

A Brief Analysis of the Beauty of Pearlescent Celadons

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ABSTRACT

Thanks to technological innovation and mechanized production brought by industrial revolutions, production of goods has become more convenient than ever before, but with that comes the convergence of product designs. Compared with cold modern industrial designs, traditional handicrafts with warmth of human beings and historical and cultural value are gaining more popularity and attention. This article takes China's folk craft art as the direction of research, and starts at pearly celadons, a kind of porcelain of civilian kiln. Focusing on the "beauty of folk crafts", this article will briefly analyze the cultural value, beauty of folk crafts and Zen elements of pearlescent celadons through the aesthetic process from its body to image to show the beauty of China's civilian kiln's porcelain.

Keywords: folk craft art, folk craft, pearlescent celadon

1. Introduction of Pearlescent Celadons

Pearlescent celadon, an important branch of celadon, is a kind of civilian kiln's porcelain, mainly produced in the Tingxi Kiln in Fujian province during the Song and Yuan dynasties. Its color is warm and lustrous, and a touch of loquat-like yellow is most impressive. Such porcelain is engraved with scroll grass patterns together with dots or lines made by fine-toothed combs (Figure 1). With some charm of celadons of the Longquan Kiln in Zhejiang Province, pearlescent celadons have also developed their own characteristics demonstrated in free-and-easy painted patterns and natural and pure styles of decorations, presenting distinctive characteristics of southern Fujian. Like their simple appearance, pearlescent celadons are not very famous in China's splendid and rich culture of pottery and porcelain, but their cultural value, beauty of folk crafts and Zen elements should not be ignored.



Figure 1 Pearlescent celadon bowl

2. Heritage of Overseas Trade through a Millennium

Pearlescent celadons have not only witnessed the prosperity of overseas trade, but also embody the open and inclusive spirit of the Maritime Silk Road. During the Song and Yuan dynasties, thanks to China's flourishing overseas trade driven by the demand of overseas markets and booming ports, China's porcelain export reached a peak. At that time, a large amount of pearlescent celadons sold abroad through the Maritime Silk Road. And the overseas trading department (like today's customs) set in Quanzhou further promoted the export of porcelain in Fujian province. According to Book on Advantages and Disadvantages of All Counties of China by Gu Yanwu, "People in Fujian province interact with others abroad all through the Yuegang port in Zhangzhou." Yuegang was a well-known commercial port on coastal area of southeastern China. Most of pearlescent celadons were exported, some of which can be found in some sunken ships of the Song dynasty as pieces. Pearlescent celadons were especially popular among the Japanese, and their records are very common in Japan's diary-like "tea party journals" in which some people would like to write down the tea sets and food in their tea ceremony. For example, in his Tea Party Journal in Tennoji, Tsuda Sōgyū wrote, "I was lucky enough to see a pearlescent celadon tea cup with thick clay and engraved by bamboo knife with twenty-seven lines. Its bottom seems a little worn. And the Chinese character "福" (blessing) on it is mistakenly written as "福ㄗ". The color is reddish brown."^[1] A Japanese document about tea ceremony Yamanoue no Sōji ki o yomu also has a clear record of pearlescent celadons. In addition, they can be often seen in Japanese art museums and unearthed cultural relics, which can demonstrate their popularity among Japanese society back

then. China is a large producer of porcelain, and over thousands of years pearlescent celadons sold to many countries and regions in Asia and Africa, leaving great impact on society, culture and life here. Beyond their value in use, pearlescent celadons also carry profound historical and cultural connotations.

3. Beauty of Folk Crafts

3.1 What is “folk craft”?

The term “folk craft” originated from Soetsu Yanagi, father of Japanese folk crafts (*mingei*) movement. Soetsu who took developing folk crafts as his mission throughout his life devoted himself to the research of folk crafts to collect and sort out quite a few folk wares and stuff. His effort advanced the development of the Japanese folk crafts movement. With a tender heart for things and unique oriental standpoint to think about the nature of creation, he regarded beautiful objects as something incorporated into our daily life. In simple folk utensils, he found the “otherworldly beauty”, and established the aesthetics in folk crafts with strong oriental features. The term “folk craft” was created by Soetsu, specifically referring to “crafts of the people”. The furniture, clothing, tableware, etc. used by ordinary people in daily life all belong to folk crafts. To Soetsu, folk crafts have qualities of warmth, purity, sincerity and down-to-earth character, and only in the world of folk crafts can we seek for natural, healthy, plain and vibrant beauty. The Japanese folk crafts movement started by Soetsu triggered the emergence of a series of folk craft books and museums. The movement has not only built Japanese confidence in their culture by exploring their cultural wealth, but also guided the whole society to uphold simple and practical aesthetic standards. Different from the one-sided aesthetics that regards preciousness, rarity, and individuality as beauty, Soetsu defines the essence of the beauty of folk crafts by practical, healthy, simple, and natural qualities, having expanded the scope of aesthetic researches. China’s folk crafts share many similarities with that of Japan. In recent years, with the effort of more and more cultural workers, China’s research in folk crafts has made great progress, but is still not profound enough to match the abundant resources of Chinese folk arts and crafts whether in quantity or quality.

3.2 Genuineness, goodness and beauty of “folk crafts”

“Genuineness” here means “being real”. When talking about the nature of folk crafts, Soetsu Yanagi noted that “Beauty means something combined with useful purposes, that is, it comes from life. As such, the beauty of folk crafts can be more sound and comprehensive. So, beauty should not be explored from the exterior aspects of our life, but must from the interior ones.” The beauty of folk

arts and crafts lies in a kind of free, plain and natural charm and creativity of the people in their life, as craftsmen’s creations are inspired by the most pure aspirations for a better life that emerge from their work, and such beautiful aspirations are transformed into the artistic images of folk crafts. In the past, people mainly appreciated paintings and sculptures, but ignored the artifacts they used. Folk craft art is treasure in human life, representing the truest beauty of life after a long history and life experience. From an aesthetic point of view, the more real things are, the more beautiful they become. The beauty of folk craft art lies in their real, natural, simple and moving features. Pearlescent celadons are often engraved with the patterns of scroll grass, which is also called creepers that are given an auspicious meaning of growth and extension as they grow and stretch earnestly. In the old days, superstitious Japanese believed that pregnant women wearing creepers could have a boy, and expressed a sense of kindness. Therefore, such kind of porcelain mostly sold into Southeast Asia, Japan, North Korea and other places where also lived many Chinese who used such porcelain to express their homesickness. The beauty of pearlescent celadons is that it embodies people’s real aspirations for life at that time.

The “goodness” of folk craft art means that it comes from life and is applied to life. Tolstoy said, “The more goodness in life, the more interest in life itself.” Items used in life should be solid and durable. Different from porcelain of official kilns that requires exquisite craftsmanship and pursues excellence, porcelain of civilian kilns is required to be more durable and is thus in high demand for it is made to meet the needs of people’s work and life. However, skilled and kind craftsmen would not cut corners; instead, they will ensure the quality and meet the demand with their sophisticated craftsmanship. Pearlescent celadons differ from other types of celadon in its glaze-free bottom which can prevent glaze being stuck on the kiln when being fired and is helpful to add aesthetic effects and convenient for mass production. The color of glaze seems like human skin, and different colors reflect different textures and characteristics. Without contrasting red and green or black and white, glaze of pearlescent celadons is mostly yellowish (Figure 2), which impresses people with an artistic sense of glimmering colors and interlaced light and shadow. Such kind of porcelain, like a pretty girl of a humble family, can give a pure, natural, and understated feeling of beauty. In addition, the texture of scroll grass patterns engraved in some bowls is straightforward and flowing, much like cirrus clouds, and although the patterns are randomly combined but still seem very superb, creating an auspicious aura of flowing clouds. Some plates are decorated with lines made by fine-toothed combs on the periphery, and scroll grass, dots or leaves patterns on the inner surface. In such kind of plates, the layout of patterns is rigorous and natural, and the lines are inscribed in a forceful and free-and-easy hand, giving a sense of falling flowers and floating water (Figure 3). Like light blue lake water, the inner surface of blue and white glazed bowls can set off the pure and plain lotus, reflecting the lotus’s virtue in being clean despite

growing out of mud, a symbol of the virtues of nobility and integrity. Images of kids occasionally appear among flowers, adding some delight of life. For example, on exquisitely made blue and white glazed plates, kids are dancing just out of their natural and innocent quality. Their facial expressions and movements, though sketched concisely, have delicate and smooth lines, showing their innocent nature. In addition, rolling camellia petals seem like a breeze blowing off, forming a harmonious dynamic state with running kids. This provides a harmonious combination of material form and internal spirit, and perfectly evokes mood and atmosphere.

The expression of these images derives from civil society where painters live. With a deep experience and more real feelings of their daily life, they can convey the pure nature of children without trying too hard to describe it. This is also the reason why porcelain of civilian kilns can reflect genuineness, goodness and beauty. Pursue genuineness and goodness, and then achieve the distinctive beauty of folk craft art. It is fair to say that a saying in Zen —“being natural can lead to excellence and greatness”—is a witty account about understanding beauty.



Figure 2 Pearlescent Celadons Fragments



Figure 3 Pearlescent Celadons Fragments

4. Beauty of Zen Elements

Both Zen Buddhism and tea ceremony culture are originated in China. In ancient times, “Tao” (ceremony here) is at mental level, referring to origin of things, while “tea” is at material level. Making “tea” as the carrier of “Tao” is called “tea ceremony”. Zen Buddhism and tea ceremony culture were introduced from China to Japan, and then gradually grew into the Zen culture with unique Japanese characteristics through a long history of inheritance and development, which have penetrated into all aspects of Japanese people’s life, and extensively influenced their values and aesthetic views. The Japanese Zen master Ikkyū Sōjun gave the calligraphy “Tea and Zen unite as one” by another Zen master Yuanwu Keqin of the Song dynasty to Murata Shuko. Later, Ikkyū, praised as the founder of Japanese tea ceremony, invented the “rustic style of tea”, and summed up the spirit of tea ceremony in four words “prudence, respect, serenity, and quietness”, which has become the core spirit of Japanese Zen tea ceremony. Later, Sen no Rikyū developed such spirit into “harmony, respect, serenity, and quietness”. During the Southern Song dynasty, or the Kamakura period in Japan, numerous pearlescent celadons sold into Japan, and were admired and honored by Murata Shuko. In a sense, pearlescent celadons also gave him inspiring insights into tea ceremony. Zen aesthetics is based on harmony and nature, expressing the beauty of harmony and plainness of things. The concise lines and colors of pearlescent celadons are unaffected, vivacious and distinctive, presenting a kind of natural and simple beauty. Using such celadons to drink tea seems better reflect the aesthetic pursuit of respect for nature. Drinking tea and practicing Zen meditation are put together, and we can taste the infinite mystery of tea in a Zen way, for the fragrance of tea contains deep Zen ideology. Sapping tea is like practicing Zen meditation, which requires a peaceful, tranquil and graceful state of mind. The two activities have different forms, but share similar essence. Tea tastes bitter but also sweet in bitterness. People can get both physical and mental pleasure after drinking tea, feeling like being enlightened and nurtured by dew. Then,

they will forget worldly things and resonate with nature emotionally, refreshing their soul and reaching a state of freedom and enlightenment. This naturally leads to an epiphany, and represents the highest level of aesthetics in tea ceremony. Zen aesthetics emphasizes man forming oneness with things, and the harmonious coexistence of man and nature. From the perspective of Tao, all things under heaven are equal without disparities. Therefore, both tea drinking and Zen meditation should conform to nature, and break the barrier between man and nature, achieving coexistence in spirit and reaching a surreal state. As the quote in Zhuangzi's *On Leveling All Things* goes, "Heaven and earth coexist with me, and all things and me unite as one." Everything breaks through the barriers and boundaries between its body and the outside world, and eliminates the difference between them. At this time, human beings are no longer independent from the heaven and the earth, but can communicate with the energy of them and with all things. Therefore, people can put themselves in a proper place to experience the interest of life of all things in nature. According to Zhuangzi's *Zhi's Journey to the North*, "Nature has great beauty that is indescribable." The world has the supreme beauty, and the only way to reach this world is to experience it really, a kind of poetic wisdom. Yanagi Sōetsu said: "Actually, using things is the best way to experience beauty in life, because beyond this, there is no opportunity to get close to and appreciate beauty. In the past, people who understood this best were those who were proficient in tea ceremony, because they have acquired a deep feeling of beauty from the beauty of utensils and tools."^[2] Masters in tea ceremony have sharp and free eyes to see objects' body, instead limiting themselves into the concept of utensil. They can be seen as the pioneers who appreciate the beauty of folk crafts, as they pursue the beauty in utensils and combine beauty with life. The natural and simple materials and colors of pearlescent celadons contain complicated procedures and delicate workmanship, which reflects the natural beauty produced through great effort to refine them. This is just like returning to the true self after Buddhist service, and can show the eternal beauty of spirit.

5. Conclusion

Prospering overseas trade and convenient shipping conditions once brought pearlescent celadons to the world, which has an impact on the society, culture and life of many countries. Such porcelain comes from life but is beyond life, and serves life and brings beauty in it. Nowadays, we need "returning to beauty" more than ever. When talking about folk crafts, Yanagi Sōetsu said, "Fortunately, we are in an era when we can know such beauty, and our life requires such beauty." We should discover the existence of beauty in our daily life, create experience of beauty, and build a state of mind for beauty. We should also think about creation, aesthetics, and how to see our life from different perspectives. At the same time, the eyes to appreciate beauty should be free and

unfettered, because boundary-free freedom can provide more possibilities in appreciating "beauty". As one kind of the porcelain of China's civilian kilns, pearlescent celadons not only carry profound historical and cultural connotations and Zen spirit, but also represent the real, natural, unaffected and moving beauty of folk crafts, like a shining jewel in Chinese history of porcelain.

Annotation

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