

Liu's Bamboo Weaving in the View of Design Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT

With national cultural and spiritual connotations, folk handicrafts have plenty of scope for survival, continue a nation's tradition of artwork-making, and have created perceivable aesthetic values. This kind of folk arts combines with daily necessities, and transforms traditional culture and spiritual connotations into the aesthetics of daily necessities. This can not only pass on excellent folk handicraft, but also make daily necessities more aesthetic, leading to an ideal aesthetics in life. This plays an important role in setting design trends with national culture and spiritual connotations. This paper takes the research of aesthetic elements in design as the theoretical framework, and combines multidisciplinary research theories and methods such as in art, aesthetics, and cultural industry to try to analyze the successful cultural industry of folk handicrafts — Liu's bamboo weaving, through material, shape and cultural connotation.

Keywords: design aesthetics, traditional aesthetics, Liu's bamboo weaving

1. INTRODUCTION

In bamboo weaving art in Sichuan Province, Liu's bamboo weaving in Qu County, Dazhou City is the most successful. Sichuan is rich in bamboo resources, and so ancestors here used bamboo to make tools and utensils a very long time ago. From the very ancient times to the Tang Dynasty and to the Qing Dynasty, bamboo weaving industry in the province was very developed and never interrupted. It is fair to say that bamboo was an inseparable part of production and life for people as their houses, chairs, fans, sleeping mats, hats and chopsticks were all made from bamboo. The Liu's bamboo weaving just emerged amid such a unique geographical and cultural background. In the 1970s, the main inheritor Liu Jiafeng successfully developed jacquard weaving and woven calligraphy and painting, laying the foundation of the unique Liu's bamboo weaving and promoting the development of bamboo weaving craft in China. And Liu Jiang, successor of the second generation, integrated bamboo weaving with tea ceremony, incense, bonsais, cultural objects and the like, to bring bamboo weaving back to the daily life of the general public. The older generations focused on craft techniques, while the new generations pay more attention to the aesthetic needs of the public.

In recent decades, Liu's bamboo weaving has gone beyond towns and opened stores in big cities, with a tranquil cultural sense. This traditional craft has entered the urban daily life and gained popularity among young people, which has transformed traditional crafts into fashionable daily necessities. Liu's bamboo weaving is a model of transformation of cultural industry in folk handicraft. By depending on traditional folk handicraft and combining contemporary aesthetics in life, public aesthetic needs, and lifestyles, this bamboo weaving brand has become a sort of

cultural industry that conforms to both the current social aesthetics and functions for use. It not only inherits extraordinary folk handicraft but shows the traditional Chinese culture. The following content mainly analyzes the woven bamboo products by Liu family from three aspects: materials, shape, and cultural connotation.



Figure 1 Bamboo weaving craft—bottom making

2. PURSUE NATURAL AND AUSTERE OF MATERIALS

Liu's weaving majorly adopts tall bamboo without joints as raw materials. From selecting materials to making bamboo filaments, it requires more than a dozen procedures. The bamboo filaments feature different degrees of thickness and are soft, light, and full of luster. A quality woven bamboo product often starts with a piece of bamboo filament. The soft filaments taking on varied shapes in the hands of folk craftsmen can be made into production tools and daily utensils. This represents a traditional pattern of life in Sichuan with a history of thousands of years, and the

unique geographical and cultural background on which Liu's bamboo weaving has developed as well. In the hands of Liu Jiang, bamboos are gradually turned into everyday items of urban people, presenting a distinct sense of artifact aesthetics. In terms of materials, he focuses more on the beauty of bamboo's natural texture, in line with the design concept and Chinese traditional artifact aesthetics which both value natural and austere beauty. Confucius once said: "As I know, vermilion lacquer does not need to be mixed with other colors, pure jade not carved, and valuable gem not decorated. Why? Quality things need no decorations. [1]" In other words, when a kind of material is already beautiful enough, no decoration is needed, because the beauty in the highest level lies in one thing's intrinsic feature, far from excessive adornments. In most cases, the design of daily necessities is to employ the unique color of bamboo filaments themselves to make products with a single color, and without exaggerated patterns or any discordant colors. Such kind of weavings looks simple and gentle on the whole. This design concept perfectly echoes an idea of Confucius that "Even beautiful, external painting is artificially added to the natural things whose intrinsic beauty is far better." Likewise, similar to Lao Tzu's idea that "great cleverness conceals in foolishness", marvelous beauty is hidden in natural things themselves, a high appreciation of nature and its beauty. Zhuangzi who was also for natural beauty and against artificial work, and regarded natural purity and beauty were synonyms. Liu's woven bamboo artifacts just manifest the natural and pure feeling the bamboo materials themselves express. The consideration of the beauty of materials themselves exists throughout the whole bamboo weaving process including bark scratching, steaming, cutting, and weaving, each of which would avoid over-processing. The Book of Diverse Crafts, Chinese oldest document about handicraft, points out four necessary elements for making exquisite artifacts, that is, good timing, geographical convenience, beautiful materials, and sophisticated techniques. In these four elements, material quality outweighs skills. The design philosophy cherishing materials and emphasizing plain beauty was reflected in the whole history of creation in ancient China. Such philosophy derives from the traditional Chinese concept of "harmony between man and nature", which conforms to nature and thus leads to the aesthetics at the highest level, and is reflected in the perfect integration of natural beauty and moderate man work.

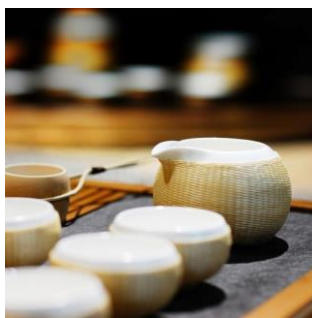


Figure 2 Tea sets series — knowing bamboo, four seasons



Figure 3 Bamboo over porcelain

In artifact design, the materials are used not only for their natural attributes, but for their intellectual and cultural ones. Apart from natural beauty, bamboo boasts cultural values as well. Since ancient times, bamboo has been admired by Chinese scholars and literati for its obvious joints were taken as a symbol of exemplary conduct and noble character. Bamboo grows uprightly, straightforwardly and neatly, which matches Chinese literati's pursuit of character. Where materials are the Tao exists. Materials are not only a carrier of items that meet the needs of people's life, but also a carrier of culture, mainly manifested in the transmission of unique traditional culture and special modern elements. Bamboo is not simply a kind of material in Chinese traditional culture, but shows the Chinese people's evaluation standards on morality and beauty [2]. Chinese scholars and literati would like to express their ambitions via bamboo. As the quote goes, "I would like have no meat to eat than to live without bamboo." Besides, together with plum blossoms, orchids, and chrysanthemums, bamboo has become an iconic plant that is a metaphor for the character of gentlemen, as it looks gentle, elegant, implicit, and dynamic. In a series of daily necessities made by Liu's bamboo weaving, the cultural elements of bamboo are also well explored and employed. "Original" is just a strongly cultural series, including vases and tea sets. Its refresh, elegant, warm, and vivacious design with soft colors embodies a restrained design of aesthetics, just like an amiable, easy people with great virtues in a secluded world.



Figure 4 "Original" series Baoqilai; plain, simple bamboo over porcelain; creative bamboo knots; bamboo porcelain vase; snake neck-like bottle

3. SHAPE ARTEFACTS WITH MODERATE TECHNIQUES

According to the evaluation standards of traditional aesthetics of creation, one who excessively shows off his handicraft skills does not deserve applause from literati, since such behavior falls into crooked art, and conflicts with literati's thought of ideal aesthetics. To Confucius, rites and music (gorgeous forms) should be in harmony with virtues (unaffected content). Similarly, materials and craftsmanship should also complement each other to attain a harmonious level to produce beauty of coordination and present good designs. In the design of bamboo woven daily necessities of the brand, traditional dazzling colors are deliberately removed; instead, pure colors and simple patterns are adopted to avoid dwarfing the beauty of the materials themselves due to excessive decorations. At the end of the Ming Dynasty and the beginning of the Qing Dynasty, Li Yu, a master of life aesthetics, concluded in his book *Pleasant Diversions* a craft design philosophy that "act by following the nature of things", which refers to the nature of materials and craftsmanship. The materials of bamboo weaving are selected according to the final products' characteristics. Such selection involves bamboo's type, age, section and color; bamboo filaments are also associated with the features of products, and the painting colors are mostly selected to highlight the natural color and texture of bamboo to give a light and elegant sense on the whole. In the Liu's bamboo weaving, woven objects with bamboo filaments, also known as bamboo over porcelain, mean that filaments with nearly same thickness are woven on a porcelain ware without any sight of joints. Procedures, from material selecting, scratching, steaming, splitting, and weaving, are all based on the nature of bamboo.



Figure 5 "Original" series "Earth" plain wooden shelf weaving; creative artisan woven bamboo bag for dinner parties

In the design of artifact-making in ancient China, the approaches to process materials and solve design problems often emphasized "cleverness" and "subtleness", which involves the combination between natural grandeur and craftsmanship, and materials and techniques, thus leaving artisan work at one with work of nature. Lao Tzu's philosophy that "great cleverness conceals in foolishness"

reflects his aesthetic principle that even with some work of man, marvelous natural beauty following the Tao is definitely different from that of ordinarily-worked stuff. Shen Chunjin of the Ming Dynasty once proposed a harmony mix of subtleness and natural splendor. The "natural" here does not imply artifacts without any processing or decoration, but with fine, unpretentious, unaffected treatment which can finally produce a natural visual effect [3]. Therefore, display of skills is not the goal of traditional design aesthetics, much less a recognized approach. The materials of Liu's bamboo weaving are mainly *neosinocalamus affinis* without joints in the Qionglai Mountains. Through a dozen procedures, bamboo is made into soft and shiny filaments with certain thickness by strict standards. The cross section of such filaments is a rectangle in general, with a uniform thickness of one or two hairs. Bamboo over porcelain is delicate and exquisite, but only needs simple tools, hands of the master and a bamboo knife. During the weaving process, filaments need to be tightly interlaced against the surface of the porcelain, and all joints and ends must be out of sight to make the final output seems like a natural thing.



Figure 6 Bamboo over porcelain

4. BUILD UNDERSTATED AND ELEGANT BEAUTY OF CULTURE

Compared with the Western design of artifact-making, the aesthetic characteristics of China's traditional artifacts in shape are understated and elegant. Chinese culture emphasizes the quiet and unobtrusive beauty of stoicism and non-exaggeration. Excellent design of utensils stresses meaningful charm, which is visually intriguing [4]. The series of "Original" in Liu's bamboo weaving just presents a mix of bamboo's intrinsic color with single-color porcelain wares, giving a trim and elegant appearance. Exquisite texture of woven bamboo and jade-like porcelain produce a gentle and quiet visual effect. To Su Shi, a writer of the Song dynasty, the highest level of art is that "Extreme splendor stems from plainness." Represented by

the aesthetic concept of literati, the Chinese aesthetic culture advocates a simple, concise and elegant design style. Traditional aesthetics pursues tranquility, harmony, vividness, and vigor, which is also the essential aesthetic pursuit of our nation [5].

The colors of bamboo strips used in Liu's bamboo weaving are usually bamboo's original color or black. Black strips are dyed in boiling water with a plant called Huaxiangye, and will never fade in the sun and rain. The strips with bamboo's original light and elegant color go through grinding, polishing and varnishing to create a pleasant sense of utensils. The design of daily necessities removes traditional bright colors and uses simple weaving patterns. Besides, it fits colors of bamboo strips to that of porcelain, i.e., bamboo's original color to light-colored porcelain and dark color to darker porcelain. This can lead to a plain visual effect. In terms of shape, the style is generous, refined, simple and adorable. The overall effect focuses on soft and stretched curves, supplemented by strong straight lines. This can present a mixed feeling of straightness and curves, toughness and softness. Such simple style can leave a cultural impression of majestic grace in traditional aesthetics in design of artifact-making.



Figure 7 “Original” series; shoulders of beauties; artisan bamboo over porcelain, Kung fu tea sets with five heads, plain weaving, white porcelain



Figure 8 Black bamboo woven tea sets over porcelain

5. CONCLUSION

The traditional aesthetics of creation subtly affects our daily life, and aesthetic concepts we identify. Liu's bamboo weaving can gain great popularity among urban young

people and lead new life aesthetics, with which admiration of the second generation of successors for traditional culture in the design of daily utensils has a lot to do. The inheritance and development of traditional folk crafts needs to be in tune with the times. For this, folk crafts have gone through the stage of producing cheap and practical tools in life and production, which highlights weaving skills and focuses on profits from export. But to combine the popular aesthetics in contemporary urban life is an important opportunity to seek development at the moment. Introduction of Western design aesthetics in the 1980s is a choice of that time for development. In the long run, we need to build an aesthetic concept in life closely related to our own culture and habits. Therefore, we must pay attention to the influence of the virtues reflected in traditional aesthetic culture and ideas on daily necessity design, and these items' relation with aesthetics, because this is important for us to better pass on traditional folk crafts and closely link them with daily life.

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