

Analysis of Aesthetic Features of Official Kilns in Song Dynasty

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Abstract. The Chinese Porcelain art burgeoned during the Song Dynasty, particularly under emperor Huizong's rule. Within the era, the official kiln was known for its exquisite quality and the fascinating philosophical thoughts underpinning the art pieces' unique aesthetic features. This paper analyzes and portrays the aesthetic outlooks of the official kilns, examining the philosophy, form, textures, colors, production details, and the influences of the art. Sources of the analysis will be derived from different literature, including Mandarin and Western. The findings of this paper suggest that the Celadon art, particularly the official kiln, is an art form that stems from the particular political situation of the Song era, with the art form's development comprised of the combined intellectual thoughts of the Song artists and literati. In addition, not only has the official kilns evolved from its previous art forms, which originated as early as the Han Dynasty but also carried on its influences on future art forms even until the modern period.

Keywords: Song Neo-Confucianism, Zen Buddhism, Official Kilns, Glaze, Porcelain Art.

1. Introduction

Celadon has always been in the mainstream of ancient Chinese ceramics. Around 200 BC, the first celadon was successfully fired in Shangyu, Zhejiang Province, marking the leap from pottery to porcelain. Later, in the Northern and Southern dynasties, porcelains were produced at their burgeoning state with a lot of smoke and dropped slags. The porcelain production technique later evolved during the Tang Dynasty and the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period, when a large number of celadons were offered to the imperial court in various locations across China. Among the productions, the finest was picked as the official tributes.

The official kilns belong to the subcategory of the Chinese celadon, a valuable art form throughout East Asian history. During China's Song era, the official kilns were items of precious production and exchange within and without the border, used mainly for rituals and diplomatic ceremonies. Considered Emperor Huizong's favorites, the official kilns were made to the highest production standards. During the Song Dynasty era, porcelain production developed five famous kilns: Guan Kiln, Ru Kiln, Jun Kiln, Ding Kiln, and Ge Kiln. There were three official kilns in the Song Dynasty: The Bianjing official kiln (now Kaifeng, Henan) of the late Huizong period, the Xiuneisi official kiln (now Hangzhou Tiger Cave) in Lin'an after the south crossing, and the Jiaotan official kiln (now Wuguishan in the southern suburbs of Hangzhou) [1]. The official kilns of the Northern Song Dynasty were exemplified as the first art goods to be used by the imperial family in Chinese history. The uniqueness of the official kiln of the Northern Song Dynasty is its technological basis of the Ru and other types of kilns. The tone was set by Song Huizong himself, using the best craftsmen and materials, and there were no defective products, all imperfect products being destroyed [2]. Compared to folk kilns, official kilns do not take financial and human costs into account. In terms of purpose, official kilns are predominantly used for national ceremonies and foreign diplomatic goods exchanges [2]. Thus, the production process was focused on delivering the best porcelains possible [3].

The reason it is called an official kiln is that the porcelain was used by the royal family. In ancient Chinese feudal society, the emperor was at the center of power. The name, "Guan" or official, is not only a symbol of power but also reflects the royal specifications in terms of food, clothing, housing, and transportation, including the porcelain used by royalty. Famous porcelain producers all over China were eager to pay tribute to the official, or royal family. During the Northern Song Dynasty,

the royal family collected famous kilns from all over the country, and to distinguish them from ordinary folk porcelain, they specifically engraved the word "official" to represent tribute porcelain. This was the first time an official kiln was invented [4]. Importantly, many tribute porcelains offered by famous kilns in various places were exquisite in workmanship, but still could not fully meet the needs of the royal family for porcelain. Hence, Song Huizong created the first imperial kiln in Chinese history in Bianjing for the firing of porcelain. The kiln was exclusively used by the royal family, and this was the time the name "official kiln" was coined. In the Song Dynasty, the upper class showed an enduring fascination and preference for celadon porcelain. In terms of porcelain-making technology and art, it still maintains a leading position in the world. Hence, porcelain craftsmen of all dynasties took Song porcelain as a model.

This paper will analyze the aesthetic features of official kilns in the Song Dynasty, in the realm of the kilns' background, the philosophies behind the aesthetic design, the historical background of the art form, the forms, textures, and colors of the celadons, and the influences and inheritances. The research serves to collate the newest findings concerning the Song official kilns, shedding light on the kilns' past, current, and future states. More importantly, the findings in this paper would hopefully expand the research interests of overseas scholars.

2. Research Background

The Song Dynasty porcelain changed the Tang Dynasty's rich and colorful aesthetic standards, and instead, pursued and formed a particular kind of aesthetics that advocate nature and restraint, opening up a new realm of Chinese ceramic aesthetics. Influenced by Taoism's core idea of "Tao follows nature", people in the Song Dynasty advocated the aesthetic way of "natural formation" and "harmony between man and nature". Hence, though the production process of official kiln porcelain in the Song Dynasty was exquisite, it did not involve too much artificial decoration but stood out with its glaze color and shape. More importantly, the artists wanted to produce the porcelains through natural effects [3]. Besides the decoration of glaze and opening pieces, the official kiln porcelain of the Song Dynasty rarely had too many decorations, similar to the Song Dynasty official kiln porcelain mostly imitating ancient wares [3]. Major kiln pieces had shapes resembling the blue and white porcelain of the Shang, Zhou, and Han dynasties. Bronze ware and ritual vessels afforded people an ancient, simple, and blunt aesthetic feeling. It is evident that the official kilns utilized archaism during the design process. However, the Song archaism was not just the imitation of the ancient system of ceramic production, but the combination of antiquity and innovation.

3. Philosophy of Aesthetics

3.1. Song Neo-Confucianism

The Song Dynasty advocated "investigating matters to acquire knowledge", considering it the highest state of moral cultivation. Song Neo-Confucianism believed that "reason" is the origin of all things in the world, and to grasp "reason" is to "observe or investigate matters to obtain knowledge", that is, to understand "reason" only after contacting everything, to achieve an ideal personality. The ideological trend of "acquiring knowledge from matters" affected the aesthetic taste of literati and officials in the Song Dynasty, and also had an impact on the aesthetic culture of ceramics. That is, the literati did not pay attention to bright glazed colors and complicated decorations but focused on the beauty of objects with a rational attitude and natural mind [3]. The ideology represented by Neo-Confucianism not only extends the "rationality" of Taoism but also borrows the "self-nature" of Buddhism and turns it into Chitta (heart or heart-mind) and constructs social ideals together with Confucian ethics. The impact on aesthetic art is reflected in the change of luxury and splendor, since the Tang Dynasty turned to the pursuit of the heart, to reveal the delicate, tranquil, elegant, and rational artistic style of the Chitta, or heart [5].

3.2. Zen Buddhism

Speaking of Zen Buddhism, it is a Sinicized Buddhism formed after its introduction to China from India and integrated its concepts with local culture, particularly in the art of Celadons. The religion emphasizes eliminating the interference of the external environment and internal emotions and achieving a pure and clear "original mind" state. Influenced by Zen's concept of mind and nature, the literati and bureaucrats in the Song Dynasty appreciated simple and natural porcelain, perceived the changes of colors and lines in the subtleties, looked for inner peace and inaction, and explored the unity of the mind and Tao. This state of seeking inner emptiness is actually a manifestation of the pursuit of natural, plain, and unadorned aesthetics. "Taking the heart as a mirror", the people of the Song Dynasty adhered to the ultimate pursuit of the mind and virtue, casting aside all external entanglements, and attaining freedom of mind and the true joy of nature with an ordinary heart [3].

Concerning the pursuit of natural textural beauty, the official kilns carried the natural changes of texture to the extreme. Official kiln porcelain utilized the differences in the expansion and contraction coefficients of glazes during firing and cooling to form decorative patterns with ice-crack effects, called openings. The pattern formed by a natural opening was used to embellish the porcelain to achieve a natural and simple decorative effect. This approach coincides with the anti-carving and false decoration advocated by Zhuangzi, as well as the pursuit of perfect natural beauty. Whether it is dense caviar patterns, patterns with numerous grapes, or fine ox hair patterns, the kilns have fascinating textures that change naturally during the firing process [6].

The organic fusion of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism changed the mindset of scholar-officials in the Song Dynasty, affecting their way of life, life attitude, and aesthetic taste. The Song Dynasty advocated natural, implicit, plain, and simple aesthetics, with its individual consciousness more inclined to rationality, peace, stability, and indifference. Plainness and nature became the highest state of artistic aesthetic pursuit in the Song Dynasty.

4. Historical Background of Song Porcelain Art

The Song Dynasty was an era that adored literature instead of martial arts. The intellectual class, especially the writers and artists, was more active than ever before. Many emperors of the Song Dynasty were artists, and their preferences, tastes, and styles imbued porcelain artists with a creative spirit. In addition, Song porcelain was deeply influenced by the then-popular culture, displaying a reserved and introverted spiritual quality. The Song porcelain is outstanding not for its bright and intricate patterns, but its shape and texture. Both enamel and color reveal a sublime, cool, and fresh beauty.

After the establishment of the Song Dynasty, due to the influence of national conditions, its aesthetic style entered a turning point. Without the prosperous military expansion and cultural eclecticism of the Tang Dynasty, the Song Dynasty's style lost the splendor generated by power and propaganda, from the boldness of the Tang Dynasty to the reserved, simple, and elegant, and from the gorgeous to the elegant. Years of war made people pray for a moment of peace in life and soul. Corresponding to such transition, the porcelain style of the Song Dynasty first showed a feeling of purity. Whether in the making of an official kiln or folk kiln, all the artists paid great attention to the purity of glaze color. After successive dynasties of exploration, the firing process of the Song Dynasty celadon developed sufficiently. The elegant tones of the celadon too catered to the aesthetic trend during the period.

Though culturally strong, the Song Dynasty was politically weak. Since the entire Song Dynasty was at war with Liao, Jin, Xixia, and Mongolia, and wars broke out frequently, the Song people gradually formed a strong national consciousness, which was reflected in the production of porcelain. The national conscience rose from the strenuous process of ceding territory, seeking peace, and paying tributes. Due to the political and military failures of the Song Dynasty, people expressed more desire for a better life; thus, auspicious patterns often manifested in artworks. Porcelains of the period often reflected and represented the rulers' greed, the merchants' ambition, and the romantic feelings

of the literati. In the realm of porcelain decorations, artists and commoners also used various methods to conceive auspicious patterns, like using metaphors of several flowers to form lucky messages. This artistic style runs through the entire production process of Song Dynasty porcelain, and every kiln from the north to the south highlighted this national art style, showing the purest, simplest, and most amazing skills and elegant style of Song people [7].

5. Form, Textures and Colors

The official kiln porcelain of the Song Dynasty was mainly plain, with neither gorgeous carvings nor colorful paintings. Most of them used concave-convex straight edges and string patterns as decorations. The porcelain's body color is iron black, and the glaze colors are often pink and blue. Song Dynasty official kiln porcelain has six characteristics: first, the shape resembles the characteristics of bronze ware produced in the Shang-Zhou periods, with more versatile shapes than those of the Ru kilns, which were used as royal ritual vessels; second, the Song Dynasty official kiln belongs to the celadon category and was improved based on the Ru kiln; third, the official kiln porcelain of the Song Dynasty had glaze cracks famous for their eel blood color, and accompanied by ice cracks; fourth, it had a strong jade texture; fifth, it had the characteristics of opaque glaze; sixth, it had the characteristics of "purple mouth and iron foot". To explain the sixth characteristic better, the phenomenon occurs because the ferric oxide at the bottom of the porcelain has an iron-like color under the action of flame reduction, and the glaze flows down from the edge of the ceramic mouth after melting at high temperature, making the glaze layer thinner, and contributing to the change of the purple color of the porcelain body [5].

5.1. Shape Design of Official Kilns

The shape design of official kilns in the Song Dynasty often imitated natural forms in terms of linearity, composition, and shape, and explored design elements in nature, especially drawing design ideas from different flowers. Most of the shapes are stoves, bottles, statues, bowls, washers, goblets, etc. Zun and goblets were imitations of Shang and Zhou bronzes, copying petals along the mouth of utensils, usually divided into five, six, nine, ten, or even more arcs, with various forms such as sunflower mouth and Linghua mouth, according to different curves. It presents a quiet and innocent artistic style, clear and elegant, peaceful, and tranquil aesthetic concept [8].

5.2. “Kai Pian” or “Kai Kou”

Other than the shapes of the ceramics, “Kai Pian”, or “Kai Kou” is also a critical feature of the art form. The terminologies refer to ice cracks, of large and small sizes on the porcelain body. Large cracks go deep into “Tai Gu”, or the bones of the porcelain body, unique and different from any kiln products of the Northern Song Dynasty. Porcelains without ice cracks are considered the best products of this kiln, which is caused by the consistent expansion of the glaze during the production process [9].

5.3. Glaze Color

Despite ice cracks, the glaze color of Song porcelain also attained a high degree of perfection. Whether expressing a single-color or multi-color glaze, thick or thin glaze, all strive to express the beauty of nature. The glaze colors include moon-white, pink-green, shrimp-green, putty, eel yellow, and other glaze colors. Most wares have bubbles in the glaze as dense as beads, totally unlike the distribution of bubbles in Ru porcelain glaze. The glaze color of official kilns tended to be jade.

6. Influences and Inheritances

Until the modern period, the inheritance of Song kilns includes two aspects. One is the all-round approach and imitation of the characteristics of the official kilns of the Song Dynasty. The method is

known as high imitation, requiring artists to fire the porcelains exactly catering to the requirements of the Song era. The second approach is to imitate the surface glaze color of the Song Dynasty official kiln porcelain while modifying their pre-existing shapes. The key focus of the second approach is to create an innovative and modern shape while maintaining the traditional techniques and focuses of the original Song kiln porcelain. Recognized by ancient Chinese artists, both high imitation and shape modification are considered inheritance of the art form. Such inheritance can sustain for generations together, mainly due to the maturity of the production process and the stability of traditional handicraft production [5].

An example of the inheritor of the official Kilns is Ye Guozhen, a representative of the intangible cultural heritage protection project of "Firing Skills of Southern Song Official Kiln Porcelain", senior engineer, and master of Chinese arts and crafts. Ye improved upon traditional official kiln porcelain techniques and studied the color-changing glaze of porcelain based on the existing data on the glaze-color ratio and firing process of official kilns in the Southern Song Dynasty and solved the conundrum of the glaze color of ceramics being incapable of change after high-temperature firing persisting since the ancient times and produced a new variety of ceramics - color-changing ceramics [1].

To promote the Southern Song Dynasty official kiln celadon, many museums, art galleries, and art spaces in China design cultural and creative peripheral products to personify the official kiln celadon and carry out illustration art design. Additionally, this provides possibilities for the inheritance and development of the Southern Song official kiln celadon. For many Chinese designers and artists, letting the Song Dynasty official kiln become a cultural icon, integrating it into illustration art design, and applying it to various products for cultural symbol output, fully satisfies people's pursuit of new things, while letting art attract people's attention has become their purpose. Illustration art design used to be the carrier of the official kiln culture of the Southern Song Dynasty, carrying the millennium-long development of Song porcelain, the aesthetic concept of the Song Dynasty, as well as the ingenuity of the Chinese people and their spirit of exploration for excellence in craftsmanship [1].

Even though Tang and Song are eras when porcelain arts became prevalent, the art form flourished in later ages, until the modern period. It can be traced to artists like Ye Guozhen. Before him, however, the widespread influence of art can also be discovered in the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. During those eras, porcelain was widely used and adopted by both commoners and aristocrats. Ceramics indeed became household items, gifts to be traded among Song and foreigners, and topics of discussion [10].

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, Song's unique artistic style has influenced the thinking of several generations. For a long period, artists have been unable to improve upon the existing style, as the achievements of ceramic art in the Song Dynasty were too superior to conquer. The philosophical meanings underlying the aesthetics, the production techniques, the glaze colors, and the high standards of creation have all impeded future artists from further creations. At present, artists must ask themselves what they want to create today. If they continue in the past, they will undoubtedly emulate the ancients and cease contributing anything new to the art world; if they completely modernize the old, then the Song aesthetics would slowly disappear. The question that remains for the modern world to ponder is the direction ahead concerning the inheritance of the Song kiln porcelains.

In the creation of visual communication art, the extensive and profound Chinese traditional culture, with its unique mysterious oriental charm, is one of the sources of everlasting inspiration. It is also an indispensable and important ideological guidance in the field of Chinese visual communication art design. The aesthetic model of official kilns in the Southern Song Dynasty has influenced a variety of modern visual communication art designs, as in the domains of illustration, advertising, packaging, display, etc. The Song Dynasty porcelain's color and texture are pure and flawless and have inspired numerous artistic fields to adopt their visual characteristics. What is considered most precious by the author is the reserved, quiet, and simple design of the kilns that emerged from the unique political

situation prevalent during the Song period. The particular mindset that the artists adopted was significantly unique.

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