to manage the transition of grey tone of the picture depending on color flat painting. While the depiction with linearity could not only enrich the pattern and strengthen the layering, but also enhance the delicacy of the lacquerware with flexible line modeling and clearer expression of the scene and features of the depicted objects. The linearity performance of the lacquer art in early China was mainly in lacquer piling, depicting and lacquer engraving.

Lacquer piling: draw the pattern outline with lacquer color, after lacquer materials being in a certain hardness upon drying off, pile several layers repeatedly to highlight the modeling line and enhance the tridimensional impression. Delicate tile ash is blended into the lacquer paints afterwards and stack several layers in the same way. This approach is not liable to be damaged and features higher hardness and abrasion resistance. The most representative work for this mode of expression should be the pattern on lacquer coffin unearthed from Mawangdui Han Tombs. As mentioned by Wu Liyin, “the main technique of expression for colored painting on lacquer coffin is the application of lines, which raises itself on the picture via piling. The entire frame presented skilled and free drawing technique, smooth and elegant lines, rhythmical and metrical musicality, ceaseless and vigorous sense of movement, as well as intense vitality” [40]. Of the the two lacquer coffins unearthed from Mawangdui Han Tombs, the mythical creatures and fairies on the black-background colored-painting lacquer coffin were in various shapes with coordinating adoption of curves and straight lines, as well as the embossed modeling pattern via lacquer piling; the picture frame of the red-background colored-painting lacquer coffin was particular about the aesthetic sense of the decorative style and adopted a wide range of geometric modeling to incisively and vividly functioned the relation among points, lines and plane [41].

Depicting: on account of the viscosity of lacquer materials, the depiction with pure lacquer lines is in tough technical difficulty and the final effect would be mainly in plane, instead of the tridimensional spatial effect. Therefore, the tension of lines in the lacquer-painting modeling itself if of great importance. As Lu Jie stated in “On Lacquer Painting Technology of Lacquer Ware in Han Dynasty”, “the application of lines in colored-painting on lacquerware of Han Dynasty had been of great changes and richness, and peaked in colored-painting process. After Han Dynasty, a mass of colored-painting lacquerware were developing towards lines and seemly less focus on the color. This type of paintings completely sketched by lines was one of the features for the lacquerware in Han Dynasty” [42]. The lacquerware in Han Dynasty performed outstanding in lacquer-painting art in ancient China. Differing with cautious and majestic shape during Zhou till Qin period, the romantic themes of

flamboyant dragon and phoenix on lacquerware in Han Dynasty remained a large number of alive artistic images with rich curve of beauty and excellent tensile strength [43].

Lacquer engraving: apart from lacquer piling and depicting, repeated lacquering of multi-layer colored paint was also available on the vessel surface in ancient China. When the lacquer layers achieved a certain thickness, engraved pattern lines with sharp awl or cutter to present sunken tridimensional effect, thus called “lacquer engraving”. Gold powders are sometimes filled in sunken position to present a strong contrast effect of black background with gold lines, also known as ‘gold inlaying’ or ‘gold immersion’, which is actually also a part of lacquer engraving. This skill of lacquer art is quite suitable for the creation of linear style. The solemn and deterrent artistic style during Zhou till Qin period had been obviously faded since the Han Dynasty, which was more likely to depict the free vitality of life. For instance, the ‘Cone Painted Hunting Pattern Lacquer Casket’ unearthed from Tomb Three at Mawangdui, Changsha, featured lively modeling formed by delicate and smooth lines with alternative concave-convex matching, profound painting performance, as well as the coexistence of curve of beauty and sense of power [44]. Lacquer engraving remained a significant status in the lacquer painting art during Ming and Qing Dynasties. Such as the ‘cloud carving’ lacquerware commonly used in palace, that was the line combination in red-black interlacement and functioned as embodiment of inheritance and development of the traditional lacquer engraving.

3.2.3. Composition Layout of Lacquer Painting in Ancient China

Xiehe in the Southern Qi Dynasty put forward the “Six Creating Methods of Art”, including ‘management position’, which referred to the painting composition with ‘management’ indicating the planning and ‘position’ indicating the geographical position where people or objects were located [45]. More factors are required to be considered for the painting composition on the tridimensional lacquerware than the Chinese paintings on paper in plane layout. There are two major types of painting composition for lacquer art during the period before and after Han Dynasty: the symmetrical structure with strong decorative performance; and the tiled form focused on painting performance.

Lacquerware modeling during Qin and Han dynasty were mainly in symmetric squareness and roundness, such as lacquer coffin, lacquer box and lacquer bowl. The lacquer painting were mostly in full layout, exquisite painting, as well as the tridimensional features with symmetric and balanced aesthetic function [46]. As mentioned in Differentiation and Analysis of Art Features in Lacquerware from Chu Area in Yangtze River Basin, “symmetry & balance is an important principle in the rules of formal beauty. Symmetry generally refers to the equal balance constituted by the combinations of same and similar formal elements; balance refers to the asymmetric visual balance. Both of these feature solemn, firm and stable aesthetic feeling” [47]. The lacquer painting pattern in this picture composition, though being heavy and complicated, consciously focused on the depicted objects through the modes such as coloring and magnifying the subject shape. On the whole, this kind of painting composition was in wide application in subsequent dynasties upon the prominent decorative elements and strong spiritual significance.

In addition to the picture composition with strong decorative performance, Chinese lacquer painting had already adopted plain and unvarnished pattern to present plot-

type drawing early in the Eastern Zhou Period, combining Chinese traditional viewpoint of ‘cavalier perspective’ to present the space sense of the picture. In the Graphic Carriage Horse and Person Going and Walking, a lacquer painting created in the Warring States Period, the painter tried to deliver a spatial dimension conforming to the real life feeling through the management arrangement of the positions of characters and images, from the unreal space up there in the sky to the real world on the ground. The composition achieved the best vivid embodiment in the ‘cavalier’ aspect and started a brand new composition form of lacquer painting in ancient china [48]. As mentioned by Liu Jingjing, “this kind of composition form adopted the horizontally translational perspective via circle shape just like Chinese scroll painting and laid the foundation for the true sense of scroll painting adopting willows for picture division after the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties. For instance, Eighty-one Gods of Gu Kaizhi, The Painting of Spring Outing of Zhan Ziqian and Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival of Zhang Zeduan were all more or less influenced by the composition thereof” [49].

The aforesaid plain and unvarnished pattern, due to the tough creation difficulty, was in low repeatability for the lacquer painting content, high cost of the lacquer made-up articles, as well as either rich or noble users. This is common in palace lacquerware in later generations, especially in lacquered-painted screens, and is usually matched with creating style in rich painting performance and majored taking figures as key themes, also in architecture and landscape, flowers, birds and plants. It is crucial to devote particular care to the harmony between the depicted contents and tridimensional modeling, highlight the principal core and create lively artistic image.

4. Conclusion

This study conducts research on the theme category and artistic expression of lacquer painting in ancient China, and obtains main achievements including the following three aspects: I. the lacquer painting in ancient China was developed depending on the lacquerware, of which the described contents and modes performed only as the pitching-in appearance for the research. Nevertheless, the comprehensive analysis of the internal development regulations thereof requires the combination of technical difficulty and usage value of the lacquerware, as well as the explanation of the phenomenon in lacquer painting; II. lacquer art featured a certain emblematic status in upper class in ancient China, played a significant role in life etiquettes upon its noble elegance, durability and insect prevention, and spontaneously made the lacquer painting pattern become the miniature of the society reflecting aesthetics, value orientation and living custom of the time; III. Taking the lacquer painting in ancient China as the standpoint to analysis the causality between the development and general social background could present more effective interpretation of the logical relationship in the influence upon artistic progress brought by the social structure and is of great guiding educational significance.

Conflicts of Interest

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

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