

Global Context, Self-Awakening and Contemporary Reinvention

Chinese Lacquer Painting and the Asian Lacquer Culture Circle

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Abstract

Judging from the perspective of globalization, lacquer is a unique material culture form in Asia, and also one of the most important art media. In the early 20th century, under the background of Art Deco movement and French colonialism, the lacquer culture formed the phenomenon of return and gave birth to the Vietnamese lacquer painting, which indirectly contributed to the formation of the Chinese lacquer painting in the modern sense. Therefore, judging from the historical perspective, the birth of lacquer painting has a globalized background. From the perspective of art history, in the course of nearly a century, Chinese lacquer painting has gone through three stages of development, from germination and popularization to development and reflection, to the formation of cultural self-awakening, which can be called the “triple stage”, and finally completed its own construction, presenting a prosperous appearance in the contemporary era. Thinking from the level of contemporary culture, with the Asian countries’ re-cognition of traditional lacquer culture, the new form of Asian lacquer culture circle is gradually coming to the fore, in this process, Chinese lacquer painting actively participates in and in a sense leads the reconstruction of the contemporary Asian lacquer culture circle, and the awakening of Chinese lacquer painting represents the systematic revival of oriental culture and aesthetics in contemporary Asia. Therefore, through the background of cultural return, the contemporary situation of triple steps and self-awakening, and the mission of reconstructing the Asian lacquer culture circle,

that is, the three nodes of the past, the present and the future, this paper points out that the development of Chinese lacquer painting is not only a matter of art itself, but also of great significance in reconstructing the contemporary global art discourse.

Keywords: Lacquer Painting; Lacquer Culture; Asian Lacquer Culture Circle

1. Introduction

Since the 16th century, with the development of the great maritime trade and the increasingly frequent exchanges between the East and the West, China's political system, culture and art, and local customs have aroused the admiration and imagination of Westerners, thus forming the "China Fever" in Europe. Against this background, Ming and Qing dynasty export art was favored in Europe, in which lacquer became a new fashion in Europe with mysterious materials, gorgeous techniques and rich images. Fantastic descriptions of Asian lacquer art can be found in the writings of Astana Hughes Kircher, John Stock, and Jean-Félix Vardin. During this period, the influence of Chinese lacquer reached every level of European society, ultimately shaping the era of a thriving European "Chinese style".

2. Spreading and Returning: The Globalization of Chinese Lacquer Painting

As we all know, the main direction of the lacquer art discipline in contemporary Chinese colleges and universities is lacquer painting, and there are two major sources for its formation, one of which is the exploration of modern lacquer art in the early part of the last century in China, with Pang Xunqin, Lei Guiyuan, and Shen Fowen as the main representatives. Among the above three, except for Shen Fowen, who studied in Japan under the master of lacquer art, Matsuda Gonroku, Pang Xunqin and Lei Guiyuan both studied in France, and Lei Guiyuan in particular was engaged in the restoration of

Chinese lacquer ware in Paris (Guo, 2016). Another source is Vietnamese lacquer painting, the landmark event of which was the exhibition of Vietnamese lacquer painting organized in Beijing and Shanghai in 1962.

The Art Deco movement in Europe can be considered the direct source of modern lacquer painting. During this period, the influence of export lacquer ware from the Ming and Qing dynasties and the boom of Oriental decorative arts at the beginning of the 20th century created many artists in Europe who were famous for using Oriental lacquer to create works, thus forming the Modern Lacquer Movement in Europe, of which the main representatives are Jean Dunand, Eileen Gray, Gaston Susse, and Picasso. Gaston Susse and Pierre Bobo. For example, Pierre Bobo's lacquer techniques and creations were inspired by the rediscovery of Ming and Qing dynasty export lacquerware, particularly the Juncai screens. These are the most representative type of Ming and Qing dynasty export lacquerware and were once considered by Europeans to be representative of Chinese lacquerware. Pierre Bobo's daughter, Marie-Thérèse Bobo, repeatedly mentioned Coromandel in her article "Remembering Chinese Lacquerware" as the influence of the Zancai screen on Pierre Bobo. We can be sure that an important feature of Pierre Bobo's work, the bird's-eye view composition, is entirely derived from the coromandel. At the same time, this has almost become the compositional characteristic of the Art Deco movement. It is worth noting that both Mr. Pang Xunqin and Mr. Lei Guiyuan had the educational background of the Art Deco movement, and they were also the pioneers of modern design education in China, thus determining that Chinese lacquer paintings have deep decorative genes and inheritance. For example, Professor Qiao Shiguang, a leading figure in Chinese lacquer painting, was a graduate student of Mr. Pang Xunqin.

In 1925, the Frenchman Victor Taraieu founded the Indochina Higher School of Fine Arts with the support of the French colonial governor Henri Merlin, an event that can be regarded as the beginning of modern art and education in Vietnam. Victor Tardou has always made the fusion of Eastern and Western cultures the aim of the school; for example, to broaden the horizons of his students, he introduced a course on East Asian art and instructed them to reproduce Chinese silk patterns of the Tang and Song dynasties, as well as seventeenth-century Japanese art. Of the early instructors, all but Nam Son came from France. Notable among them was Joseph Inguimbert (1896-1971), a graduate of the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, the epicenter of the modern lacquer movement in France, from which Gaston Suisse also came. Encouraged and guided by these teachers, Vietnamese students gradually discovered ways to combine lacquer materials with oil painting techniques in their practice, thus creating the artistic expression of rubbed lacquer painting, realizing the fusion of modernity and tradition and producing the first Vietnamese lacquer painters, such as Le Phu and Nguyen Khang (Nguyen, 2013). In 1962, Vietnam organized an exhibition of lacquer painting in Beijing and Shanghai, which attracted great attention from the Chinese cultural department, so that all the colleges and universities started the research and exploration of lacquer painting. It was against this background that Mr. Cai Kezhen, the first director of the Lacquer Painting Art Committee of the China Art Association, went to Vietnam to study lacquer painting.

It can be found that the two major sources of Chinese lacquer painting are closely related to the modern lacquer movement in Europe, which originated from the rediscovery of Ming and Qing dynasty export lacquer ware in the early 20th century. Therefore, in a sense, Chinese lacquer painting can be defined as the “cultural return” phenomenon of the Ming and Qing dynasty export lacquer ware in China after the westward transmission in the 17th century. The phenomenon of “cultural return”. Accordingly,

we can make a judgment that Chinese lacquer painting is a new form of Chinese lacquer art formed in the process of global evolution and transmutation and therefore has multiple and complex cultural attributes.

3. Triple Steps: The Self-Awakening of Chinese Lacquer Painting

For more than half a century, Chinese lacquer painting has been closely related to the development of contemporary Chinese art and has also been indirectly influenced by international art trends. Judging from the creative outlook and conceptual awareness, Chinese lacquer painting from the 1950s to the end of the 1980s can be called the first stage, which was under the dual influence of the main line of decorative tradition and the secondary line of Vietnamese lacquer painting, and included two time periods, namely, the New Chinese Art Movement and the post-Cultural Revolution trend of decorative art, and was characterized by the coexistence and dislocation of the awareness of painting and the language of decorative art. The period from the 1990s to the early part of this century can be called the second phase, which was set against the background of the 85 New Wave of Fine Arts and the marginalization of the Chinese decorative system. During this period, on the basis of the reflection on the first phase, the lacquer painting creative group formed a fierce debate, but both sides of the debate essentially want to construct the purity of lacquer painting, and in the creative outlook. They all embodied the consciousness of de-decorating and the problem of “translation of materials”, and in fact this mode of creation still has a certain degree of universality in the contemporary era. In fact, this mode of creation still has a certain degree of universality in contemporary times. In fact, this mode of creation is still somewhat common in contemporary times. After about 2010, the lacquer painting creative group gradually formed the consciousness of “lacquer self-nature” and carried out effective exploration,

gradually forming the unity of ontological language, formal language and material language, and this trend can be called the “self-awakening” of Chinese lacquer painting. This trend can be called the “self-awakening” of Chinese lacquer painting.

Regarding the first stage of the development of Chinese lacquer painting, based on the analysis of the cultural background mentioned above, we can fully understand that the beginning of Chinese lacquer painting had two veins at the same time, that is, the Art Deco movement and Vietnamese lacquer painting. From the analysis of existing cases, it can be found that early Chinese lacquer painting is characterized by the coexistence and dislocation of pictorial consciousness and decorative language. Judging from the subject matter, it is clear that early Chinese lacquer painting was to some extent influenced by Vietnamese lacquer painting, which began to have an independent pictorial consciousness. Historically, the emergence of Vietnamese lacquer painting was accompanied by the national liberation movement, in which Vietnamese artists re-established their independent cultural spirit and national consciousness through the creation of a local painting style. Therefore, the themes of Vietnamese lacquer paintings are mainly anti-colonial war and socialist construction, and some figures and landscapes also contain similar ideology. For example, Nguyễn Gia Trí's work “Spring Garden - Central, Southern and Northern” in the collection of Ho Chi Minh Museum of Fine Arts shows three young women in the center of the picture representing the three regions of northern, central and southern Vietnam, which is an allegory for the national unification of Vietnam. This point played an important role in the formation of the consciousness of independent painting in Chinese lacquer painting. In terms of expressive language, early Chinese lacquer painting formed a different system from Vietnamese lacquer painting. There are two main reasons for this, one is the influence of the background of modern Chinese decorative arts system, and the other is the constraints of traditional Chinese lacquer crafts. in

the early twentieth century, the Art Deco movement had a great influence on China, including the founders of Chinese design education, such as Pang Xunqin and Lei Gueiyuan, who were both deeply influenced by the movement. Since then, Art Deco has gradually declined in Europe and the United States, but for a number of reasons, it continued to flourish in China until the 1980s and 1990s, and a complete education system was formed. At the same time, from the perspective of institutions, due to the problem of discipline setting, the development of Chinese lacquer painting at that time was mostly based on the Arts and Crafts specialty, which was based on the system of decorative arts, and was closely connected with the Arts and Crafts industry. Therefore, the early expression of Chinese lacquer painting presented strong decorative characteristics and craft tendency, which was also inevitable to some extent.

Under the background of decorative art, early Chinese lacquer painting borrowed the painting consciousness of Vietnamese lacquer painting, while continuing the expressive language of decoration, and tried to build a lacquer painting art system combining the ontological language of painting, the formal language of decoration, and the material language of craftsmanship. Therefore, this kind of misplaced construction method also leads to a different way of “from painting to lacquer” from Vietnamese lacquer painting. Although Chinese lacquer painting has been explored by some excellent artists, it has formed a reverse trend of “from lacquer to painting”. The defects of early Chinese lacquer paintings, such as decorativization and miniaturization, to a certain extent also reveal the mismatch between its ontological language and formal language.

In the 1990s, the second phase of Chinese lacquer painting gradually unfolded against the background of the rise of contemporary art. At the same time, due to the gradual marginalization of the Chinese decorative art system, the formal language of lacquer painting was also questioned and even

denied with the withdrawal of decorations, and the status of lacquer painting's academic discipline also underwent a crisis of identity. During this period, the lacquer painting creative group launched a new round of exploration, devoting themselves to thinking about the pictorial nature of lacquer painting. The theoretical debates in this period were very active, with continuous debates on the creation theory and ontology of lacquer painting, mainly including the “natural lacquer and chemical lacquer controversy” and the “big art and lacquer craft controversy”. Judging from a contemporary perspective, the debates during this period were precisely the reflection of the lacquer painting creative group on the dislocation between the pictorial consciousness and decorative language of the first stage of lacquer painting under the impact of the “85 New Wave of Art”. In essence, both sides of the debate realized the problem of dislocation, but put forward different solutions. One part of the creators' point of view is to weaken the craftsmanship component of lacquer, treating lacquer as an ordinary painting material and incorporating it into the category of fine art. On the other hand, some of the creators' viewpoints are based on the material characteristics of lacquer and launch the pure research of lacquer painting. Mr. Qiao Shiguang's article “Dancing in Shackles” was an important document at that time, from which we can have a look at the discussion hotspots of that year. As a matter of fact, if we review this history again today, we can judge that whether it is natural lacquer or chemical lacquer, if we judge it from the perspective of easel painting, it is actually a pair of shackles, and there is no essential difference. The controversy of the 1990s has continued to this day, and in fact, the problems that existed during this period have not yet formed a better solution.

Although there are sharp differences in creative theories, in terms of creative practice, both sides of the debate in general show the mode of “material translation”. Lacquer creators looked for creative concepts and even patterns from oil paintings, Chinese paintings, prints and other kinds of

paintings, and studied how to convert them into material expressions of lacquer paintings, trying to realize the purity of lacquer paintings. As a result, the lacquer paintings of the 90s of the last century showed a strong appearance of “other kinds of paintings”. As a matter of fact, the creation based on the translation of this material proved to be incapable of realizing the artistic language of lacquer, and this situation has been criticized by other kinds of paintings in China and continues to this day. Although there are many excellent cases during this period, in general it can be summarized as a mismatch between the language of material and the language of form. As we all know, lacquer itself is a decorative craft with a history of at least 8,000 thousand years, but during this period, the main concern of the creators of lacquer paintings was how to abandon the decorative nature of lacquer in order to conform to the mainstream of the creation of the great fine arts in the same period. In essence, this was a paradox from a theoretical point of view, which led to lacquer painting passing by Chinese contemporary art in the last century.

It is worth noting that in the reflection of the double dislocation of the last century, the lacquer painting creative team of this century began to recognize the problem of “lacquer’s own nature”, that is, exploring the attributes belonging to lacquer paintings themselves, including their creative patterns and aesthetic forms, and using them as a basis for the construction of a unified ontology, form, and language system of materials. At present, we have already seen valuable explorations in the appearance of some of the works. One of the more common ways is to make a formal interpretation of the material language, such as making full use of the visual effects of lacquer gray layer and linen, reconstructing its unique formal language in a physical way, thus promoting the awakening of the ontological language and properties of lacquer paintings, which can be called the awakening of the “lacquer’s own nature”. To a certain extent, these problems may once again form a misunderstanding for the construction of

lacquer painting's own system or even blur the boundaries and paradigms of the discipline, leading to problems similar to those faced by the discipline in the 90s of the last century.

Judging from the three stages of development of Chinese lacquer painting, for more than half a century, the creative outlook of Chinese lacquer painting has mostly been in a state of wandering, which on the one hand reflects the continuous thinking and interpretation of the lacquer painting creative group, and on the other hand also shows that the complete language system of Chinese lacquer painting has never been constructed. Judging from the historical perspective, lacquer is a decorative craft and material, which does not have the ontological attribute of painting. For example, the lacquer screen unearthed in the tomb of Sima Jinlong of the Northern Wei Dynasty, although it has an extraordinary historical status, it is still a copy of the silk painting of the same period. Whether historical or contemporary, if we only explore from the direction of modern easel painting, lacquer painting will inevitably fall into the “material translation” of other kinds of painting. As a matter of fact, the same problem exists in Vietnamese lacquer painting, which has not been solved so far. Throughout history, judging from the aesthetic experience of Chinese local art, in terms of painting, what is pursued is the “creation of environment” based on modeling, which is also its significance. If analyzed from another perspective, lacquer art with a history of 8,000 years not only possesses the value of “creation of environment”, but also the advantages and significance of another system, namely “creation of things”. Therefore, the artistic language of lacquer and lacquer painting can never be fully opened if it is only converted from the concept of ordinary easel painting. Contemporary art forms are diversified, and the so-called easel painting also has many possibilities. The creative language of lacquer painting should not be limited to the easel painting's system of “creation”, and the intervention of the language of the system of “creation” may expand its new ideas and form its own language through the fusion of the two

systems. Through the fusion of the two systems, it can form its own language characteristics and shape its local contemporary nature. Some of the works in recent years have shown the potential consciousness of the “creation” system, and have clearly put forward this idea in the relevant seminars, thus forming a different appearance from the past.

To sum up, Chinese lacquer painting has gone through three stages of development, gradually unified in the construction of the language system, which can be called the “triple stage”, and has presented the unity of language and local contemporaneity in contemporary times, which can be said to be of extraordinary significance.

4. Reinvention and Re-dissemination: The Historical Mission of Chinese Lacquer Painting

By analyzing the historical background and contemporary development of Chinese lacquer painting, we can understand its creative outlook and contemporary value in a more objective way. At the same time, through horizontal comparison, we can also find that Japanese lacquer painting does not have the burden of contemporaneity, for contemporary Japanese lacquer artists, tradition means contemporaneity. Vietnamese lacquer painting does not have the burden of history, since its birth in the early 1900s, Vietnamese lacquer painting has been exploring the issue of pictorial expression, and the lacquer painting itself is contemporaneity, there is no traditional lacquer painting to be troubled by. However, Chinese lacquer painting needs to think about the inheritance and transformation of the traditional craft on the one hand, and on the other hand, it needs to explore the concepts and patterns of contemporary art, so it has more complicated creative differences. Happily, through the unremitting efforts of the lacquer painting creative group, Chinese lacquer painting has not only come to the forefront in the study of material language, but also reconstructed its ontological language and formal

language in contemporary times. From many cases of creation, we can find that Chinese lacquer painting has already awakened the consciousness of “reopening”. Firstly, in terms of ontological language, its field of view has shifted from other painting types to the aesthetic scope of lacquer art itself, opening up the contemporary aesthetic construction of lacquer culture. Secondly, in terms of formal language, its appearance has shifted from the schematic imitation of other painting types to the self-expression of lacquer cultural language, opening up the contemporary form and even the ecology of lacquer art with a new context. It can be said that Chinese lacquer painting is a successful case of the contemporary reinvention of oriental lacquer culture, and it has a certain leading role in the Asian lacquer culture circle.

At present, Chinese lacquer painting is facing unprecedented development opportunities. First of all, under the guidance of the China Artists Association, the Lacquer Painting Art Committee was formally established in 2001, which has further developed academic activities and organizations nationwide, and strongly promoted the prosperity of Chinese lacquer painting. For example, in terms of organization construction, in recent years, lacquer painting art committees have been established in Shanghai, Shanxi, Shaanxi, Guangxi and Anhui, making the organizational structure of lacquer painting further complete. Secondly, in terms of brand construction, in addition to the National Art Exhibition, the China Lacquer Painting Exhibition, China Lacquer Painting Biennial, China Small Lacquer Painting Exhibition, and China Youth Lacquer Painting Exhibition have been set up one after another. In addition, the Hubei International Lacquer Triennial, Fuzhou International Lacquer Biennial and other events have also improved the contemporary ecology of Chinese lacquer painting to a certain extent, and embodied more cutting-edge academics in terms of curatorial concepts. Finally, with the rise of crafts in institutions, majors such as glass, jewelry, ceramics, lacquer, and fiber have experimented with the

combination of materials and contemporary art, entering the post-craft phase of institutions, also known as “art in the post-craft era”. This background has also indirectly contributed positively to the academic cognition of lacquer painting and has also provided certain inspiration and reference in terms of creative concepts.

There is no doubt about the success and potential of Chinese lacquer painting, but on this basis, we need to further think about the future development of Chinese lacquer painting and the cognition of cultural identity. Chinese lacquer painting has a deep historical background, and its own formation is characterized by the globalization of dissemination and reflux, a feature that is unique compared to all contemporary Chinese art disciplines. Since the beginning of the new century, China has put forward the initiative of “One Belt, One Road” and the concept of the community of human destiny and opened up a new round of international cooperation and exchanges. Therefore, based on the accumulation of history and globalization background, the contemporary value of Chinese lacquer painting is not only limited to its art itself, but also as a successful case and an important form of contemporary Asian lacquer culture circle, to reconstruct its global discourse, so as to contribute to the continuous promotion of the “One Belt, One Road”.

As a matter of fact, Chinese lacquer painting has already initiated the construction of a globalized discourse and the reshaping of the Asian lacquer culture circle. For example, under the influence of Chinese lacquer painting, South Korea established the Lacquer Painters Association and held the “China-Korea Lacquer Painting Exchange Exhibition” in Sejong Hall in 2013. In recent years, the number of flat lacquer paintings has far exceeded the number of three-dimensional lacquer works in Japan's Japanese exhibitions, while the number of flat lacquer works in Thailand and Myanmar has also gradually increased. After 2016, the Asian Lacquer Exchange Program, which is the most

influential lacquer cultural exchange program on an international scale, has been held in Chiang Mai Thailand, Hanoi Vietnam, Bagan Myanmar, and Siem Reap Cambodia, jointly organized by countries in East and Southeast Asia. Chinese lacquer painters actively participated in it and comprehensively displayed the face of contemporary Chinese lacquer painting, thus leaving a deep impression on Asian countries. In 2017, the Lacquer Painting Working Committee of the Shanghai Artists Association organized a delegation to Vietnam, which visited Ho Chi Minh University of Fine Arts, Hanoi School of Arts and Crafts and other institutions and units, and exchanged views with Vietnamese lacquer painting educators and creative groups, discussing contemporary Asian lacquer painting's Discipline co-construction and related cooperation. In the same year, the article "Overview of Chinese Lacquer Painting" was published in "Vietnam Fine Arts", which caused great repercussions among Vietnamese institutions and lacquer painting creative groups and formed creative reflections.

In terms of international promotion, under the guidance of the China Artists Association, the "Contemporary Chinese Lacquer Painting Invitational Exhibition" was held at the International Exchange Center, University of Cambridge in 2018. A total of 31 works were displayed in the exhibition, representing the main outlook and concepts of contemporary Chinese lacquer painting. The opening ceremony was attended by leaders and experts from the Fitzwilliam Museum of the University of Cambridge and the Department of History of Art of the University of Cambridge, and so on. They expressed their full recognition of the creative concepts, graphic language, and technical characteristics of Chinese lacquer painting, and reviewed the important influence of Chinese export lacquer art on Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries, thus pointing out the important potential of contemporary Chinese lacquer painting in the future cultural exchange between East and West. Following the exhibition at the University of Cambridge in the UK, the "Overseas Exhibition of Chinese Lacquer

Painting in Spain" was grandly opened at the Chinese Cultural Center in Madrid in 2019. This event is organized by the Lacquer Painting Art Committee of China Artists Association, undertaken by Madrid Chinese Cultural Center and Shen Shao'an Lacquer Art Research Institute, and co-organized by Spanish Chinese Artists Association and Barcelona Academy of Arts. During the opening ceremony, the guests highly affirmed the oriental poetic beauty and contemporary art form of Chinese lacquer painting and looked forward to another encounter between the oriental art and the western world, writing a new chapter for the cultural exchange between the two countries.

To summarize, Chinese lacquer painting is a way to open up the traditional lacquer art in the field of contemporary art, and in a new form, it provides the Asian lacquer culture circle and contemporary art with concepts and modes of thinking, thus further expanding the influence of Chinese lacquer culture in the world, and also providing an important revelation for the construction of China's contemporary cultural self-confidence.

5. Conclusion

The prosperity of Chinese lacquer painting is gratifying, but at the same time, we need to think about the future direction of Chinese lacquer painting and lacquer culture. Art not only faithfully reflects the changes and visions of contemporary society, but also becomes one of the most important bridges for the exchange of ideas by virtue of its ability to cross linguistic and cultural boundaries. While perfecting its self-construction, Chinese lacquer painting has achieved remarkable success in various overseas activities in recent years, thus shaping and spreading China's excellent culture and highlighting the spirit of contemporary China through the artistic language of lacquer painting. It can be said that it

will be the historical mission of Chinese lacquer painting to re-recognize the history, establish cultural confidence and build a contemporary global discourse.

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