

A Comparative Study between Eastern Zhou and Early Ancient Greek Decorative Styles

--Taking the Warring States Feast and War Pictorial Bronze Vessel and the Francois Vase as Examples

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Abstract. Among creations at the peak of the arts and crafts realm, Chinese bronze vessels and ancient Greek pottery paintings have been key research subjects of art history. Their respective decorative styles have been studied comprehensively, but research is still lacking on Eastern Zhou pictorial bronze vessels and black-figure pottery, which are important stages in the development of Chinese bronze vessels and ancient Greek pottery paintings. To study the decorative styles of Eastern Zhou pictorial bronze vessels and black-figure pottery, this paper takes the Warring States Feast and War Pictorial Bronze Vessel and the Francois Vase as examples, compares their decorative styles, and explores the causes of their differences. The study finds that the decorative styles of Eastern Zhou pictorial bronze vessels and black-figure pottery are similar in terms of narratives and composition, reflecting features typical in the time and arts of an early-staged civilization. There are also great differences between the two in terms of contents of the decorations and art expression styles, revealing differences in craftsmanship, social environment, and artistic pursuit of the two cultures.

Keywords: Pictorial bronze vessels; Black-figure pottery; Decorative styles.

1. Introduction

The pre-Qin period in China was in the same historical period as ancient Greece, and they both developed their ingenious arts and crafts genre--bronze vessels and pottery paintings. Bronze vessels are objects made of bronze alloy, and pottery paintings are ancient Greek pottery that was decorated with paintings. The two played an important role in the civilization and social life of pre-Qin and ancient Greek periods respectively. Both bronze vessels and pottery paintings developed distinctive decorative styles, which are not only a key element in their artistic features but also a carrier of the artistic pursuit and the cultural identity of both civilizations. Using complete, narrative images and detailed black silhouettes as decorations respectively, pictorial bronze vessels and black-figure pottery each were derived from a highly innovative stage in the development of the decorative styles of Chinese bronze vessels and ancient Greek pottery paintings. Analyzing their decorative styles would provide insights into the aesthetic pursuits and relative historical and cultural factors in the Eastern Zhou period and the black-figure period in ancient Greek. Additionally, the Eastern Zhou and ancient Greek periods are both important parts of the history of painting, but there is a lack of cultural relics that can provide evidence of painting from these times [1]. Compared with silk, lacquer, and other painting media of the same period, pictorial bronze vessels represent the general characteristics of Eastern Zhou painting more comprehensively [2]. Similarly, as an important branch of Greek painting, especially one that is still in existence, Greek pottery paintings represent the height Greek painting has reached [3]. Therefore, the study of the decorative styles of Eastern Zhou pictorial bronze vessels and Greek black-figure pottery can help increase the understanding of painting of the time. On the other hand, the aesthetic and cultural value of the decorative styles of Eastern Zhou pictorial bronze vessels and Greek black-figure pottery is also inspiring for modern decorative design. This paper takes the Warring States Feast and War Pictorial Bronze Vessel and the Francois Vase as examples and explores the decorative styles of Eastern Zhou pictorial bronze vessels and Greek black-figure pottery through a comparative study of the two chosen pieces. This paper is divided into three

parts: the first two parts introduce the Warring States Feast and War Pictorial Bronze Vessel and the Francois Vase and their decoration techniques, and the third part compares the decorative styles of the two pieces, analyzes the reasons behind their differences, and explores the historical and cultural factors that influenced the formation of the artistic styles during the Eastern Zhou and ancient Greek black-figure styles.

2. The Warring States Feast and War Pictorial Bronze Vessel

From the 19th century B.C. to the early Shang dynasty [4], China gradually entered the Bronze Age. Bronze vessels initially inherited the forms and purposes of primitive pottery, and originally appeared as practical utensils. The Shang and Zhou dynasties are regarded as a golden age of the development of Chinese bronze vessels, and bronze vessels were mostly designed as ritual instruments and weapons to fulfill the needs of the ruling class in the patriarchal clan system of ancient China. The patriarchal clan system was destroyed in the late Western Zhou period, and while bronze vessels remained one of the dominant utensils in Eastern Zhou, their functions and styles tended to become increasingly practical and down-to-earth, and their craftsmanship and decorations were further developed. The pictorial pattern was a new decorative pattern that appeared in the late Spring and Autumn period and was most popular in the early and middle Warring States period. The style of pictorial bronze vessels tended to be realistic, with subjects such as mulberry picking, feasting, fishing, hunting, and war, the pictorial patterns recorded human activities and broke through previous styles and subjects of bronze vessel decoration. The Warring States Feast and War Pictorial Bronze Vessel is one of the most important representative works of Eastern Zhou pictorial bronze vessels.

2.1 Basic Information

The Warring States Feast and War Pictorial Bronze Vessel was excavated in 1965 from Tomb No.10 at Baihuatan, Chengdu [5]. It is a wine vessel from the Warring States period covered with inlaid patterns. The decoration on its body is divided into three layers by three circles of triangular cloud patterns, and with over 200 different figures decorated, it vividly recreated the life of the nobility during the Warring States period. Under the three layers, an additional circle of leaf pattern was added at the lower part of the vase. The upper layer of the pictorial pattern depicts a scene of slaves picking mulberry and hunting. In the middle layer, one part shows the nobility drinking cheerfully with slaves playing music and dancing on the side, and several traditional Chinese instruments, such as Bianzhong, Qing, and Sheng, were played. The other part shows the entertainment activity of archery of the nobility. The lower layer portrays a fierce war to guard the city, battles in water and on land are both vividly depicted, leaving a valuable record of the war scenes in the Eastern Zhou period.

2.2 Decoration Technique

The Warring States Feast and War Pictorial Bronze Vessel used the gold inlay technique, a traditional Chinese decoration technique used in arts and crafts. This technique makes use of the good ductility and bright luster of gold and silver to beautify the decorative patterns on the surface of objects, and was first used for the decoration of bronze vessels in the Shang and Zhou dynasties [6]. With the gold inlay technique, grooves are engraved in advance in the mold. After casting the bronze vessel, decorative patterns are drawn and chiseled on the surface of the vessel, and then pieces or wires of gold and silver are embedded in the grooves [6], or "thin copper pieces are pounded into the chiseled patterns" [7], and finally the surface of the vessel is polished so that there are no cracks between the inlaid metal and the surface of the bronze and the surface can be smooth.

3. The Francois Vase

Pottery production occupied an important position in the social life of ancient Greece similar to that of bronze vessels in ancient China. Both production and decoration techniques of pottery in ancient Greece were developed to an unprecedented level, and the pottery decoration style evolved continuously. After the geometric style and the Orientalizing style, the black-figure style was developed by the end of the 7th century B.C. [8], which creates black silhouette patterns on the brown surface of the pottery and engraves details inside the silhouettes. The Francois Vase is an important work of this decorative style.

3.1 Basic Information

The Francois Vase, excavated in the burial chamber of the ancient Etruscans in the Apennines [9], is a wine mixing vessel produced in the Attica region of ancient Greece in the form of a volute krater. Signatures of the maker and the painter of the vase are engraved on the surface, and six decoration bands are painted on the body, representing different Greek mythological stories and animal motifs. Of the two bands around the neck, the top one depicts the wild boar hunt in Calydon and a dance celebration after Theseus defeats the Minotaur; the lower one depicts the funeral games of Patroclus and the battle between the Lapithae and the Centaurs at the wedding of the Lapithae king. The first band on the body of the vase depicts the wedding of Peleus and Thetis; the second band depicts Achilles chasing Troilus in the Trojan War and the return of Hephaestus; the third band depicts Griffins, the lion-eagle creature of Greek mythology, as well as lions fighting with stags and bulls. The band at the foot of the vase depicts a battle between goat-riding Pygmies and cranes. The two bands on the top and the three bands on the body are divided by thin lines, geometric decorations are only used at the division between the body, neck, and foot of the vase, and a circle of long, pointed triangular rays are decorated below the third band on the body. There are also over 250 various figures and animals in the decoration of the Francois Vase, and the names of the figures are inscribed on the side.

3.2 Decoration Technique

Same as other black-figure pottery, the Francois Vase was produced through a pottery wheel, on which clay was placed, stretched, and eventually shaped as the wheel spun. The decorations of the Francois Vase are painted with mud containing iron oxide. Through correct proportioning and redox reactions, the mud turns black and forms a black silhouette pattern, while the clay not covered by the mud reverts to its normal brown or yellowish color, contrasting with the black pattern [10].

4. The Comparison of Decorative Styles between the Warring States Feast and War Pictorial Bronze Vessel and the Francois Vase

The Warring States Feast and War Pictorial Bronze Vessel and the Francois Vase were close in production times, share the same function as wine vessels, and they have several similarities in the decorative style. Both the Warring States Feast and War Pictorial Bronze Vessel and the Francois Vase are composed of several horizontal strips of pictorial patterns with circles of geometric ornaments, both of which are parallel in composition. Both pieces adopt the form of a comic strip in terms of visual narrative, in which typical characters and their movements in the events depicted are picked up and flexibly combined with the setting, plants, animals, and other objects in the scene, making the whole image harmonious and dynamic [11]. With hundreds of figures on the surface, the decoration of both pieces is extremely rich in content, but the orderly composition keeps the image from seeming chaotic. The depiction of figures and animals in both pieces reveals a similar perspective on creation. They both chose the most characteristic angle to arrange the figures and portrayed the figures in a highly decorative fashion. However, different techniques brought distinctive differences in the content, style, and composition of the decorative style of the two objects.

4.1 Difference in Decoration Technique

The decoration technique of the Warring States Feast and War Pictorial Bronze Vessel is completely different from that of the Francois Vase, and this has resulted in an essential difference in the decorative style between the two. The inlay technique adopted by the Warring States Feast and War Pictorial Bronze Vessel requires the embedding of various metals into the patterns on the surface of the vessel. The complicated process and polishing further limit how sophisticated the patterns could be on the already limited space of the surface, leaving the patterns to be as simple and characteristic as possible. It would also be difficult to present space with such a technique. The technique of the Francois Vase does not restrict the style of the pattern, and with the pattern adjustable during the production process and details carved at the end, there is more freedom to portray the pattern in detail and to present spatial relationships.

4.2 Difference in Decoration Content

The content of the decoration highlights the difference in decorative style between the Warring States Feast and War Pictorial Bronze Vessel and the Francois Vase, especially in the subject and ornament.

4.2.1 Decoration Content

The content and subject of the pictorial pattern of the Warring States Feast and War Pictorial Bronze Vessel and the Francois Vase are completely different. The three layers of decoration on the Warring States Feast and War Pictorial Bronze Vessel depict scenes of mulberry picking, hunting, feasting, archery, and battles in water and on land, presenting the life of the nobles in the Warring States period. The six bands of decoration on the Francois Vase, on the other hand, depict scenes and creatures from Greek mythology, inheriting the characteristics of Attica pottery that has been using Greek mythology as the theme of decoration since the late period of the orientalizing style.

4.2.2 Geometric Ornament

Both the Warring States Feast and War Pictorial Bronze Vessel and the Francois Vase are decorated with geometric ornaments, but their styles differ. As Fig.1 shows, the three layers of decorations on the Warring States Feast and War Pictorial Bronze Vessel are divided by triangular cloud patterns, and the bottom of the vessel is decorated with a circle of leaf pattern. Neither pattern was new at the time the vessel was produced. Cloud patterns can be found in the decoration of early primitive pottery, and are also widely applied in bronze vessel decoration, but the cloud patterns here have been more abstract and simplified than in previous times. The leaf pattern was popular after the Spring and Autumn period, mostly similar to here, decorated on the lower part of the vessel to present a sense of heaviness and stability [12]. The decoration of the Francois Vase is mostly divided by single lines, except for the thin square ornaments at the division between the neck, body, and the foot of the vase and the circle of triangular rays below the third band of decoration on the body (shown in Fig.1). These ornaments also show the inheritance of the decorative style of previous times. Horizontal lines have been used to divide decoration in ancient Greek pottery paintings since the initial geometric style, delicate geometric and ray-like patterns have also appeared in the geometric style, but they are only applied in the Francois Vase as a supplement instead of dominating the decoration, making the overall decorative style more harmonious.

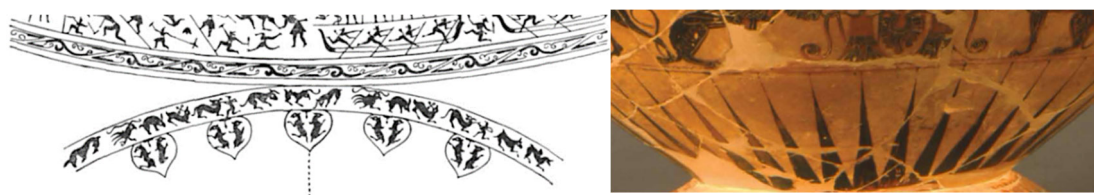


Fig. 1 Geometric ornaments on the Warring States Feast and War Pictorial Bronze Vessel (left) [5] and the Francois Vase (right) [13]

4.3 Difference in Decoration Style

Although both the Warring States Feast and War Pictorial Bronze Vessel and the Francois Vase have silhouette-like patterns in their decoration, the motifs of the former are typical movements of the depicted event, presenting very accurate and vivid figures, but retaining only a few decorative elements to help depict the scene. For example, in Fig.2, there are details designed to show folds on the dress of the mulberry pickers, but these designs are not specific to any figure. the Francois Vase presents the main figures and animals of a Greek mythology story in its decoration and adds a great number of details inside the silhouettes. As Fig.2 presents, the clothing pattern and facial features of the figures, the hair of people and animals, and details of the architecture and vehicles are all depicted with care, and even the outfits of the soldiers are richly varied. Chinese pictorial bronze vessels portray abstract figures with an emphasis on expressing the inner essence, while ancient Greek black-figure pottery portray specific figures, focusing on details and the pursuit of realistic effects.

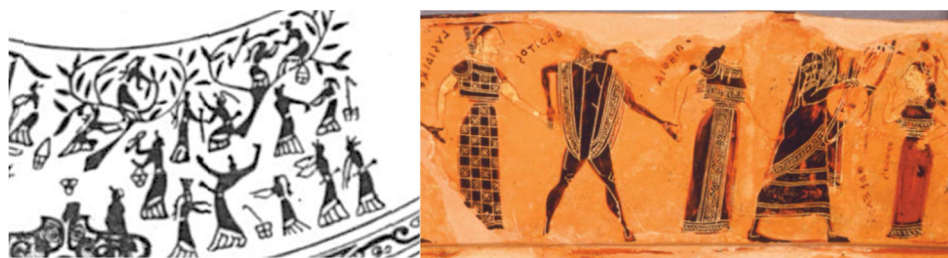


Fig. 2 Figures on the Warring States Feast and War Pictorial Bronze Vessel(left) [5] and the Francois Vase(right) [13]

4.4 Difference in Decoration Composition

The decoration of the Warring States Feast and War Pictorial Bronze Vessel and the Francois Vase reflect different principles of composition, including different symmetrical relationships and different treatment of spatial relationships.

4.4.1 Symmetrical Relationship

The pictorial decorations on the Warring States Feast and War Pictorial Bronze Vessel are symmetrically distributed in each layer, with the ears of the vessel as the symmetry axis and one scene on each side. On the Francois Vase, although most decoration bands also depict two scenes from Greek mythology (except for the first band on the body and the band on the foot, which use the whole band to present only one scene), there is no division between different scenes, and all patterns are in the same direction.

4.4.2 Spatial Relationship

Spatial relationships are dealt with differently in the decoration of the Warring States Feast and War Pictorial Bronze Vessel and the Francois Vase. In the Warring States Feast and War Pictorial Bronze Vessel, instead of applying a three-dimensional perspective, space is presented with a layered juxtaposition, in which the upper layer manifests the figure farther from the viewer, and the bottom layer is the figure closer to the viewer [14]. For instance, Fig.3 shows that in the water battle scene the boatman and the soldier standing next to each other are juxtaposed vertically, and in the mulberry picking scene, people under the trees are arranged on the top and people in front of the trees are arranged below, under the feet of the people under the tree, presenting a sense of space and distance. In contrast, the Francois Vase shows the sense of space by partially blocking what is farther from the audience. For example, in Fig.3, on the first band on the neck, soldiers participating in the wild boar hunt in Calydon are presented in pairs and depicted in profile, and the figure closer to the viewer almost completely blocks the figure next to him, but it is still clear to see the positions of the two figures from the exposed limbs and part of the torso. The different ways of rendering space reflect the different aesthetic pursuits of Chinese pictorial bronze vessels and ancient Greek black-figure

pottery-Eastern Zhou pursued the enjoyment in the expression of the inner essence, while ancient Greece pursued rationality in realism.



Fig. 3 Water battle on the Warring States Feast and War Pictorial Bronze Vessel(left) [5] and the hunt in Calydonon the Francois Vase(right) [15]

5. Conclusion

This paper compares the decorative styles of the Warring States Feast and War Pictorial Bronze Vessel and the Francois Vase and finds differences in the technique, content, style, and composition of their decoration. Represented by the Warring States Feast and War Pictorial Bronze Vessel, the decoration of Eastern Zhou pictorial bronze vessels usually features scenes from the life of the nobility. Arranged symmetrically, different scenes are often presented together as pictorial decorations and are complemented by geometric ornaments. Typical characters from the chosen scene are depicted in a stylized fashion, and spatial relationship is demonstrated by the layered juxtaposition of figures in different positions in the scene. The overall decorative style does not focus on the pursuit of realism or details but the expression of the inner essence. Represented by the Francois Vase, ancient Greek black-figure pottery takes Greek mythology as the main subject in decoration and also uses geometric ornaments as a supplement. The black-figure style depicts main characters and other creatures from Greek mythology in a highly detailed and realistic way and represents spatial relationships by covering up the overlapping part of two figures. Its general decorative style emphasizes the portrait of details and a realistic effect. Eastern Zhou pictorial bronze vessels reveal the social life and the war scenes of the slavery society in the Eastern Zhou period, reflecting the authority of the nobility and the continuing impact of the patriarchal clan system on Eastern Zhou society and culture. In contrast, ancient Greek black-figure pottery shows the openness and prosperity of the ancient Greek city-state of Athens in the 6th century B.C., reflecting the great influence of Greek mythology on ancient Greek art, and the awakening of man manifested in the celebration of human beings in the name of the gods. Eastern Zhou pictorial bronze vessels and ancient Greek black-figure pottery are crucial stages in the development of Chinese bronze vessels and ancient Greek pottery paintings, and their unique and innovative decorative styles studied in this paper are significant in further research on Chinese bronze vessels and ancient Greek pottery paintings, and hope that future scholars can pay more attention to the research of decoration technique.

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