

Research on the Aesthetic Implication of Ugliness in the Appreciation of Portrait Bricks in the Han Dynasty from the Perspective of the “Theory of Play”

Ruiyan Geng

Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua Zhejiang, 321000, China

Abstract: The portraits in the Han Dynasty are an intuitive reflection of the life, ideological concepts, and aesthetic tastes of that era. The images of the appreciation of the ugly in them are unique. However, for a long time, academic research on their aesthetics has mainly focused on the positive and harmonious aesthetic category, and relatively less attention has been paid to the part of the appreciation of ugly. This paper introduces the “Theory of play” into the research on the appreciation of ugly in the portraits of the Han Dynasty. By deeply analyzing the types and expression techniques of the images of the appreciation of ugly in the portraits of the Han Dynasty under the Theory of play, this paper explores their artistic value and the cultural significance behind them. The present study finds that the Theory of play emphasizes the non - utilitarian, free, and creative nature of art, which is consistent with the practice of the creators of the portraits in the Han Dynasty breaking free from the constraints of conventional aesthetics and being bold in innovation when shaping the images of the appreciation of ugly. This consistency further expands the research field of traditional Chinese aesthetics and provides useful references for contemporary aesthetics and artistic creation.

Keywords: The Appreciation of Ugly; Theory of Play; Portraits in the Han Dynasty; Contemporary Art.

1. “Theory of Play” and Portraits in the Han Dynasty

(1) The Evolution and Interpretation of the “Theory of Play”

In the late 18th century, the German philosopher Kant put forward the view in Critique of Judgment that “art is a free play”. He believed that art is non-utilitarian and an activity that allows people to give full play to their spirit freely[1]. Subsequently, scholars such as Schiller, Groos, and Gadamer had different interpretations. Schiller proposed the view that “play is the harmony of human nature”[2], regarding “play impulse” as an important psychological motivation for the occurrence of activities. Groos, based on the psychological activity of “inner imitation”, proposed that “play is not completely without practical utilitarian purposes and serves as preparation or practice for future real-life situations”[3]. With the spread of Western modern aesthetic thoughts, the “Theory of Play” gradually attracted the attention of Chinese modern aesthetic pioneers. The first Chinese scholar to pay attention to the “Theory of Play” was Wang Guowei, who believed that art is a game for adults to vent their “surplus energy”. After Wang Guowei, Zhu Guangqian distinguished between play and art, believing that art, similar to play, objectifies images and has the function of empathy.

From this perspective, the “Theory of Play” encompasses many aspects, but the commonality in its discussions lies in emphasizing game activities that meet inner needs and cognition through “pleasure” as a means. Starting from this theory, we can find that the essence of the ancients’ creation of Han portraits is consistent with the “Theory of Play”. During the creative process, artisans can not only express their aesthetic cognition but also present it to viewers in a relaxed and pleasant form. This is not only an aesthetic cognitive behavior but also a spiritual enjoyment of play.

(2) Portraits in the Han Dynasty

Portraits in the Han Dynasty are special artworks decorated

on structures such as tombs, tomb shrines, tomb watchtowers, stone coffins, and cliff-side carvings during the Western and Eastern Han dynasties. Using stone as the medium and knives instead of brushes, they are either outlined with ink lines or painted with colors. In the early Han Dynasty, their artistic style was mainly characterized by “primitive nature” and “mythical colors”. In terms of expression techniques, line drawing was mostly used, with exaggerated and distorted images, pursuing a surreal beauty and being full of a strong decorative and mysterious atmosphere.

In the middle and late Han Dynasty, with the development of social economy and culture and the influx of Indian and Buddhist art, the portraits in this period paid more attention to the reflection of real life, and the themes became more extensive. They included not only mythological legends but also social life, portraits of people, architectural landscapes, etc., reflecting the Han Dynasty society’s concern for real life and emphasis on individual life experiences. Their style also gradually shifted from a single decorative nature to expressiveness. Artists began to pay attention to the inner emotions and temperament of the objects, rather than just pursuing formal decorative effects.

(3) The Joint Signification of the “Theory of Play” and Portraits in the Han Dynasty

When applying the “Theory of Play” to the study of Han portraits, we can regard these two as two manifestations of an art form. They share unique commonalities in the way they represent human activities, emotions, and social life. As a visual art, Han portraits capture moments of the daily life, historical events, and religious beliefs of the people in the Han Dynasty through images. The “Theory of Play”, on the other hand, can be regarded as a literary artistic expression, which expresses the understanding of life and comments on society through narration and description. Viewers seem to become participants in the “game”, thinking, judging, enjoying pleasure, and comprehending various “meanings” contained

therein during the process.

From the perspective of the creators' motivation, the creation of some images stemmed from the game mentality at that time. For example, some auspicious images full of fantasy, exaggeration, and deformation in Han tombs, such as the nine-tailed fox and the three-legged crow, do not exist in reality and were created by the ancients based on imagination. This creative behavior is similar to children constructing surreal scenes through fantasy during games, satisfying the spiritual desire for entertainment and exploration, and demonstrating the free spirit of the ancients in the creation of Han portraits.



Figure 1. Nine-tailed Fox of the Eastern Han Dynasty in Chengdu, Sichuan

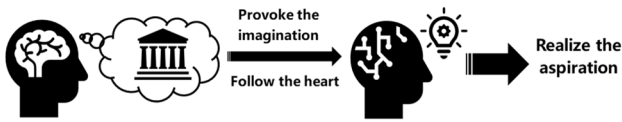


Figure 2. Psychological creation mechanism of “Theory of play”

From the perspective of the viewers' judgment, “play” is the key that unlocks the connection between the inner self and

the external world. The combination and layout of Han portraits are not random. Images of different themes are arranged in zones, echoing each other. Each image is like a game element, and through a specific combination, they create a particular atmosphere and convey specific ideas.

Take the stone outer coffin of Xing Hejiang's tomb in the Northern Wei Dynasty as an example. On the inner wall, there are painted images of 14 seated Buddhas, flying apsaras, donors, and divine beasts for protection. It is a stone outer coffin that imitates a Buddhist hall. The central wall is composed of three stone slabs, painted with three parallel pointed - arch niches. Inside the right - hand niche is a seated Buddha in meditation. The Bodhisattva on the left and the Prajapati on the right face the seated Buddha as if asking questions. The lower part of the three niches on the central wall shares a row of donors. With an incense burner at the center, there are six donors on each side. In front of each figure, there is a rectangular inscription frame. The image arrangements on the east and west side - walls are the same, each painted with two parallel large niches. The front wall is composed of three stone slabs forming the coffin door and the door lintel. On the outer wall of the coffin door are painted door - keepers bowing towards each other. The inner wall is divided into two layers. In the upper layer, there is a row of seven seated Buddhas sitting under a building. On both sides of the coffin door in the lower layer are divine beasts with long tongues sticking out. The top is composed of eight stone slabs, painted with six groups of flying apsaras [4].

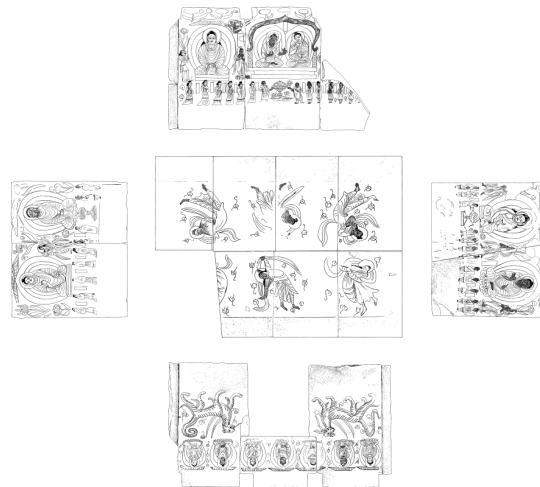
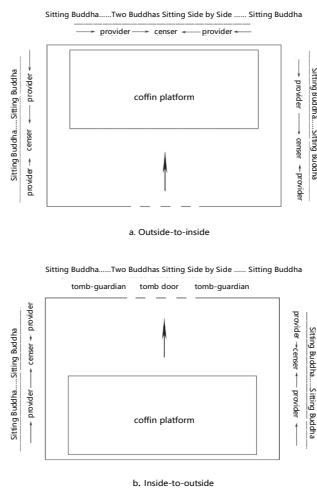


Figure 3. The inside structure of the stone outer coffin of Xing Hejiang's tomb in the Northern Wei Dynasty

When viewers enter the coffin chamber, their visual focus is on the stone coffin bed in front of the central wall and the paintings on the central wall. The deceased on the stone coffin bed is the object of sacrifice, and the paintings on the central wall are an imagination of the deceased's afterlife. The image of the tomb owner in the middle symbolizes the soul of the deceased in the afterlife world. In the interactive space with the soul of the deceased, viewers have entered a “game state”. Under the premise of following the “game rules”, they read the portraits, preserving the unpredictability that occurs during the process. The deceased in the afterlife is no longer an ordinary person in the secular world but a Buddha who has escaped the cycle of six realms. Driven by the “game impulse” triggered by the plot, viewers continue the “game”.

After the funeral, when the tomb is sealed, the seven seated Buddha images on the upper part of the front wall become the new visual center. The donors on the lower part of the Buddha

images on both side walls all take the incense burner slightly towards the outer side as the center, guiding the viewers' sight from the inside out towards the seven Buddhas on the front wall. From the central wall to the side walls and then to the front wall, as the content of the portraits extends, there is a transition from the past to the future, reflecting the unpredictability of the ending.

The joint signification of the “Theory of Play” and Han portraits makes it easier for viewers to immerse themselves in Han portraits. It triggers unconscious cognition and then leads to conscious understanding. The questions raised by reading the pictures quietly lead viewers into a “game state” during their thinking, and the “unpredictability” of the ending adds a mysterious touch. It can be said that the viewers' experience is inseparable from the combined consideration of the “Theory of Play” and Han portraits.

2. The Emotions of Appreciating Ugliness in Han Portraits

In 1853, Karl Rosenkranz, the founder of modern aesthetics of ugliness, first proposed the concept of “the appreciation of ugliness” in *Aesthetics of Ugliness*. He summarized various forms of “ugliness” in nature, the human spiritual world, and artworks, and generalized the yardstick of “ugliness”. On one hand, in terms of form, ugliness represents deformity, disharmony, incoordination, and irrational aesthetic content. On the other hand, ugliness embodies a negative spirit, that is, a return to rational concepts, culture, or customs through form, and it inherently carries the gene of irrational spirit. Ugliness, with its critical power, stimulates people’s greater yearning for beauty[5].

The so-called evaluation of beauty and ugliness in aesthetics is actually a state of lucidity in existence that humans create and endow to themselves. Everything that is beneficial to the existence of life is ultimately affirmed by beauty in a certain sense, and everything that is detrimental to the existence of life is ultimately negated by ugliness in a certain sense[6]. In primitive society, humans had not clearly and distinctly distinguished between beauty and ugliness, but ugliness already had a unique meaning. Due to the extremely low level of productivity at that time, people lived in various dangers, and the object world of their practice was terrifying and dreadful. From the unearthed bronze masks, pottery patterns, and rock paintings, it can be seen that primitive ancestors characterized the objects with the form of uglification, reflecting the terror and mystery of the object world.

By the Han Dynasty, the prevalence of Confucian thought imbued the concepts of beauty and ugliness with a strong sense of ethics and social utility. The core spirit of Confucian ethical aesthetics is “benevolence”, with “rites” as its form. “Originating from benevolence and ending with rites” is the criterion for Confucian aesthetic judgment. Subsequently, Mencius and Xunzi further developed the educational function of “beauty” and “ugliness”. Mencius said, “What is desired is called good. What one has in oneself is called trust. What is full is called beauty.” Xunzi advocated the “theory of associating virtue”, that is, believing that the beauty or ugliness of natural things does not depend on their own value but on the moral and ethical character they are associated with[7]. Confucianism endowed beauty and ugliness with ethical significance and regarded them as a social function. Therefore, Han portrait bricks also became the standard for moral judgment.

(1) Phenomena of Suffering

Nowadays, creators usually focus on eulogizing beautiful scenes and praising heroic figures, deliberately avoiding inauspicious and unpleasant phenomena. However, in Han portraits, there is no shortage of depictions of scenes such as illness, death, and punishment. For example, “Nie Zheng’s Self-Slaughter” in Figure 4 presents the scene where Nie Zheng, in order to repay the kindness of recognition, committed suicide after successfully assassinating Xia Lei. His chivalrous spirit of “being true in word, resolute in deed, and fulfilling promises” moved the stone-carving artisans in the Han Dynasty, so they depicted it to commemorate. In Figure 5, Zeng Shen was beaten unconscious by his father because he cut off the root of a melon while hoeing. After waking up, worried that his father would be angered and harm his health, Zeng Shen played the qin and sang to show that he

was unharmed. This reflects the emphasis on the Confucian concept of filial piety in Han society and also embodies the thinking and values of people at that time on how children should respond to their parents’ punishment. Although these phenomena are uncomfortable, they are a true record of reality and carry profound cultural and social educational significance.



Figure 4. Nie Zheng’s Self-Slaughter Nanyang, Henan Province



Figure 5. Zeng Tie suffered beating Nanyang, Henan Province

(2) Bizarre Imaginations

Bizarre images, as a form of manifestation of the elements of appreciating ugliness in Han portraits, are a special phenomenon in aesthetic activities. Through means such as exaggeration and anti-tradition, they challenge the boundaries of traditional aesthetics and trigger a special aesthetic experience for viewers. For example, in the picture of “Xia You with a Fox-headed Human Figure” in Figure 1, it adopts the indecent squatting posture of “sitting with legs spread out”[8]. In the picture of “Bear Dance” in Figure 2, there is a monster with a bear’s head and a human body. Also, the well-known figures like Fuxi and Nüwa with human heads and snake bodies, the Queen Mother of the West with tiger teeth and a leopard’s tail, and the Taotie all reflect people’s understanding of the boundary between “normal” and “abnormal”[10]. This is often a deliberate act by the creators. By presenting “strange” images through exaggerated forms, they achieve a special artistic effect, triggering a strong psychological and sensory response from viewers, thus enabling them to experience the humor or irony within.



Figure 6. Xia You, Eastern Han Dynasty, Xuchang, Henan Province [9]



Figure 7. Bear Dance, Eastern Han Dynasty, Henan Province

(3) Humorous Images

In Han portraits, themes of dwarfs and jesters were quite popular in the imperial court. They were often short in stature and had exaggerated postures. Some were juggling balls, while others were beating drums and performing comical shows, amusing people with their funny movements and expressions. When these images appeared in tombs and other settings, it was hoped that they could provide entertainment for the tomb owner in the afterlife or bring some relief to those coming for sacrifices and mourning in the solemn atmosphere. By self-uglifying to entertain others, they reflected the entertainment cultural needs of the society at that time. Meanwhile, it also demonstrated from the side that people adopted a relaxed and joking attitude towards the imperfections and flaws in life.



Figure 8. Music, Dance and Variety Shows, Eastern Han Dynasty, Nanyang, Henan Province

3. The Aesthetic Connotations of the Appreciation of Ugliness in Han Portraits from the Perspective of the “Theory of Play”

(I) The “Game State” beyond Reality

From the perspective of the “Theory of Play”, the appreciation of ugliness provides people with a free space that transcends the utilitarian aspects of reality and conventional aesthetic standards. In real life, people are often constrained by norms such as morality and ethics. However, the activity of appreciating ugliness, like a game, allows people to temporarily set aside these constraints and face and examine elements excluded by traditional aesthetics with a more liberated mindset. For example, Bian Que with a human head and a bird’s body may seem a bit comical in modern times. But at that time, the bird was regarded as a symbol of mysterious power and the ability to communicate between heaven and earth, suggesting the miraculous nature of Bian Que’s medical skills and his connection with the divine. In the portrait, Bian Que holds items such as needles and ganoderma grass. The needle represents acupuncture therapy, indicating the importance people attached to Bian Que’s acupuncture skills at that time. The Ganoderma grass symbolizes the magical herb, implying immortality and suggesting that Bian Que had the medical skills to bring the dying back to life and prolong life. By contemplating ugliness, people can break through the inherent aesthetic thinking patterns and obtain a new aesthetic experience, which is the pursuit and realization

of the free spirit.



Figure 9. Bian Que Practicing Medicine, Eastern Han Dynasty, Weishan, Shandong Province

(2) The “Game Impulse” of Transforming Ugliness into Beauty

At the beginning of the 20th century, the psychoanalyst Freud linked “play” with the human subconscious, believing that the creative activities of artists could be regarded as a form of manifestation of the subconscious, and they were engaged in spiritual play through artworks. In Freud’s view, art is not only the conscious self-expression of creators but also the projection of their subconscious desires and conflicts. When artisans create artworks of ugliness, they have the impulse to transform ugliness into an object with aesthetic value.

Take the image of “Qitou” as an example. They artistically process “ugliness” by exaggerating and enlarging the mouth part and adding the effect of fangs, creating an aesthetic effect of “ugliness” that fully demonstrates the ferocity of Qitou, thus reflecting its ability to expel ghosts and diseases. This process is full of a creative game impulse. Similarly, when viewers interpret “ugly” works, their aesthetic experience is activated, enabling them to give full play to their subjective initiative and endow the works with different meanings. This interactive aesthetic process is precisely the embodiment of creativity in the “Theory of Play”.

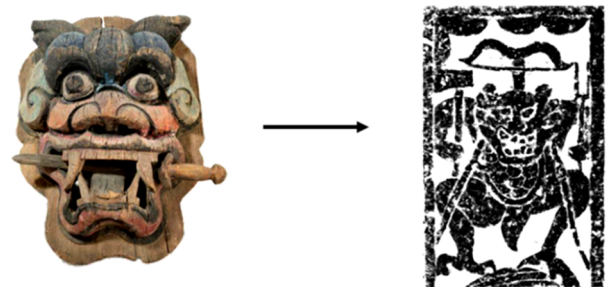


Figure 10. Qitou, Eastern Han Dynasty

(III) The “Game Value” Reflected by Ugliness

The aesthetics of appreciating ugliness in Han portraits is not a simple negation. Instead, it is a way to understand beauty more profoundly through comparison. Aesthetic play is not pure entertainment either; it is a metaphor for the living state at that time and a profound expression of life experiences. Take the cliff-side stone carvings of Buddha images on Kongwang Mountain as an example. They include Buddhist themes such as the Nirvana image and the story of sacrificing one’s body to feed the tiger, as well as standing Buddha and sitting Buddha images. The movements of these Buddha images are exaggerated, and the slightly closed eyes and the

ushnisha are symbols of the Buddha, representing the Buddha's wisdom and realm of cultivation. From this, it can be seen that Buddhism had been introduced in the early Han Dynasty. However, during the process of integrating with local culture, craftsmen might not have grasped the Buddha's image accurately enough, resulting in some differences in the shapes of some images compared with the mature Buddhist statues in later generations. For example, the body proportions are not very coordinated, and the lines are not smooth enough, making them seem a bit "strange". Through the depiction and examination of ugliness, we can gain insights into deep-seated issues such as social development, culture, and human nature. This kind of reflection helps people better understand themselves and society, promoting social progress and the improvement of human nature, embodying the social value of the aesthetics of appreciating ugliness from the perspective of the "Theory of Play".



Figure 11. Cliff-side Stone Carvings of Buddha Images on Kongwang Mountain, Eastern Han Dynasty, Lianyungang, Jiangsu Province

4. Implications for Modern Art Creation

(1) Breaking Free from the Shackles of Traditional Aesthetics and Pursuing Freedom and Innovation

The rise of "aesthetics of ugliness" not only corrects the bias of neglecting the appreciation of ugliness in traditional aesthetic research, expands the diverse orientations of aesthetics, but also propels this discipline towards an open and dynamic modern cultural form[11]. Firstly, it must be clear that breaking free from the shackles of traditional aesthetics does not mean completely denying the value of traditional aesthetics. Instead, while deeply exploring traditional aesthetics, the concept of innovation should be integrated into artistic creation, aiming to achieve a dual sublimation of artistic expression forms and connotations. Secondly, pursuing freedom and innovation is an inevitable requirement for the development of art. In the current era of information explosion, people's aesthetic concepts are becoming increasingly diversified, and a single aesthetic standard can no longer meet people's growing spiritual needs. Therefore, modern art creation requires sufficient freedom to explore more possibilities and meet people's diverse aesthetic demands. Only in this way can art truly enter people's lives and become an integral part of them.

(2) Enriching the Levels of Emotional Expression and Conducting "Game-like" Creation

The primary task of enriching the levels of emotional expression is to explore and delve into deep-seated emotions. In the "Theory of Play", this means that artists need to break away from superficial emotional descriptions and explore more profound emotions and feelings. We can regard creation as a game. Through comprehensive considerations of character image design, scene layout design, and detail addition, and by using techniques such as exaggeration and reversal, the emotional conflicts in the work are magnified.

By expressing "beautiful" emotions in a "ugly" way, a detailed emotional world is created, allowing the audience to deeply immerse and experience in the ocean of emotions.

(3) Extracting Elements of Appreciating Ugliness and Achieving Integration and Innovation between the Ancient and the Modern

During the creative process, artists should focus on integrating elements of appreciating ugliness with other aesthetic elements and possess a keen insight into the modern art context and innovative thinking. By combining elements of appreciating ugliness with elements such as grace and sublimity, considering the inherent value of traditional aesthetic elements, and paying attention to the development trends of modern art and the aesthetic needs of the public, works such as prints, paper - cuts, polymer clay art, and installation art that have both the charm of traditional aesthetics and conform to modern aesthetic tastes can be created, thus achieving true innovation and development.



Figure 12. Modern Art Creation

5. Conclusion

The influencing mechanism of the "Theory of Play" on the aesthetics of appreciating ugliness in Han portraits is multifaceted. It stimulates the creativity of creators, endows works with non - non-utilitarianism, and creates a free creative atmosphere, enabling the aesthetics of appreciating ugliness in Han portraits to present unique artistic value. In today's art creation, we can draw on the concept of the "Theory of Play", break free from the constraints of traditional aesthetic concepts, and boldly explore the forms of expression and subject matter of the aesthetics of appreciating ugliness, injecting new vitality into art creation.

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