Highlights in Art and Design
ISSN: 2957-8787 | Vol. 14, No. 1, 2026

A Comparison of Plant Carving Patterns in Ancient Huizhou with Those in Baroque and Rococo Styles

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Abstract: Although ancient Huizhou and the Baroque and Rococo sculpture arts of Europe belong to different times and spaces in the East and West, both were in the late feudal society and the transition to modern times, and both were passionate about expressing plant patterns, forming their own visual transformation systems with distinct styles. Through the comparative analysis of patterns, this paper reveals the differences in style and method of visual transformation of plant patterns between the two, thereby revealing the expression methods of traditional patterns under different cultural differences. The research finds that the plant patterns of Huizhou's three carvings have established a visual transformation system centered on Confucian ethics: in terms of shape, they usually use simplified or geometric forms for generalization, while in composition, they tend to emphasize symmetry and balance, and rely on homophonic symbolism and cultural allusions; while the visual transformation of plant patterns in the Baroque and Rococo periods shows a shift from religious symbolism to a focus on sensory experience. These differences between the East and the West respectively reflect the Confucian tradition of "investigating things to gain knowledge" and the transition of European decorative art from the Christian view of nature to the Enlightenment. This study provides a theoretical basis for the visual transformation of plant patterns under cultural differences.

Keywords: Huizhou Three Carvings; Baroque and Rococo; Plant Patterns; Visual Transformation Comparison; Cultural Cognition.

1. Visual Transformation Methods of Plant Carving Patterns in Ancient Huizhou

The most representative carving art of ancient Huizhou is the "Three Huizhou Carvings", which artistically distill natural plants such as flowers, grass, and fruits, thereby creating plant patterns that not only meet aesthetic demands but also are rich in cultural connotations.

1.1. Visual Transformation of Flower and Grass Patterns

The Three Huizhou Carvings have a distinct set of visual transformation rules for the forms of natural plants. Taking the peony pattern as an example, the petals of peonies in nature are often layered and full. However, in the Three Huizhou Carvings, peonies are often stylized through reducing the number of petals, emphasizing the edge curves, and highlighting the symmetrical and radiating arrangement of the stamens. For instance, in the peony lattice carving decoration of the Yizhixi Zhi Cheng Hall in ancient Huizhou, the overall shape of the flower head is highly symmetrical yet with variations in direction and angle. The petal shapes are simplified and generalized into round and plump forms, the calyx shapes are elongated and curled, and the leaves are simplified into scroll patterns. The work combines shallow relief and line engraving techniques, retaining the typical features of the plants, exaggerating their symbolic parts, and then regularizing them with reasonable geometric shapes, creating a solemn yet rich and delicate visual effect.



Figure 1. The peony carvings of the "Zhicheng Hall" in ancient Huizhou

The characteristic of the lotus "growing out of the mire but remaining unstained" makes it a symbol of purity and detachment in the minds of Chinese scholars. Additionally, the lotus is an important representative of Buddhist culture. The lotus pattern was widely used in the ancestral halls of ancient Huizhou, and this choice reflects the combined influence of traditional Confucianism and Buddhist culture[1].

The visual transformation of the lotus pattern also follows this rule. Huizhou craftsmen often emphasized the circular structure of the lotus's outer contour and simplified the petals into regular geometric shapes. For instance, in the Ming Dynasty brick carving of "Lotus and Heron" in the Anhui Provincial Museum, the petals are generalized into geometric shapes and arranged in strict symmetry. The design of the petals presents a symmetrical distribution and is enhanced by the use of various circular lines and the dynamic, curved shapes of the petals, highlighting the transformation of the lotus about to bloom, which is vivid and exquisite. Typical techniques of visual transformation of the lotus pattern in the picture include: reducing the number of petals, emphasizing the circular line structure, and using incised lines to represent the veins of the petals.



Figure 2. Huizhou Ancient Residential Building - "Hulü" Pattern Brick Carving

1.2. Visual Transformation of Tree Patterns

The artistic treatment also embodies another visual transformation strategy. In the Qing Dynasty plum tree finial from the Anhui Provincial Museum and the pine tree stone carving from Xidi Village in Anhui Province, the tree trunks are simplified into slightly curved cylindrical shapes. The tree bodies are expressed through the combination of countless lines, which represents the rough texture of the bark. This reflects the spirit in traditional Chinese art of using lines to shape and express texture. The flowers and pine needles on the tree crowns are composed as a whole through repetitive units, making the overall shape imply subtle layering changes within a harmonious and unified form.



Figure 3. The carved plum tree pattern on the plaque



Figure 4. The pine tree on the stone carving from Huizhou

1.3. Visual Transformation of Vine Patterns

Vine plants, with their graceful curves, have become an important decorative element in the three-dimensional carvings. The honeysuckle pattern originated from Central Asian art and evolved into a typical scroll pattern in the Huizhou three-dimensional carvings. The honeysuckle pattern in the ancient buildings of the Huizhou village near Mount Huangshan, combined with the shape of peony leaves and transformed, is interwoven and intertwined with the structural lines through continuous S-shaped wave-like lines, forming a continuous band-like decoration with the "one whole and two breaks" composition rule, which is highly decorative. This transformation of vine patterns employs linear repetition, symmetrical arrangement, and rhythm changes as encoding techniques, symbolizing the continuous vitality of life. The grape pattern of this building highlights its compact and plump grape fruits, exaggerating the fruits into spherical clusters, simplifying the vine into a spiral main line, and summarizing the grape leaves as five-lobed palmate shapes. Through the inlaying technique, the three-dimensionality is enhanced. The multi-seeded characteristic of grapes makes them a symbol of "many children and good fortune".



Figure 5. The grape patterns in the wood carvings of ancient villages in Huizhou



Figure 6. The honeysuckle pattern found in the wood carvings of ancient villages in Huizhou

1.4. Symbolic Representation of Fruit Patterns

Fruit patterns are frequently used in the wood carvings of Wuyuan to convey specific auspicious meanings. Peaches, in traditional culture, symbolize longevity and are usually depicted in a symbolic form to summarize the natural shapes. They are often combined with bats to form the meaning of "both good fortune and longevity". Grapes and pomegranates have many seeds and in the carving, emphasis is placed on depicting the roundness and fullness of the objects and the abundance of the seeds, symbolizing "many children and good fortune". Fruit patterns have the beautiful meanings of "continuously multiplying melons" and "full family of children", representing a prosperous family. The "Prosperity Picture" in Wuyuan wood carving summarizes the structure of natural melons into a stylized fruit pattern. Through regular wavy arrangement, it forms a whole. The shape and composition are basically symmetrical, and the space relationship is created by the obstruction of leaves and field mice.



Figure 7. Wuyuan Wood Carving "Prosperity Picture"

2. Visual Transformation Characteristics of Baroque and Rococo Sculptural Patterns

The visual transformation of plant patterns in European decorative art underwent a significant shift from religious symbols in the Baroque period to sensory experiences in the Rococo period. This evolution can be evidenced by the visual transformation methods of three types of patterns: flowers, fruits, and leaves.

2.1. Flower Patterns

As early as the Middle Ages, roses had been established as symbols of purity and the love of the Virgin in Christian art. Therefore, roses were the most favored flower motif in Western decorative patterns. The rose carving patterns in the Baroque period were a three-dimensional declaration of divine authority. For example, the rose relief decoration on the ceiling of the Roman Jesuit Church was heavy and symmetrical, paired with lotus leaves, and complemented by a golden background, symbolizing religion and royal power. Due to the height of the ceiling, the diameter of the natural rose was enlarged to over 1 meter and the number of petals increased, with the carving exceeding the ordinary scale. It emphasized the solemnity of religion in the color treatment of flower patterns, and the gold foil-covered petals symbolized the light of heaven and the authority of the church. The wall decoration of the Harvest Hall in Versailles also used rose patterns. This pattern was composed of entwined vines, blooming flowers, and curled leaves, creating a visual sense of flow through asymmetrical curves, emphasizing dynamics and drama. The rose was prominently displayed on the wall in a three-dimensional form, combined with gold treatment, enhancing the sense of three-dimensionality and luxury, and echoing the theme of "abundance" of the Harvest Hall. Therefore, the Baroque rose carving patterns had the characteristics of being heavy, solemn, and luxurious, reflecting the Baroque's exaggerated representation of natural themes.

In contrast, the rose patterns in Rococo art were as an embodiment of courtly sentiment, often found in furniture decoration, reflecting the luxurious daily concept of Rococo. For example, the rose relief decoration in the Petit Trianon Palace was very elegant and soft in shape, often composed of multiple partial C-shaped and S-shaped curves, with a clear sense of flow. Its overall layout broke the symmetry of the Baroque style and pursued a more dynamic elegance. Moreover, the rose relief decoration in the Petit Trianon Palace paid great attention to the realistic depiction of natural details, with more complex layers of petals and an emphasis on imitating the natural stretching form of real roses.



Figure 8. Wall decorations of the Harvest Hall in Versailles



Figure 9. Rose reliefs in the Petit Trianon Palace

2.2. Fruit and Vine Patterns

The carved decorative patterns featuring fruits and vines from this period in Europe are most prominently represented by grapes. The Christian scripture "I am the vine, and you are the branches" mentions this, so grapevines have been closely associated with Christian doctrine since early times. The carved patterns of grapes and vines are often closely related to religious culture because grapes have the metaphorical significance of Christ's blood and the wine used in the Eucharist, representing salvation. The main altar at the main entrance of the Baroque-style Saint Francis Church in Paris, with its golden walls, features hundreds of gilded angels flying among grapevine-covered flower clusters. The gold foil used is extremely costly, and even the Corinthian columns are adorned with gilded grapevines, with the angels scattered among them, creating a complex and magnificent scene that contrasts beautifully with the image of Jesus being held up by the prophet in the altar. During the Rococo period, grapevines broke away from the religious framework and became purely decorative. For example, the gilded grapevines on the wall panel of Princess Salamon's room at the Soubise Mansion in Paris interweave with roses in an "S-shaped curve", the vines are summarized as slender golden lines, losing the heaviness of the Baroque period, creating a luxurious and soft effect. This reflects the ornate and graceful decorative art style of the Rococo period.

From the development of fruit patterns, we can see the evolution of the sculptural thinking from Baroque to Rococo. For instance, the main part of the pinecone fountain at the Schönbrunn Palace in Vienna was built in the late Baroque period and was supplemented with decorations during the Rococo era. However, its main sculpture still retains the characteristics of Baroque: carved from sandstone, each scale weighs 15 kilograms, and the surface retains the marks of wide chiseling. The newly added decorative part is cast in tin alloy, significantly reducing its weight, and uses the "reduced and nested" technique to allow lighting fixtures to be placed inside.



Figure 10. Pinecone Carved Fountain in the Vienna Palace

In terms of color treatment, the Baroque part maintains the original color of the stone, while the part of the Rococo period is applied with blue-green glaze, and when the internal candles are lit at night, it produces a mysterious fluorescent effect. This functional transformation into aesthetics marks the liberation of the artistic essence of sculpture.

2.3. Branch and Leaf Patterns

During the Baroque period, the engraving of calyx leaves was extremely popular. The calyx pattern first appeared on the flower cups of the Corinthian columns in ancient Greece, with an elegant posture. It is a typical representative of ancient Greek and Roman scroll decorations, symbolizing the eternal existence of the temple. On the Baroque bronze canopy designed by Bernini for the dome of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, the calyx leaves wrapped the column in an exaggeratedly curled form. The leaves were thick and processed with deep relief, combined with the dynamic spiral columns, symbolizing the sanctity and vitality of the ecclesiastical power. Additionally, in the gold-plated decorations of the Palace of Versailles, the calyx leaves were arranged symmetrically around the Sun King's emblem, with plump leaves and distinct layers, reflecting the sense of order of absolute monarchy. In the Rococo era, the shallow relief treatment of calyx leaves relied more on the plasticity of plaster, making the leaf edges appear thin and like paper. Moreover, in the interior decoration of the salon of the Soubise Mansion in Paris, the calyx leaves were simplified into asymmetrical scroll patterns, combined with gold lines, giving it a luxurious and dynamic feel.



Figure 11. The lily leaf emblem of the Sun King at the Palace of Versailles



Figure 12. The lily leaf decoration in the Suisi Salon

3. The Cultural Roots Behind the Differences in Visual Transformation Characteristics of the Two

Both the ancient Huizhou of China and the Baroque and Rococo sculpture art in the West prefer to use plant patterns as decorations. The differences in the means and style of visual transformation of plant patterns in the two are fundamentally due to different civilizational perceptions.

3.1. The Divergence of Natural View and Aesthetic Philosophy

The plant pattern encoding of the "three carvings" in ancient Huizhou was deeply influenced by Confucianism. The concepts such as "harmony" [2], "investigating things" [3], and "joyful but not excessive, sorrowful but not painful" advocated by Confucianism deeply influenced the visual transformation of plant patterns, making the Huizhou three carvings exhibit a restrained aesthetic.Therefore, the plant patterns in it mostly express natural forms through simplified and regular geometric shapes, presenting a feature of being formulaic and symmetrical. The shapes and composition features are inclined towards regularity and balance, and the style is stable, reflecting the aesthetic of "harmony" advocated by Confucianism. Moreover, the decorative nature of it is subordinate to the function of ethical education. For instance, the scroll-pattern in ancestral buildings symbolizes the continuity of the family, the lotus pattern symbolizes integrity, the melon pattern symbolizes the continuous growth of descendants, and so on. And the plant patterns are not only natural objects but also metaphors for the noble character, having the "beauty of analogy" effect. For example, the pine, bamboo, and plum patterns in the three carvings. Finally, the three-carving art in ancient Huizhou also profoundly embodies the Confucian concept of "observing things to acquire knowledge". Confucianism emphasizes that by carefully examining the natural laws of objects, one can understand their inner truth. The three-carving art does not simply copy the depictions of plants such as peonies, honeysuckles, and melons, but completes artistic refinement under the traditional aesthetic perspective by grasping their essential features. This vivid visual transformation vividly embodies the concept of observing things and the exploration of truth by the people of ancient Huizhou.

In contrast, the decorative art of Baroque and Rococo is rooted in the Christian view of nature and presents a less stable development process. The plant patterns in Baroque decorative art often reflect the divine radiance, creating visual shock through forms such as spirals and fractures, aiming to inspire believers' reverence for the divine. During the Baroque period, the gold wall of the Saint Francis Church in Versailles was covered with grapevine carvings, with angels scattered among them, being extremely complex and magnificent, with strong religious symbolism. While in the Rococo period, the salon was the core of noble social gatherings, the plant patterns deviated from the sacred and solemn pursuit of the Baroque period and placed more emphasis on decorative appeal. For example, the gold-plated grapevine patterns on the wall panel of the salon of the Subiz Mansion present a dynamic "S-shaped curve", with the vines simplified into slender golden lines, and the leaves summarized as heart shapes, creating a romantic and beautiful effect, with a complex, elegant, and dynamic style. The plant

patterns in the Rococo period gradually broke away from the religious framework and became pure decoration, providing visual pleasure. [4]

3.2. Differences in the Demands for Social Functions

The plant patterns in Huizhou three-carving art have a significant function of ethical education. The imperial examination culture, clan system, and commercial ethics all made the carving art in ancient Huizhou permeated with the beauty of human relationships and education, such as the "bending the laurel branch pattern" corresponding to the meaning of "bending the laurel branch to win the imperial examination"; the "cabbage pattern" rhymes with "hundred wealth", combining Confucian frugality concepts with the practicalism of Huizhou merchants; the melon pattern symbolizes descendants filling the house, etc. The plant patterns in Baroque and Rococo decorative art served absolute monarchy and ecclesiastical power. The laurel tree pattern in the Palace of Versailles symbolized Louis XIV's military victory, with its strict geometric layout reflecting a sense of solemnity and the desire to conquer nature. The Rococo period's noble residences had more complex and elegant, dynamic rose patterns, embodying the aesthetic submission to the sensory pleasure of the secular world.

3.3. Differences in Carving Materials and Techniques

The selection of materials for Huizhou three-carving art is limited by the geographical environment of Huizhou. The blue bricks have a certain brittleness, so the shallow relief technique is often used, and wood carving can be shaped according to the texture of the wood. In addition, the apprenticeship system of inheritance also limits the speed of innovation of patterns, allowing the symbolic features of the formula to be continuously maintained for a long time. While Europe not only mastered the gypsum technology but also achieved progress in alloy casting technology after the Renaissance, which enabled the plant patterns to present surreal scale depictions [5], and also had greater freedom in shaping, making the patterns more three-dimensional. For example, the tin alloy used in the pinecone fountain of the Beautiful Palace in Vienna and the bronze lotus leaf decoration in the Saint Peter's Basilica. The advancement of technology made the decorative patterns of Baroque and Rococo in sculpture more free in shaping and size, and also made preservation better.

The ancient carving arts of Huizhou in China and the Baroque and Rococo styles in the West both favored the use of plant patterns as decorations. The differences in their visual transformation methods and styles were actually the external manifestations of the different civilizations' understandings. The visual transformation style of the three types of Huizhou carvings originated from the orderly nature of Confucian culture, while the visual transformation styles and methods of Baroque and Rococo plant patterns reflected the shift from religion and royal power to a focus on sensory pleasure. This contrast provides a reference model for cross-cultural visual transformation studies.

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