

# Analysis on the Artistic Expression of "Flying Beauty" of Chaozhou Inlaid Porcelain

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## ABSTRACT

The art of inlaid porcelain in Chaozhou has a long history and has been passed down to this day, which is an important part of Lingnan's architectural decoration and craft art. "Flying beauty" is a dynamic artistic expression that expresses meaning through form. This article will analyze the artistic expression connotation and underlying factors of the "flying beauty" of Chaozhou inlaid porcelain from the perspective of the regionality of culture and the visual sense and symbolism of artistic expression.

**Keywords:** Chaozhou inlaid porcelain, Aesthetics, Culture.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Mr. Zong Baihua once mentioned the "flying beauty" of ancient Chinese architectural art in the article "Preliminary Exploration of Important Issues in the History of Chinese Aesthetics"<sup>1</sup>. The "flying beauty" has many levels of connotations and it is also reflected in many aspects of traditional Chinese art, but from the level of "whether it can be observed intuitively", it can be roughly divided into two aspects. First of all, on one hand, it is the part that can be directly observed. For example, the flexible states and the graceful lines of the characters in the Dunhuang Murals are dynamic expressions that people can directly see. Correspondingly, on the other hand, it is the part that cannot be directly observed. In general, it is an expression of artistic conception, conveying dynamic atmosphere feelings in a static art creation form. For example, the literati paintings of the Song Dynasty used this expression of artistic conception to the extreme. However, the two aspects cannot exist independently. The "the part that can be directly observed" often serves the expression of artistic conception and becomes the basis of artistic conception expression. It can be said that "flying

beauty" is a dynamic artistic expression from the form to the meaning and from the form to the meaning.

In the Lingnan area, thanks to many factors such as folk culture, regional characteristics, etc., a variety of crafts commonly used in architectural decoration have been born. One of the more famous ones is the often-speaking Lingnan "three carvings and two sculptures", which are more prominent representatives. The artistic symbols they contain show the dynamic expression of flying beauty in different aspects and degrees. Chaozhou inlaid porcelain is also an important part of architectural decoration and craftsmanship in the Lingnan region of China. In addition to the infusion of folklore and regional culture, with unique material selection and craftsmanship, it shows more levels in the manifestation of the flying beauty.

## 2. VISUAL IMPRESSION OF "FLYING BEAUTY"

In terms of architectural art, as early as in *The Book of Songs · Minor Odes of the Kingdom · Si Gan*, there is a record of the palace of King Xuan of Zhou "The palace is magnificent and majestic like a person standing tall, with strict regulations like sharp arrows rushing upwards; the cornices are shaped like big birds spreading their wings and soaring, looking like a golden pheasant flying swiftly upward from a distance. This is the palace

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1. Zong Baihua. *Aesthetic Walk* [M]. Shanghai People's Publishing House. 2015:68.

where the monarch attends to state affairs"<sup>2</sup>. It can be seen that the aesthetics of Chinese architecture has tended to the flying beauty long time ago. The flying cornices and rake angles of various shapes in later generations also interpret this flying beauty, and the architectural decoration is constantly evolving. Inlaid porcelain is a traditional architectural decoration with very regional characteristics in Chaozhou, Guangdong. A large part of the decorative positions of Chaozhou inlaid porcelain are concentrated on the edge of the building, which have a great influence on the overall visual impression of the building, meaning that the expression of "flying beauty" largely depends on the art of inlaid porcelain.

Traditional Chaozhou buildings mainly include dwellings, ancestral halls, temples, etc. The decoration of these types of buildings is inseparable from inlaid porcelain craftsmanship. The decorative art of inlaid porcelain on the building is mainly concentrated in the roof ridge.

The decorative trend at both ends of the main ridge tends to be upwards, in a state of flying birds ("Figure 1"), which modifies the originally relatively straight architectural lines to be lighter. In addition to the flying and brisk outlines that are similar to those of ordinary flying cornices and rake angles, the buildings decorated with inlaid porcelain show more agility. This is mainly manifested in the lines and hollows of the inlaid porcelain decoration craft. For example, while the floral scrolls decorations appearing at both ends of the main ridge ("Figure 2"), connect the roof ridge as a whole and tilt upwards, the meticulously arranged hollow position and shape, and the line and shape of each grass-blade show a lighter and more delicate flying beauty in the overall shape of the building. The inlaid porcelain decoration on the middle section of the main ridge is mainly divided into two parts. One type is at the ridge plug that is segmented on the main body of the main ridge, and the other type is a three-dimensional winding above the main ridge. The inlaid porcelain on the main body of the main ridge often does not have a great influence on the overall outline of the building, but the decoration above the main ridge greatly affects the overall visual impression of the building. The architectural decoration of Chaoyang Confucian Temple ("Figure 3") has both of the two parts. The two dragons flying upon air, with flexible and

graceful curves, have shaped the exterior outline of the entire building to a certain extent, making the building flying and flexible in visual impression.

"The decoration of the vertical ridge is mainly manifested at the end of the ridge. This position is well in line with the sight of people viewing the building"<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, the decoration of the vertical ridge also affects the overall visual impression of the building. The end of the vertical ridge is usually decorated with figures, lion heads, fish bodies, and flower basket shapes. The overall shape and arrangement of shapes also show an upward trend ("Figure 4").



Figure 1 Overall view of the decorated building with inlaid porcelain.



Figure 2 Inlaid porcelain at Kaiyuan Temple in Chaozhou.



Figure 3 Chaoyang Confucian Temple inlaid porcelain.

2. Cheng Junying, Jiang Jianyuan. Annotation and Analysis of The Book of Songs [M]. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company. 1991:542.

3. Xue Ying, Cheng Jianjun. The Art of Roof Ridges — Regional Chaoshan Inlaid Porcelain Decoration [J]. Decoration, 2012(09): 119-120.



Figure 4 Inlaid porcelain on the vertical ridge.

### 3. THE SYMBOLIC MEANING OF THE "FLYING BEAUTY" OF CHAOZHOU INLAID PORCELAIN

The emergence and development of inlaid porcelain art cannot be separated from the unique regional culture. Analyzing the cultural roots behind the inlaid porcelain can explain the origin of this symbolism. With the continuous development of economy, society, science and technology, and the gradual changes in people's lifestyles, the living space of inlaid porcelain art in modern times is shrinking. However, thanks to the unique regional culture and the rich and auspicious symbolism of inlaid porcelain, it still has strong vitality in their traditionally prosperous areas. The symbolic communication also enhances the artistic conception of "flying beauty" in cultural heritage.

#### 3.1 Tracing the Origin of Regional Culture

The first is regional characteristics. To a certain extent, inlaid porcelain is a decoration that adapts to the regional climate. The Chaozhou area is located in the eastern coastal area of Guangdong. The climate there is humid and the air has a high salt content and is corrosive to some extent. In addition, the summer is hot and there are much typhoon rainstorm, putting forward the requirements of climate adaptability for architectural decoration such as saline-alkaline tolerance, resistance to weather, and not easy to absorb water. At the end of the Ming Dynasty, the developed porcelain industry in Chaozhou and its surrounding areas had a large number of discarded and broken porcelains that could be used, and the inlaid porcelain craft came into being.

The local culture of the Chaozhou area originated from the ancient Central Plain Culture. The ancient Central Plains ancestors flooded into the Chaozhou area at the end of the Tang Dynasty due to wars and other reasons, bringing advanced

life and production methods and Confucian culture to the local area, emphasizing the etiquette and the patriarchal clan idea. The regional culture of Chaozhou gave rise to the "centripetal" idea based on this concept. The influence of Confucian culture is also reflected in the architecture and its decoration. The decoration on the main ridge is generally the largest, symmetrically distributed on both sides, with the ends being upwards and centripetal.

*Historical Annals of Chaozhou · Volume of Congtan* records that "The vulgar admires witches and ghosts", "The county vulgar admires ghosts and worships the excessive religious activities"... The trend of worship in Chaozhou area is very popular. Many temples are built, and the decoration of temple buildings is more complicated and profound. It can be seen that inlaid porcelain is not only decorative objects, but also carries the spiritual sustenance of Chaozhou people.

#### 3.2 The Symbolism of Theme

The symbolic expression of regional culture is not only in the form of architectural decoration, but also in the types of themes and modeling characteristics of the inlaid porcelain. The modeling theme of Chaozhou inlaid porcelain art is very wide. Chinese traditional architectural decoration mostly uses symbolism to express, and the inlaid porcelain comes from folk arts and crafts and is deeply immersed in Chaozhou local folk culture. Most of the themes are accompanied by rich folk beliefs.

The first is animal themes with beautiful implied meanings. Since ancient times, traditional Chinese art has highly praised the auspicious beasts. As early as in *Kaogong Ji · Ziren Wei Sunju*, there is a record of "The Five Big Beasts of the World"<sup>4</sup>. There are regulations on the animals carved in the sacrifices and artifacts, and even the incised animal forms and expressions are explained. This shows the importance of animal dynamics and spirits. After that, especially in the Han Dynasty, people's yearning for fairyland further catalyzed the form of flying auspicious beasts, often using cloud patterns, thunder patterns, and images such as the writhing dragon ("Figure 3") and the flying crane ("Figure 5"). Due to the influence of the Central Plain Culture, these have also been inherited by the

4. Zhang Daoyi. Annotation and Translation of "Kaogong Ji" [M]. Xi'an: Shaanxi People's Publishing House, 2004:152.

inlaid porcelain art in its own way. "Two dragons grabbing treasure", "two phoenixes toward peony" and other patterns are mostly used in ancestral halls to express the awe and worship of Chaozhou people to their ancestors and deities. And as for the decoration of dwellings, poultry, domestic animals, birds, insects, and fishes are all the subjects of decoration. In addition, Chaozhou is near the sea, thanks to the marine culture, many aquatic organisms appear in the subjects of inlaid porcelain. As Chaozhou people observe carefully everywhere, the shape of subjects is more flexible and natural, expressing the beautiful desire of Chaozhou people to live a prosperous and happy life.

In addition to animals, characters are also important subjects of the inlaid porcelain. Characters in opera, history, myths and pictures of daily life are all displayed. The Chaozhou area has always had many dramas. People's beliefs and sacrificial activities are often closely related to drama shows. There are many kinds of dramas, and the repertoire is too numerous to enumerate. Drama shows have become an important part of Chaozhou culture, providing a wealth of creative themes for the inlaid porcelain. Characters from dramas and myths are mostly very stretched in terms of dynamic figure, driving their beards, hair, costume tuinga's streamers, armour flags, feather skill, and tassels to dance, setting off each other, and the overall form is flexible and natural ("Figure 6"). The inlaid porcelain decoration of dramas and historical figures often has a strong symbolic meaning. For example, the eaves of temples often adopt character modeling with themes such as "a brave and battlewise army" and "three people fighting with Lv Bu". The character modeling needs to be flexible, symbolizing the meaning of exorcising evil spirits. If only the image is moulded, there is no verve, and it is impossible to talk about the symbol of exorcising evil spirits.

The use of plant themes in inlaid porcelain art is also very extensive, with a strong breath of life, generally does not occupying the main body, but giving more room to the inlaid porcelain craftsman to play. Plants, melons and fruits are often combined with other themes to create novel works closely related to mundane life.

In addition to the expression of the theme of the work itself, the metaphor behind the work is also a part of the artistic conception, just like the common allusions in poetry creation: perhaps the "material basis" that can show the artistic conception is not fully expressed, but it can still have an endless

aftertaste effect. If understanding the allusions in poems is depending on the accumulation of knowledge, then the symbolic meaning of metaphors behind the inlaid porcelain is the power of cultural identity. This is closely related to the cultural soil for the development of the inlaid porcelain. For example, dramatic themes with storytelling (such as classic Chaozhou opera repertoire "Chen San and Wu Niang", "Three Scholars Within the Family", "Xue Rengui Conquers the West", etc.) are familiar opera stories by the older generation of Chaozhou people. There are also deities, historical figures, local deities, the Eight Immortals, Yue's troop, etc. that people generally believe in. These themes themselves have a strong emotional tone and resonate with the public, and use the artistic techniques of "replacing the complex with simplicity and expressing emotion with spirit" in realistic writing to show the most representative plots. Once the scene is brought in, the characters will naturally become more vivid and three-dimensional. It can be seen that form is the basis of meaning, and the meaning makes form have a deeper meaning. Only when the form and the meaning influence each other and accomplish each other, can they be expressed more clearly and harmonically, so as to meet the needs of "beauty" and to convey the needs of spiritual sustenance.

### **3.3 Modeling Symbolism**

From the analysis of the "flying beauty" embodied in the modeling, most of the dynamics are closely related to the performance of the "line". Various art forms in ancient China paid great attention to the expression of lines. It can be said that "the texture of the image of Chinese art is line pattern"<sup>5</sup>. As far as Chaozhou inlaid porcelain art is concerned, whether it is the writhing of the dragon's body, the dancing of feather skill or the branches of plants, it is a complete linear expression with tension. Although on the surface, the smallest composition of the inlaid porcelain is various forms of ceramic chips, which are "blocks", but in the end, these "blocks" are used to form flowing lines. These flying lines are an important basis and carrier for the expression of "flying beauty" in the inlaid porcelain art.

The expression of "lines" is not only reflected in the whole, but also in the form of ceramic chips. The ceramic chips used in the inlaid porcelain process are also called "rao pieces". Inlaid porcelain

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5. Zong Baihua. *Aesthetic Walk* [M]. Shanghai People's Publishing House. 2015:51.

craftsmen will knock and cut the ceramic chips according to their needs, and they will be trimmed and polished to become suitable "rao pieces". This process is also called "cutting rao". Sometimes inlaid porcelain craftsmen will also customize ceramic chips according to needs. These ceramic chips are like brushstrokes in a painting, serving the whole while also conveying their own information. For example, the curves displayed by the ceramic chips at the end of the crane ("Figure 5") (regardless of the edges or the overall form) have the flying beauty, which is similar to the whole but more exquisite and delicate.

The "flying beauty" displayed by the inlaid porcelain art through themes and shapes finally conveys a kind of agile artistic conception, which can be regarded as the spirit of the work in the traditional Chinese artistic aesthetics. All tangible material expressions ultimately serve and convey the artistic conception. "Beauty" itself is a very abstract and intangible concept. In the final analysis, the "flying beauty" is a kind of artistic conception in a certain sense. A very simple example is that, just like the curved shape on the inlaid porcelain artwork, it itself is still but conveys an invisible sense of flying, which is from the tangible to the intangible, from the real to the virtual. Judging from the molding style of inlaid porcelain, most of them are realistic, but there are also many exquisite freehand works. But whether it is realistic or freehand, the inlaid porcelain artwork itself is an objective existence of entities. The form and shape of the inlaid porcelain mentioned above is the material basis for the expression of "flying beauty", ultimately conveying the intention of "dynamic" to the viewer, creating an atmosphere of "flying beauty" and reaching the artistic conception of "sacred and unpredictable realm"<sup>6</sup>.



Figure 5 An inlaid porcelain work of crane.

6. Yang Bojun. *The Interpretation of The Works of Mencius* [M]. Zhonghua Book Company. 2014:334.



Figure 6 An inlaid porcelain work of figure.

#### 4. UNIQUE ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

Due to the influence of the region and its culture, the artistic expression of "flying beauty" is also embodied in the unique artistic symbols embedded in the inlaid porcelain such as the use of color and texture expression.

##### 4.1 Color Performance

The color of the inlaid porcelain is also undoubtedly influenced by the local aesthetic habits. In the beginning, the inlaid porcelain craftsmen chose colored ceramic chips for "cherishing materials", with bright colors and obvious contrasts. Even after the development and prosperity, the specially made porcelain still uses the previous colors. The commonly used colors are mainly six colors of red, green, yellow, blue, black, and white ("Figure 7"). The mismatch of contrasting colors is not taboo. There are many combinations of red and green, which are in sharp contrast with the gray wall and earthy tiles and have strong local characteristics. In traditional inlaid porcelain works, the perspective relationship between distance and perspective is not pursued, instead, the jollification and gorgeousness are pursued. In addition, colors with higher purity and strong contrast can also better highlight the shape of the block. For example, the color contrast between the branches in the floral scrolls ("Figure 2") allows the curve of each branch to be better displayed.

For the imaginary images in the faith, especially the decorative colors on the temple buildings are often extraordinarily bright-colored and contrasting, which not only maintains the unity of the ethnic group, but also has the meaning of praying to heaven to protect the ethnic group, embodying the

beautiful vision of Chaozhou people toward a flourishing and prosperous life. For things in mundane life, the colors used for the inlaid porcelain tend to be the original colors of the

painting image, "coloring according to the category", thus making the image more vivid and lively ("Figure 8").

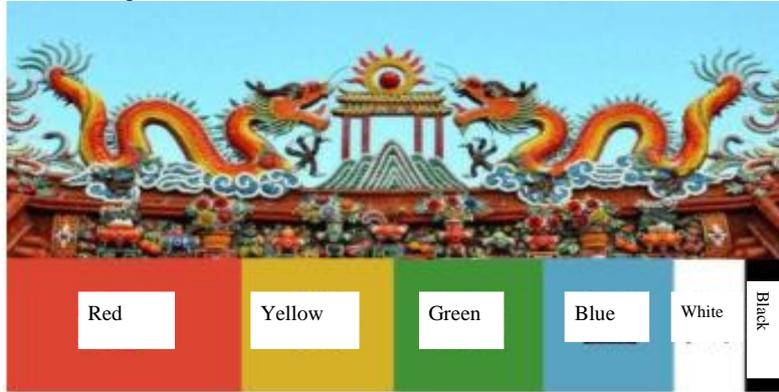


Figure 7 Chaoyang Confucian Temple inlaid porcelain.

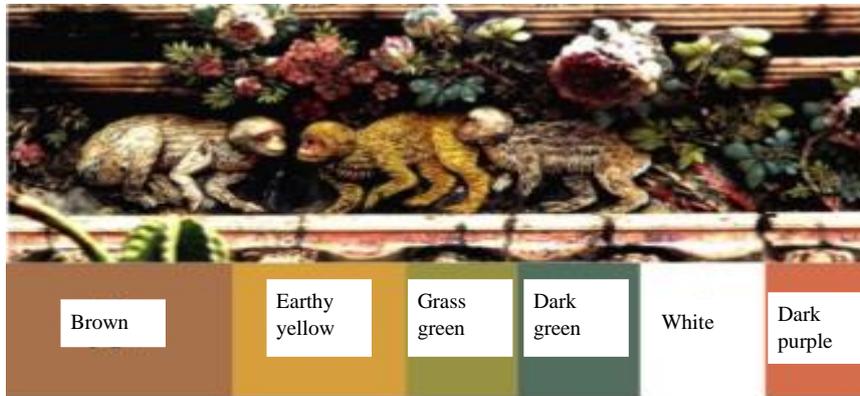


Figure 8 Mei Family Ancestral Hall inlaid porcelain.

The colors used in the inlaid porcelain are not only high-purity colors. For example, in the shaping of flowers ("Figure 8"), the use of color is that the middle color is dark and the outer color is light. Such color changes can further express the spatial level and portray the natural form of flowers more realistically. The so-called lifelikeness is due to the proper dynamic expression of the image, and the use of color also promotes the dynamic expression to a certain extent.

#### 4.2 Texture Expression

One of the important characteristics of the inlaid porcelain art that distinguishes it from other Lingnan architectural decorations is its compositional craft. The material of the inlaid porcelain is divided into body material and surface material. The body material mainly plays a supporting role, and the surface material is mainly made of various types of ceramic chips of different

colors, sizes, and shapes, giving the inlaid porcelain a unique layered texture.

The ceramic chips used in the inlaid porcelain craft originally came from defective goods and broken pieces of ceramic production. It was only when it flourished that ceramic workshops produced porcelain and custom-made ceramic chips for the inlaid porcelain. As raw materials, ceramic chips have their own unique texture expression. High-temperature vitreous enamel is used as the raw material for the inlaid porcelain. In addition to the stable properties of ceramic chips themselves, their resistance to corrosion, and their being very suitable for the humid and rainy climate as well as the high salinity of the offshore air in Chaozhou area, from the decorative point of view, ceramic chips possess a long-lasting gloss that ordinary materials do not have. The surface of ceramic chips is smooth and glossy. As architectural decorations, they will become mysterious under different conditions of sunlight. On the one hand, this kind of

gloss adds a sense of lightness to the actual quality of the inlaid porcelain artwork, and on the other hand, the mapping of light under different conditions also gives the inlaid porcelain artwork a sense of movement in the time dimension.

The surface shaping technique of the inlaid porcelain also creates a unique texture for the inlaid porcelain art. Starting from the cutting of small ceramic chips, the average small ceramic chips used for detailed decoration are less than five millimeters, and the thin and sharp part is only one to two millimeters. And the gear rack of ceramic chips is only as thick as a toothpick. A single shape requires hundreds of such thin and small ceramic chips. In addition to the cultural thought guidance of "exquisite and economical use", this is also to better express the real sense of being strewn at random of animal fur. For example, the number of ceramic chips used to decorate the tail wing of a phoenix or a bird can even reach hundreds, tier upon tier, giving the inlaid porcelain a texture with "a sense of breathing", which is more transparent than other similar craft. Here is a simple comparison between the inlaid porcelain work of crane and the gray sculpture work of crane ("Figure 9"). Although the theme is similar to the shape, the inlaid porcelain tiles are densely combined, giving people a real and intuitive fluffy feeling. However,



Figure 9 Comparison of the inlaid porcelain work of crane (left) and the gray sculpture of crane of crane (right).

## 5. CONCLUSION

Chaozhou inlaid porcelain contains the artistic expression of "flying beauty" in visual impression, symbolism and artistic symbols, and this kind of flying and agility comes from the unique regional culture of Chaozhou. It is not only the inheritance of regional culture, but also has its practical significance. It is not only an aesthetic demand but also a spiritual sustenance.

On this basis, the understanding of "flying beauty" also has a richer interpretation: The curves

the expression of the gray sculpture is more overall; compared with inlaid porcelain, it gives people a heavier feeling in texture performance, which is not as light as inlaid porcelain, and its sense of flying beauty is weaker in this respect.

In addition to the fineness, the arrangement of the inlaid porcelain tiles is also quite particular, which can be regarded as a more conscious expression of texture. For example, in the flower shaping technique, in order to show the true strewn levels of petals, in addition to the multi-layered inlaid porcelain, the rhythm of the arrangement of ceramic chips must be mastered. For example, in the shaping of China rose ("Figure 8"), the middle is small and tight, and the outer layer is large and sparse. The shaping methods of different flowers are also different, and the real and strewn interspersed relationship will not make the seemingly single unit of texture appear dull and lifeless, but will give people a more flexible and natural impression.

It can be seen that the gloss, light and transparent sense of breathing, as well as the sense of agility and natural layering brought by the expression of inlaid porcelain texture will also promote the dynamic expression of "flying beauty" in all aspects.

in the molding, the lightness and transparency of the texture of the material, and the artistic conception and symbol of the work itself as well as behind it can all be expressions that tend to be "dynamic". "Flying" conveys to people a sense of upward and agile beauty, which can be said to be part of the many aesthetic treasures left by China's splendid culture. In today's various design and creation activities, the performance of "flying beauty" can also be explored more and more deeply from more traditional artistic expressions.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Yihong Yuan designed and revised the paper, and Yutong Yang participated in the paper writing and data analysis

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