

Exploration of Aesthetic Ideas in Bronze Patterns of the Xia, Shang and Zhou Periods

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Abstract: From the perspective of historiography, bronze is a highly concentrated material representation of the social, political, religious and cultural aspects of the Xia, Shang and Zhou Dynasties. From the perspective of aesthetics, bronzes are the physical embodiment of the artistic aesthetics of the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties. However, by integrating history and aesthetics, bronzes are the epitome of the development of Chinese aesthetics from primitive aesthetic consciousness to traditional Chinese aesthetic thought. The patterns in bronzes became an important carrier of the aesthetic concepts of the ancestors. With the development of productive forces, the development of bronze craft reached its peak in the Shang and Zhou Dynasties, and bronze wares played an important role in the political and social life of the ancestors as a tool for rituals and divination, and the decorations in them left a colorful mark in the history of the world's fine arts. This paper takes bronze patterns as the entry point, takes the basic theories of aesthetics and art history as the basis for elaboration, places the Xia, Shang and Zhou bronzes in different era backgrounds, analyses and explains the aesthetic characteristics of their decorative patterns and the aesthetic ideas behind them, reveals the basic aesthetic connotations of the Xia, Shang and Zhou bronze patterns, and unearths the spiritual roots of the formation of traditional Chinese aesthetic ideas.

Keywords: Bronze; Bronze Patterns; Xia, Shang and Zhou Dynasties; Aesthetics; Decorative Arts.

1. Introduction

Bronze mainly refers to the artifacts made of copper and tin alloy in the pre-Qin period. Its exquisite decoration is rare in the history of world craftsmanship. The appearance of bronzes is undoubtedly a historically significant event, reflecting the outstanding talent of human beings and bringing great changes to the social life of that time. Since the invention of bronze, it spread rapidly and the technology of smelting bronze has been improving, which opened a new page in the history of mankind - the Bronze Age. Bronze is the symbol of the Bronze Age, and also the symbol of the rites of the pre-Qin period, which conveyed a rich symbolism through the abstract visual language. In the process of long-term development, the shape and decoration were given a unique aesthetic significance, this paper tries to explore the aesthetic characteristics of bronze decoration, the main purpose is to figure out the characteristics of the era of the Xia, Shang and Zhou period, what are the aesthetic ideas, aesthetic value of bronze? What influence did it have on the aesthetics of later generations? What is the significance for today's art? Through the study of these issues, the roots of traditional Chinese aesthetic thought will be explored.

2. Overview of Xia, Shang and Zhou Bronze Ware and the Period Characteristics of Patterns

2.1. Overview of Bronzes

Bronze is one of the most important achievements of material civilization during the Xia, Shang and Zhou periods, and occupies an irreplaceable position in the history of Chinese art with its exquisite decorations and unique shapes. Bronze is regarded as one of the symbols of the entry of slave society into slavery, and as a cultural symbol of slave society,

it was an important tool used by slave masters to commemorate their achievements and shape their ceremonies. The major events of social development at that time were recorded on bronzes. At the same time, as exquisite upper-class crafts, bronzes focused on the pinnacle level of social craftsmanship and art at that time.

The development of ancient Chinese bronzes can be divided into a budding period (21st century BC - 16th century BC), a nurturing period (16th century BC - 13th century BC), a flourishing period (13th century BC - 11th century BC), a renewing period (7th century BC - 221 BC), and a period of decline (after the two Han dynasties). This paper will focus on the aesthetic ideas in the art of bronze decoration from the 21st century BC to the 3rd century BC.

Bronze containers and weapons began to appear in the early years of the Xia Dynasty. The Xia Dynasty was the most rapidly developing period in China's bronze history, and the archaeological community generally agrees that the Erlitou site in Yanshi, Henan Province, was the site of the capital city of the Xia Dynasty. At the Yanshi Erlitou site, the bronze casting workshops cover an area of more than 10,000 square metres. Remains of smelted bronze objects have been excavated from Phase II to Phase IV, and there are traces of smelting in the bronze casting remains of Phase I. The variety of bronzes of the Shang Dynasty was already quite rich, and the overall style appears heavy, exquisite and complicated, with the technology reaching its peak. The artifact system centred on wine vessels was basically formed, and the complete assemblage of ceremonial vessels reproduced the increasingly elaborate rituals and status hierarchies of the Shang royalty and nobility. Bronzes of this period were heavy and high in shape, with complex and varied decorations, mainly featuring imaginary animals such as animal faces as the decorative motifs. During the Western Zhou period, tripods were the main component of bronze ritual vessels, and there were many of them. With the passage of time, the form

changed accordingly. The early Western Zhou tripods were similar to those of the late Shang Dynasty, with more varied styles in the middle period and slight changes in the late period. Some tripods had inscriptions on them, such as the Da Meng tripod and the Da Ke tripod, which had long inscriptions concerning the historical facts of the Western Zhou Dynasty. These tripods are elegant and dignified, representing the outstanding achievements of bronze art in the Western Zhou period. [1]

Bronzes of the Shang and Zhou Dynasties reached a high artistic standard based on their exquisite smelting technology and the characteristic shapes and decorations. These shapes and decorations were on the one hand the decorations of the bronzes, and on the other hand the observation and depiction of the world by the people at that time, and the embodiment of religion, nature and society in their spiritual world. As Hegel said in his book *Aesthetics*: "The elements of beauty can be divided into two kinds: one is internal, i.e., the content, and the other is external, i.e., what the content lends meaning and character to." [2]

2.2. The Period Characteristics of Bronze Patterns

2.2.1. Cultural Characteristics of Bronze Patterns

Chinese bronze culture originated in the Xia Dynasty, gradually developed and matured in the Shang Dynasty, and reached its peak in the Western Zhou Dynasty. After more than a thousand years of evolution, bronze culture has become a treasure of early Chinese culture. The decorative styles of bronzes also went through an evolution from simple and rough to ornate and exquisite, and then to plain and simple. In terms of social function, the bronzes gradually changed from being the supreme ceremonial instruments to the practical living instruments, and these features had a profound influence on the bronze patterns.

The initial stage of development of bronzes can be traced back to before the Xia Dynasty. At that time, the decorations were relatively simple and plain, reflecting the pure and simple concept of survival of the ancestors. For example, during the QiJia culture period, the shapes of bronzes were very simple and there were no particularly complicated decorations. During the Xia Dynasty, the bronze manufacturing process was gradually refined, with most of the shapes imitating pottery, and the decorations mainly based on stripes and single-layer flat carvings. Xia Dynasty bronzes were symbols of imperial power and religious majesty.

During the Shang and Zhou periods, especially the Shang Dynasty, the manufacturing process and patterns of bronze wares developed and matured as society progressed and a slave society prevailed. As the first large-scale dynasty in Chinese history, Shang culture is characterised by a long history and a primitive religious mystique. The people of the Shang Dynasty worshipped and personified the gods, displaying a colourful social life and the spirit of man's struggle against fate. During the Shang and Zhou Dynasties, bronze patterns were combined with a sense of kingship, religion and even the pursuit of knowledge, making art, religion, politics and even philosophy one and the same. The abstract pattern form gave the bronze a sense of mystery and unique decorative beauty.

From the early Shang Dynasty to the early Western Zhou Dynasty, the artistic decoration of bronzes has consistency both in terms of materials and ideas. Although they can be divided into three stages in terms of craftsmanship and

present their own unique development, they share the common feature that animal-face motifs dominate and are closely related to the religious ideas of the time. In fact, this form of decoration expresses people's attitude and level of cognition towards the objective world in an artistic way, reflecting the mysterious and solemn atmosphere generated by the worship of natural gods at that time [3]. However, after the middle of the Zhou, the nobles did not worship ghosts and gods as fanatically as the Yin and Shang, but focused more on interpreting the Mandate of Heaven and seizing and consolidating power. Relatively simple and plain, smooth and vivid patterns appeared in this period, such as tile patterns, heavy ring patterns and ring band patterns.

During the development of Chinese bronze culture, the decorative styles of bronzes have evolved continuously and have been influenced by factors such as social changes and religious beliefs.

As a cultural heritage, bronzes have gradually shown their unique artistic value and historical significance in the course of inheritance. Through the study and appreciation of bronzes, we can gain a deeper understanding of the brilliance and wisdom of ancient Chinese civilisation.

2.2.2. Artistic Characteristics of Bronze Patterns

(1) Decorative Symmetry

The bronze patterns of the Shang Dynasty retained the ancient imitation of the sensual mood of things, and gradually used the formal laws of balance and symmetry. No matter how complicated the patterns are, they all conform to the decorative principle of the axis of symmetry. Take the taotie pattern as an example, it particularly highlights symmetry in its composition. Taking the bridge of the nose as the centre line, the fierce giant eyes and sharp fangs are arranged symmetrically and spliced into a frontal taotie, giving people a solemn aesthetic feeling. From the side, it embodies the psychological worship of totems and the sacrosanct inviolability of the rights of the ruling class in the slave society.

(2) Repeated Orderliness

After replacing the centuries-old symmetry of the animal-face motif, the aesthetics of traditional Chinese decorative motifs are characterised by a single motif element, "repetitive order" and "pairs". These motifs include a large number of tattoos, thunder motifs, banded motifs, and nipple motifs, which to a certain extent belong to the category of abstract motifs. These motifs are full of regular and geometrical aesthetics. The fundamental change in the structure of decoration in this period had a significant impact on the subsequent development of bronze decoration.

(3) Harmonisation of Integrity

The patterns of the bronzes seem to be complex and complicated, but the patterns are perfectly integrated with the shape of the vessel. The elaborate patterns are interspersed between the straight and curved lines of the bottle, forming a unified rule of formal aesthetics. This also enhances the decorative interest of the pattern, which constitutes a complete and unified form. It conveys the extreme emphasis and respect of the slave-owning aristocracy for their own totem and their own rights, giving the decorative patterns of the Chinese nation a unique style.

3. Analysis of the Aesthetic Ideology of Bronze Patterns in the Xia, Shang and Zhou Periods

Xia, Shang and Zhou bronze patterns have both individual elemental patterns and combined patterns, in order to dig out the aesthetic characteristics, the author will list the elemental patterns, explore their connotative meaning, and then analyse their characteristics and laws from the combined patterns. There are both rugged or detailed abstract patterns, refined and miniaturised realistic patterns, or purely geometric patterns. The different forms of patterns can be brought together and unified in an overall design and presented in a harmonious composition. From the aesthetic point of view of the patterns of the various dynasties, the bronze patterns of the Xia Dynasty focus on the expression of form, the relationship between different patterns is closer, and the overall presentation of an organic structure and harmonious aesthetics. The patterns from the early Shang Dynasty to the early Western Zhou Dynasty are characterized by abstraction and ruggedness, and are deeply influenced by religious thoughts, and the imaginative and diversified images of fantasy animals are richer and richer, and the solemn and mysterious atmosphere is also more serious. The pattern of the middle and late Western Zhou gradually became a variety of animal body deformation pattern, this change in the structure of the pattern, for the previous specifications of the composition, is both negative and dissolution.

3.1. The Aesthetic Characteristics of the Bronze Patterns

The subject matter and techniques of bronze decorative patterns are an important part of bronze art, reflecting the social form of the time, as well as the symbolic expression of the aesthetic consciousness of each era.

Gombrich said in *The Sense of Order* that all patterns were originally conceived as symbols, even though their significance has disappeared in the course of historical development". The bronze patterns of the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties not only served as symbols, but were also the embodiment of the hierarchical system, with different patterns decorating different utensils for different purposes, and different bronze ornaments used by each class. The patterns of each era changed with the change of ideas of the dynasties, which resulted in the splendour and richness of the bronze patterns, and left the world with precious artistic treasures.[4]

Categorised according to the characteristics of the motifs, the individual elemental motifs are divided into two categories, one is a single category according to the motifs, such as dragon motifs, phoenix and bird motifs, tiger motifs, snailed beast motifs, cicada motifs, snake motifs, etc., whose images can be further divided into more subtle categories according to their respective characteristics. The other is a comprehensive pattern category, that is, various images have more in common in general, such as animal face pattern, deformed animal body pattern, geometric deformation pattern and so on.

(1) A Single Category of Decorative Motifs Dragon Pattern

In traditional Chinese culture, the dragon is regarded as a mysterious and spiritual animal, which not only appeared on bronzes during the Xia, Shang and Zhou periods, but also decorated many other artefacts. Dragon decoration is widely

used on crafts such as ivory ware, jade and wood carvings. In the ancient Bronze Age, people regarded the dragon as a symbol of natural deities and worshipped its power. Depending on the structure of the image, dragon motifs can be divided into three categories: crawling dragon motifs, scrolling dragon motifs, and intersecting dragon motifs. Crawling dragon motifs are dragon motifs placed horizontally and flatly, with the entire body in a crawling posture and the head facing forward. This type of motif can be divided into one-legged and two-legged forms, and some simple footless dragon motifs also exist.



Figure 1. Crawling Dragon Pattern



Figure 2. Scroll Dragon Pattern

Phoenix and Bird Pattern

Most of them exist in the Western Zhou bronzes, and have a very important position in the national decorative patterns. According to the image of composition, phoenix bird pattern is divided into Long-beaked Bird pattern, the body is a bird, the head has a longer beak; Scops owl pattern, front, large round eyes, hairy horns and large wings, prevalent in the middle and late Shang Dynasty. [5]

Tiger Stripes

The tiger stripe is distinguished from the tiger's head stripe in that it shows the tiger in profile. It stands on two feet, lowers its head and opens its mouth, revealing sharp pointed teeth, with its tail curled up and swirls on its body. There is also another type of pattern with two tigers forming a circle. It first appeared in the middle of the Yin Dynasty and was popular for quite a long time. During the Shang and Zhou Dynasties, there were two manifestations of tiger decoration: the line-carved tiger pattern and the round-carved tiger pattern.

(2) Composite Grain Type

Animal face pattern

Also known as taotie motifs, fantasy animals are an important representative motif of the Shang Dynasty and the pre-Western Zhou period. The animal face pattern is the pattern of the animal's head facing, and it is also one of the most primitive forms of the animal pattern composition, which accounts for the largest proportion in the bronze decoration of the Xia, Shang and Zhou Dynasties. Throughout the Xia, Shang and Zhou era of animal face pattern features, synthesized several factors: the center of the bridge of the nose as the baseline, on both sides of the symmetrical eye pattern, the eye tends to have a brow on the side of the ear, the lower two sides of the animal's mouth and the animal cheeks, the upper part of the forehead, the forehead on both sides of the protruding horns of the animal. On each side of the animal face pattern, there is a section of the body that curves upward, and the lower part of the body often has animal feet.[6]

Geometric Deformation Pattern

Geometric pattern is the earliest pattern of bronze, including oblique and parallel thunder pattern, rhombic thunder pattern, breast nail thunder pattern, hooked thunder pattern, spiral thunder pattern and zigzag thunder pattern.

Thunder pattern is the most basic geometric pattern of bronze, various forms of thunder pattern are different geometric combinations, but also the most basic structure of bronze pattern. [7]



Figure 3. Animal Face Patterns

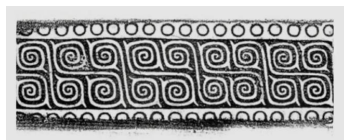


Figure 4. Geometric Patterns

3.2. The Aesthetic Ideology of Bronze Patterns

3.2.1. The Idea of "Middle Ground"

The "middle way" originated from Confucianism and Mencius, which is a kind of social interaction law and life philosophy based on the feudal patriarchal order, and is also reflected in art aesthetics. In decorative patterns, we can see that the expression of the "middle way" is mainly reflected in directional and symmetrical shapes or patterns. According to W.H.J. Schoenmakers, a modern abstract theorist, "The material world consists of two structures, vertical and horizontal." Bronze patterns of the Xia, Shang and Zhou periods, such as the animal face pattern, followed certain rules and guidelines, that is, the horizontal or vertical line as the central axis, unfolding on the plane. This "median idea" pursues accuracy, extending and unfolding at a single point, which can be located anywhere between the two ends, either in the center or between the two ends. In ritual activities, the ornament of the main body on the front is usually oriented to the public and placed towards the front. The main body decoration is divided into front and side. For example, the "Bronze Square Zun Decorated with Four Rams" of the Shang Dynasty, a relic excavated in Changsha, Hunan Province, is symmetrical from side to side with the head of a sheep as the center. This type of decoration makes it possible to see a complete image of a sheep's head from the front, and extends the symmetrical axis to the sides, presenting a "sheep's head-shaped" representation.



Figure 5. Bronze Square Zun Decorated with Four Rams

3.2.2. The Idea of "Gods and Ghosts"

The value attribute is the core of aesthetics, meaning a sense of satisfaction, acquisition and belonging that people get at the spiritual level. The role of bronzes in the Xia, Shang and Zhou periods was not only daily and ritual objects, but also a channel through which people at that time communicated with the gods and spirits; they believed that

the decorations in the bronzes displayed the language of the divine sessions, and that they could talk to the gods and spirits through these decorations. It is recorded in the Book of Rites - The Book of Tables: "The Yin people honored the gods and led the people to serve the gods, first the ghosts and then the rituals; first the punishments and then the rewards, honoring them but not kissing them. The ills of their people were swinging and unquiet, winning without shame." Shang Dynasty people respect the gods and ghosts, but also the idea of ghosts and gods as a ruler to consolidate the position required by the necessary materialization of the idea of the product, but also reflects the people of the primitive totem worship. Therefore, the main feature of bronze decoration is mysterious, majestic, hideous, solemn bronze pattern. Such as the typical pattern "animal face pattern", they cast the "animal face pattern" on the bronze ritual vessels used for sacrifice, is to use it as a medium to seek blessing and shelter with the gods. Shang Dynasty bronzes on the "animal face pattern", is the Yin Shang ancestors "respect for God" awareness of the performance, until the Zhou Dynasty evolved into "respect for heaven and law ancestor", become a religion, power, the power of the Trinity Symbol. However, there is another school of scholars who believe that the rulers of the Shang and Zhou Dynasties used the "hideous horror" of bronze decoration to express the "mysterious majesty" of the kingship, in order to show their possession of political power, status and wealth.

3.2.3. The Idea of "Peace"

In China's ancient aesthetics, the idea of harmony and roundness has similarities in different schools of thought. Whether it is Confucianism, Taoism or Zen thought, all of them emphasize the harmonious coexistence of man and nature, as well as the harmony between man and man.[8] At the same time, this thought is also reflected in the affinity between the individual and the heart, i.e., the pursuit of inner tranquility and indifference. Every object has internal contradictions, and "harmony" is about interpenetrating and integrating these contradictions. In order to realize the realm of "harmony", it is necessary to respect nature and the characteristics of things themselves. This quality of "harmony" is also reflected in the unity and coordination of the bronze patterns, showing the beauty of order and rhythm in the combination of patterns and shapes.

4. The Aesthetic Value and Influence of Bronze Patterns

Combined with the historical background, after analyzing the characteristics of Xia, Shang and Zhou bronzes' patterns and aesthetic ideas, the last point is to take the common aesthetic ideas of Xia, Shang and Zhou bronze patterns as an entry point to analyze the influence of Xia, Shang and Zhou bronze patterns on social aesthetic ideas and modern aesthetics.

4.1. The Influence of the "Middle Way" on the Art of Painting

The development of Chinese painting was influenced by the "Middle Way" proposed by Confucius. This philosophy has shaped the creative style and cultivation of Chinese painters in many ways, including philosophy, aesthetics and science. In the history of ancient Chinese painting, outstanding painters not only excelled in the field of painting, but also excelled in other forms of art such as literature,

calligraphy and poetry. The exchanges and interactions between these different artistic fields played an important role in expanding the creative ideas and aesthetic concepts of painting. For example, Wang Xizhi, Dong Qichang, and Su Shi were all learned artists. Chinese painting, as a comprehensive art form, combines various elements such as poetry, calligraphy, painting and printing, which requires painters not only to possess painting skills, but also to have the emotional experience of a poet and the vigor of a calligrapher. As Su Dongpo said of Wang Wei, who was both a poet and a painter in the Tang Dynasty, "His poems have a painting-like mood, and his paintings have a poetry-like flavor." Similarly, Dong Qichang believed, "Noble character is fundamental to the achievement of noble painting." It can be seen that as a painter, cultivation is essential.

4.2. The Influence of "The Unity of Heaven and Man" on Modern Aesthetics

The creative process in Chinese graphic design art has also subjectively implanted the aesthetic idea of "unity of heaven and mankind"; for example, Zhuang Zi, a Taoist, put forward the concept of "heaven and earth are born together with me, and all things are one with me" in the "Theory of Qiyi", which emphasizes the harmony between man's inner self and heaven and earth. This concept is also found in graphic design works. This concept is also reflected in graphic design works. For example, in the poster "Communication" created by contemporary graphic designer KAN Tai-keung, various forms of stones such as stone mountains, stone inkstones and touchstones are used to express the geographical features of Taiwan, mainland China, Hong Kong and Macao, and to symbolize the kinship between the two, expressing the philosophical concepts of "harmony between heaven and earth" and "harmony between human beings". The philosophical thought of "heaven and" and "man and". It can be seen that the "unity of heaven and mankind" idea in the aesthetics of bronze pattern has played a crucial role in influencing the creative orientation of modern art design aesthetics.

5. Conclusion

By studying the changes and development of bronze patterns during the Xia, Shang and Zhou periods, we can

reveal the ancient origins of traditional Chinese decorative beauty. This aesthetic consciousness was gradually formed under the obsessive worship of primitive religion, totem and kingship by the ancestors, who lived in an agriculture-based economic model. The beauty of traditional Chinese decoration is closely linked to the decorative patterns on bronzes.

The complex and varied decorative patterns on bronzes make traditional Chinese decoration unique in the world. These solemn and deep shapes produce a striking aesthetic effect. Despite the fact that Chinese art creations have been subjected to the impact of modern Western culture, we should study the origin and development process of traditional Chinese decorations in greater depth and explore the regularities embedded in them from the perspective of aesthetic value and cultural spirit. By doing so, we can gain a deeper understanding of the aesthetic values embedded in traditional Chinese decorations and apply them to contemporary design in order to highlight our unique cultural characteristics.

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