

A Symbolic Study of Bird-and-flower Patterns in Song Dynasty kesi

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Abstract. Song Dynasty kesi pioneered the art of kesi painting. To further explore the symbolism of bird-and-flower patterns in Song Dynasty kesi, this study systematically analyses historical documents, survey data, and artworks to explore the cultural, social, and aesthetic context of bird-and-flower patterns in kesi art during this period. The research found that Song Dynasty bird-and-flower patterns on kesi were a decorative technique and a cultural expression with multiple layers of symbolism. These patterns often represented good fortune, prosperity, and happiness, reflecting society's yearning for a better life. This research provides a valuable reference for understanding Song Dynasty society's cultural atmosphere, aesthetic orientation, and craftsmanship prosperity. It has specific theoretical and practical significance for art history and cultural studies.

Keywords: Song Dynasty; Kesi; Floral and Bird Patterns.

1. Introduction

To thoroughly implement the requirements of the 'Outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China and Long-Range Objectives through the Year 2035' and the guidelines of the 'Opinions on Further Strengthening the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage' issued by the General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council, and to effectively promote the revitalization of traditional Chinese craftsmanship and the high-quality inheritance and development of conventional craftsmanship.

As an essential part of China's handicrafts and intangible cultural heritage, kesi silk embroidery is rich in cultural connotations. After being refined during the Tang Dynasty, Song Dynasty kesi silk embroidery became even more exquisite. During the Northern Song Dynasty, China's social and economic development was rapid, and culture and the arts flourished. Kesi silk embroidery was widely used in court costumes and palace decorations as a high-level embroidery technique. Song Dynasty emperors favored famous flowers and rare birds, and at that time, the patterns of kesi silk embroidery were mostly auspicious floral and bird themes. In general, the construction of its visual form not only follows the formal logic of arts and crafts but also deeply participates in the encoding and disseminating of social and cultural meaning. However, there are no detailed records of systematic textual descriptions of the floral and bird patterns, and there are very few records of floral and bird patterns in Song brocade in overseas documents, which poses certain limitations on the study of the art and culture of the time. By studying the evolution of the bird-and-flower pattern in Song brocade works, the composition characteristics, color expression, etc., and integrating these, a deeper understanding of Song culture, aesthetic concepts, and lifestyles can be gained, providing theoretical support for revealing the interpenetrating relationship between artistic production and daily life experience in a specific historical context.

2. The Evolution of the Silk-embroidered Floral and Bird Patterns

Traditional Chinese patterns are rich and varied, and their development has a long history in the river of Chinese history. The patterns on silk fabrics may have been relatively simple at first, mainly based on basic geometric patterns. However, with the development of social civilization, the gradual maturity of flower-and-bird paintings in the Tang Dynasty set off a trend in society of admiring works with flower-and-bird themes, and people gradually introduced flower-and-bird patterns on silk fabrics. During the Tang and Song dynasties, the folding flower and bird style became popular, and the

combination of flowers, birds, butterflies, and auspicious birds in silk could be seen everywhere. Moreover, most of these combinations of flowers and birds had a specific meaning, such as the phoenix and birds among flowers, the peacock among a hundred flowers, peonies, and peony, all of which symbolized wealth and good fortune, while plum blossoms, orchids, bamboos, and chrysanthemums were the 'gentleman' flowers that conformed to the literary aesthetic. The Song Dynasty's silk floral patterns were known for their rich themes and realistic style, showing a neat and elegant artistic style. Typical forms of the organization include scattered, folded branches, entwined branches, and geometric filling, while modeling techniques and decorative treatments use freehand, composite, seasonal, scene-setting, and scholar flowers. The overall color tends to be light, soft, elegant, and solemn. In terms of the development of silk patterns since ancient times, the changes and alternations in style have not qualitatively changed due to different dynasties, and each pattern has a gradual creation process. The upper class of the Song Dynasty pursued spiritual freedom and tranquillity, with a melancholy mood and natural and vivid depictions of flowers and birds that were more prevalent in that era. A large number of flower and bird patterns, such as broken branches and intertwined flowers, became the mainstay of silk weaving during the Song Dynasty, and the details of the patterns also sought to be delicate and tender. Huang Nengfu's book 'Complete Collection of Chinese Fine Arts: Arts and Crafts: Printing, Dyeing, Weaving and Embroidery' includes a total of 15 Song Dynasty kesi works, of which those with birds and flowers as the theme occupy a prominent position, with as many as 9 of them[1]. The smooth flow of the Silk Road and the open foreign policy of the Tang Dynasty brought the Western barbarian style and foreign cultures to China, enriching the decorative materials for the bird and flower patterns in woven and embroidered products. During the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, the floral and bird patterns continued to be passed down in silk fabrics and gradually evolved into various styles, reflecting the cultural context of different historical periods.

3. The Decorative Expression of Floral and Bird Patterns in Song Dynasty kesi

(1) The transformation path of Song Dynasty kesi patterns

Before the Song Dynasty, kesi production was mainly concentrated on practical items such as the beginning of calligraphy and painting, belts, and other valuable items. However, after entering the Song Dynasty, this tradition changed. During the Northern Song Dynasty, kesi gradually shifted from practical to ornamental use, with its content focusing more on the depiction of birds and flowers, and the compositional style becoming denser. By the Southern Song Dynasty, ornamental kesi had reached maturity. Under the influence of the realistic painting style, many copies of court paintings and calligraphy by famous artists were produced, significantly expanding the range of subjects to include diverse artistic elements such as flowers and birds, landscapes, architectural landscapes, and human figures[2]. With the flourishing of flower-and-bird paintings, works with flower-and-bird themes are particularly common in the art of kesi. First of all, flower-and-bird paintings can bring a relaxed and pleasant feeling to people from the subject matter. Flower-and-bird patterns are usually based on natural scenery. Artists observe flowers and birds in nature to capture realistic details and shapes to ensure the vividness and realism of their works. Artists also choose different flowers to match according to the changes of the seasons to show the vitality and changes of nature. Second, flower-and-bird paintings are auspicious and popular with rulers and the people alike. They also often incorporate elements of traditional culture, such as images from classical literature, symbols from Taoism and Buddhism, etc, to reflect the depth and heritage of the culture[3]. In addition, flower-and-bird paintings are relatively small in size, which makes it easier to express their delicacy in the art of embroidery. When framing the scene, the artist focuses on the decorative nature of the composition. Through carefully designed patterns and motifs, the overall effect is a harmonious and beautiful visual effect, achieving the delicate and dainty style pursued by the Song people. Take Zhu Kerou as an example. Zhu Kerou was famous for her kesi, but she was also good at painting. As of this point in time, only seven authentic Zhu Kerou silk tapestries exist, and they all feature birds and flowers as

the central theme. Her artistic attainments reached a high level of both form and spirit. Her works are sketched with silk threads as freely as a brush, and the colors used highlight the simple and elegant charm. The unique 'Zhu Kerou' long and short cross technique is dedicated to recreating the court-style painting's vivid and delicate ink wash effect, striving to rival the popular boneless painting technique of the same period. This style of painting inherits the charm of Northern Song court flower-and-bird paintings and follows the style characteristics of 'Huang Family Wealth and Prosperity,' but the unique feature is that it does not rely on ink strokes to outline the subject but is directly depicted in color. While studying the commonalities between the Song Dynasty's meticulous flower-and-bird paintings and kesi, Zhu Kerou discovered similarities in the meticulous depiction of animal posture and the enhancement of the image's texture. She combined the meticulous and realistic style of the Song Dynasty's meticulous brushwork with the precise techniques of kesi and then innovatively used silk threads to replace the traditional gradual color changes of meticulous brushwork, thereby innovatively recreating on the basis of meticulous literati painting. Historical records show that Emperor Huizong of the Song Dynasty once praised the kesi work 'Peach Blossom and Butterflies' and personally inscribed: 'The birds step on the flower branches and come out of the white silk. I have heard people say that it is difficult to carve silk. Don't look at it as ordinary embroidery if you want to know that it should be a Xuanhe object.' [4] The poem highlights that this work is not comparable to ordinary embroidery but a masterpiece that demonstrates the exquisite craftsmanship of kesi during the Xuanhe period.

(2) Composition characteristics of Song Dynasty kesi bird-and-flower patterns

The composition of Song Dynasty kesi bird-and-flower patterns follows some traditional painting rules and aesthetic principles to create a harmonious and aesthetically pleasing effect. The bird-and-flower patterns in Song-dynasty kesi art are often small in size and tend to use a single branch of flowers as the main subject of the picture. The overall composition is balanced, and the picture is given vitality by a cluster of leaves extending subtly from the corners or by birds and insects as clever decorative elements. This compositional technique is a common approach in Song-dynasty bird-and-flower paintings. It not only shows the form and charm of the object in exquisite detail but also cleverly creates a delicate and unique beauty. Deeply influenced by the philosophical thinking of the Song Dynasty, this rule of composition, which seeks truth and realism and is meticulously crafted, has always been the core pursuit of painting art at that time. The goal of artistic pursuits was highly valued by painters, and to conform to this trend, they even personally raised various plants and animals, carefully observing and sketching them. This serious approach reflects a top-down focus. It created a meticulous and skillful scene in the paintings of the entire Song Dynasty. 'Ducklings in a Lotus Pond' is Zhu Kerou's masterpiece. In the composition, this work highlights the main subject of flowers and birds, making it the visual focus through techniques such as size and shading. The secondary elements are supportive. The picture depicts a pair of mallards (male and female) accompanied by two ducklings, two egrets, and a kingfisher. They either swim leisurely in the pond or fly lightly in the sky, vivid and lifelike. The scene is interspersed with tiny creatures, such as dragonflies and grasshoppers, adding a touch of vitality. On the water's surface, aquatic plants such as lotuses, lotus leaves, hibiscus, white lotuses, and water caltrops are reflected in the Taihu rocks on the shore, creating an interesting contrast. The layout is well-proportioned, showing the static beauty of harmony and incorporating dynamic and lively elements, outlining a peaceful and harmonious natural scene. All the flowers, insects, and birds depicted in the picture are realistically portrayed based on the actual objects, which were obviously obtained through direct observation and sketching of natural scenes. At the same time, the size ratio of the animals and plants in the picture also faithfully restores the true state of the natural world so that their position and size in the pattern conform to the overall aesthetics. In the composition, attention is often paid to the posture, movement, and rendering of the environment of the flowers and birds to express a particular emotion and artistic conception. For example, the lotus pond scene is presumed to be a scene from late spring to early summer based on the size of the ducklings and the state of the flowers[5]. Certain flowers, birds, or elements, such as cranes and plum blossoms, may have a symbolic meaning, representing good omens such as

longevity and fidelity. The flowers in the picture are presented in the form of twin stems and branches, and the birds and insects are all in pairs, cleverly implying the good omens of a harmonious marriage and a prosperous family.

(3) The color language and symbolic expression of the flower and bird pattern of kesi

The coloring process of the flower and bird pattern of Song Dynasty kesi is a complex and delicate process that requires multiple steps to complete. First, a suitable satin or other material must be selected as the basis for drawing the flower and bird pattern so that the subsequent coloring process will not be affected. 'Zilan Quepu Tu' is a collection of paintings that brings together the essence of birds. It shows 36 rare birds of nine species, including the Mandarin duck, the crane, the golden pheasant, and the brown-headed bulbul, all dancing and singing together. They are similar in shape but have different and colorful plumage. The work is made of purple ripe silk as the base material and is refined using the technique of partitioned openwork. The main flowers are peonies and passion flowers, forming the core pattern, supplemented by various floral elements such as lotuses and begonias interspersed among them. Contrasting with the birds, they form a coherent pattern of flower-and-bird combinations. In each group of patterns, a pair of peacocks is engraved and painted in the center, creating a prosperous, vibrant, and festive atmosphere and symbolizing the wish for 'wealth and good fortune.' 'Kesi Camellia and Swallowtail Butterfly' is a typical flower-and-bird painting from the Northern Song Dynasty, in which the silk weaving technique shows a unique charm and character in the use of various colored silk threads. In the coloring process, gradual changes and transitions in color must be paid attention to show the three-dimensionality and layering of the petals and feathers. For example, brown and beige are often used for the dry branches to show their aged texture, while green and yellow-green are used for the leaves to restore their vitality. For the challenging insect-eaten parts, the clever use of beige and brown combined with the floral thread weaves a natural transition of colors to simulate the realistic effect of insect-eaten leaves. In terms of detail, the layers of the calyx are finely displayed through the technique of long and short stitches, while the stamen part is colored beige and yellow. Reducing the gap between stitches makes the overall effect more even and natural. The technique of filling in strokes, as the core craft technique of silk-weaving, is used in the 'Silk-weaving Camellia and Swallowtail Butterfly' to achieve precise control of artistic expression in the texture of the calyx branches and stems the shape of the insect-eaten remnants of leaves, and even the subtle omissions that occasionally appear in the weaving. The coloring process requires the artist's experienced manual skills and sensitivity to color matching to ensure that the final floral and bird patterns are full of artistic and technical beauty.

4. Cultural and Artistic Representation of the Kesi Bird-and-flower Pattern

As a material culture carrier in a specific historical context, the artistic form and symbolic system of Song Dynasty bird-and-flower patterns in kesi profoundly reflect the cultural ecology and value orientation of the Song Dynasty. Under the dual influence of the ruling strategy of promoting culture and suppressing martial arts and the rise of Neo-Confucianism, the Neo-Confucian scholars represented by Cheng Hao, Cheng Yi, and Zhu Xi gave new interpretations to Confucian classics, constructed a rigorous metaphysical system and rational spirit, and thus changed the way of thinking and value orientation of aesthetics. The study of the principles emphasized the unity of heaven and humanity and the spiritual realm of oneness within and without. This led Song Dynasty art to move from external beauty to internal depth and from perceptual experience to rational understanding[6]. The driving force behind the kesi technique broke through the traditional framework of pragmatism, gradually evolving into a spiritual expression system with images of flowers and birds as its carrier. This pattern system refines natural objects into a decorative language with semiotic significance through the creative logic of 'viewing objects and extracting images.' The choice of subjects follows the aesthetic principle of 'transferring emotions through sketching' in court painting and coincides with the ethical projection of the literati group of 'viewing objects and comparing them to morality.' In essence, it is a visual translation of the Confucian ideal of 'gentlemanly character' in craftsmanship.

From the perspective of technological history, the weaving characteristics of 'through warp and weft' and the increasingly sophisticated resist dyeing technique of kesi not only construct a color symbolism system of 'coloring according to type' but also enhance the dialectical relationship between reality and illusion in the pattern space through the physical characteristics of warp and weft interweaving, so that the two-dimensional plane can carry the painterly spatial awareness of the 'three distance methods.' This breakthrough in the intertextuality of technology and art reflects the value transformation of Song Dynasty handicrafts towards 'the vessel carries the way.' This symbiotic relationship between material culture and spiritual culture reveals the deep integration of technological rationality and humanistic spirit in craftsmanship in Song society.

5. Conclusion

The study of the Song Dynasty's bird-and-flower pattern, kesi, provides an important perspective for decoding the cultural symbols and aesthetic paradigms of the Song Dynasty. The selection, combination, and spatial configuration of specific floral and avian motifs in the pattern system essentially constitute a symbolic coding mechanism, which not only reflects the Song people's aesthetic perception of 'seeing objects and taking their likenesses' but also reflects the philosophical interpretation of the natural order in the collective consciousness of society. It is worth noting that the 'traditional style of describing objects' in the literary field and the 'trend of sketching from nature' in the field of painting during this period penetrated the creation of kesi through an inter-media aesthetic paradigm, causing the fabric patterns to break through the boundaries of traditional decoration and evolve into visual texts that carry the concept of 'gathering objects to attain knowledge' in Neo-Confucianism. This kind of research not only reveals the inter-construction relationship between craft evolution and cultural trends from the perspective of technical philosophy but also provides a typical sample for analyzing the coupling mechanism between material civilization and spiritual production in the Song Dynasty from the perspective of art sociology, which has double enlightenment value for the revitalization of contemporary intangible cultural heritage and the reconstruction of the aesthetic system of traditional crafts.

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