

Brief theory on the Genealogy of Plant Patterns in Jingdezhen Export Porcelain

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Abstract

The quantity of Jingdezhen ceramics exported overseas was huge, and the themes were roughly about heraldry (also known as badges), stories of figures, as well as plant patterns such as flowers, grass, etc. Plant patterns accounted for the vast majority among the patterns on Jingdezhen export porcelain. This paper mainly analyzes and elaborates on the origin of plant patterns, their composition and layout, as well as the sources, types and development of leaf patterns and flower patterns.

Keywords

Export porcelain; Plant pattern; Leaf pattern; Flower pattern.

1. Introduction

In the most primitive decorative art of patterns, plant themes were quite rare. It was not until later civilized periods that they were widely applied to various other decorations. The development from animal decoration to plant decoration was a characteristic of the transition from a fishing and hunting life to an agricultural life. As early as the pre-Qin period, we had already mastered relatively advanced shipbuilding and navigation technologies. Roughly from the late Western Han Dynasty to the Eastern Han Dynasty, the Maritime Silk Road had truly taken shape in China, and silk, porcelain and other items began to be shipped and sold overseas, reaching its peak during the Tang and Song Dynasties.

Up to now, the trade of Chinese porcelain sold abroad via the Maritime Silk Road has a history of more than a thousand years. With the advent of the Age of Great Navigation in the 16th century, various maritime routes between the East and the West were continuously opened up, which brought China's ceramic exports into a globalized era. The period when the porcelain industry in Jingdezhen reached its peak was during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, which was also the most prosperous period for export porcelain.

2. Types and Origins of Plant Patterns in Export Porcelain

The Jingdezhen export porcelain in the Ming and Qing Dynasties not only brought prosperity to economic exchanges but also promoted cultural exchanges and development among various countries. Through porcelain transactions between the East and the West, exchanges were promoted in different cultures, aesthetic concepts, religious beliefs, cultural diets, cultural costumes and other aspects. Countries learned from each other, and among them, the "Plant pattern" entered China through different artistic carriers in the process of exchanges and interactions. After a long process of Sinicization and localization, it was then spread to the world. Export porcelain refers to porcelain produced in China and specifically sold abroad. The Ming and Qing Dynasties were the golden period for China's porcelain exports. China sold a large number of daily-use porcelain to foreign countries (mainly Europe) through the "Maritime Silk Road". The varieties mainly included blue and white porcelain, famille rose porcelain, Guangcai porcelain, multicolored porcelain and so on. The porcelain produced in China was widely praised internationally. From the end of the 16th century to the beginning of the 17th century,

the Dutch East India Company continuously conducted trade with China, among which export porcelain was particularly important. The porcelain carried by the Portuguese Carrack fleet was sold in large quantities in the West, so this kind of porcelain was named Carrack porcelain. This kind of porcelain was greatly loved by Europeans. It was not only classic white-based blue and white with a thin and light material but also had exquisite decorative patterns. During this period, as many as 30 million pieces of Carrack porcelain were sold by the Dutch East India Company from China to all parts of the world. These Chinese porcelains that were originally only accessible to high officials and nobles became no longer rare. Later trades enabled ordinary people to use Chinese porcelain as well, and the export porcelain produced in Jingdezhen also became the main source of this trade.



Figure 1. Porcelain plate decorated with Dutch landscape paintings, 1700 - 1725, diameter 26.8 cm, housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London

The Dutch East India Company also put forward requirements to Jingdezhen regarding the material, shape, pattern and color of Carrack porcelain. In terms of theme content, it was required to have themes of traditional Chinese culture that Europeans were very curious about, as well as artistic themes catering to the local markets where they were sold, and there were also themes combining the two. For example, Figure 1 shows the integration of Western art on a porcelain plate.

Among the patterns on this part of the export porcelain, plant patterns were a very important type of border pattern. Some plant patterns showed stylized characteristics but were not lifeless. On the plants, we can see the formal beauty in lines, shapes and compositions, which were natural and smooth, harmonious and full of vitality, orderly and with clear layers. [1]

2.1. Leaf Patterns in Export Porcelain

(1) Origin of Leaf Patterns

Ancient Egypt is the earliest origin that leaf patterns can be traced back to. In production activities, human beings developed and created plant patterns through understanding plants and making use of them. The acanthus leaf pattern (Acanthus Ornament), which was widely used in Greek and Roman decorations, evolved from the palm leaf pattern. The palm leaf pattern was formed by the transformation of the lotus leaf pattern symbolizing the sun in ancient Egypt. However, the leaf patterns did not completely follow the real appearance shown in reality, nor were they simply copied. Instead, they were formed through deformation and integration with other traditional patterns. [2]

In China's early agricultural culture, a large number of bone spades and cultivated rice were unearthed at the Hemudu Cultural Site in Zhejiang. Many decorative contents were mainly about plants. The flower and leaf patterns of plants were unearthed in the Yangshao Culture in the middle reaches of the Yellow River, the Dawenkou Culture in the lower reaches, the Majiayao Culture in the middle and upper reaches, the Daxi Culture in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River and the Hemudu Culture in the lower reaches. Their basic forms were generally the same, and the composition methods of some parts were quite similar, indicating that there were many common factors or certain connections in economy and culture among them. Meanwhile, it further confirmed that in the Yellow River and Yangtze River basins, China's primitive agriculture had developed to a certain scale at that time. People gradually paid attention to plants and plant leaves in agricultural labor and learned to make use of them. Distinguishing plants by leaves and roots was classified into categories such as food, herbs, dyeing raw materials and ornamental plants. From cognitive experience, it gradually rose to theory, was sublimated into thought, and then through the spread of thought, it was recorded in symbols or displayed in images, passing on the thoughts and emotions of the ancestors to later generations.

(2) Types of Leaf Patterns in Export Porcelain

Tobacco Leaf Pattern: The naming of the tobacco leaf pattern style came from Western scholars. Tobacco leaf porcelain actually has nothing to do with tobacco. Its patterns are mainly composed of rolled passionflowers, round ball flowers or peonies, peonies and other flowers and large leaves. Some are also added with birds such as peacocks and pheasants. Because the large leaves look very much like tobacco leaves, Western scholars commonly call it "tobacco leaf porcelain". It has two varieties, blue and white with additional colors and famille rose porcelain, and its composition is relatively full. Tobacco leaf porcelain usually has rich and bright colors, with bright and blooming flowers, giving people a sense of beauty, gorgeousness, liveliness and vitality. It was mainly popular from the Yongzheng period to the middle of the Qianlong period.

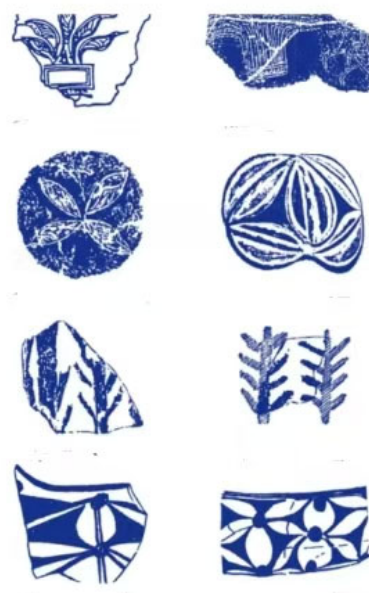


Figure 2. Plant patterns in various periods of primitive society

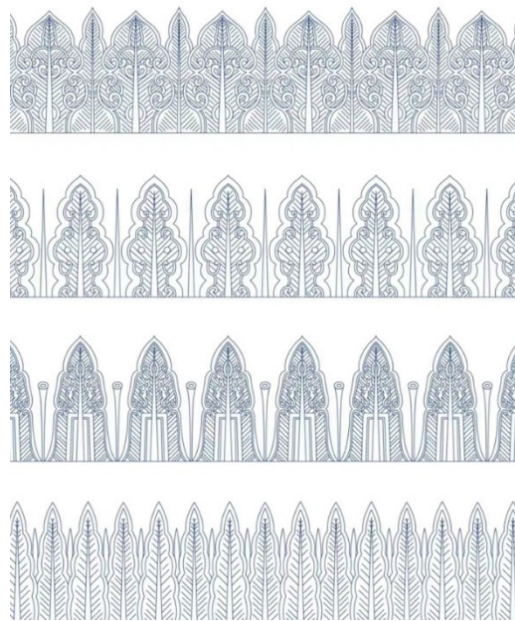


Figure 3. Banana leaf pattern

Banana Leaf Pattern (Figure 3): The banana leaf pattern refers to the band-shaped decorative pattern composed of banana leaves. Specifically, it is a decorative pattern formed as early as the Shang Dynasty by using the banana leaf pattern for two-dimensional continuous expansion. It has strong decorative properties, with simple and regular lines, and mainly uses the technique of engraved patterns for expression. It often appears in the scenes of people's prayers and sacrifices, expressing people's longing for a happy and peaceful life. [3]

2.2. Flower Patterns in Export Porcelain

(1) Origin of Flower Patterns

The prototypes of flower patterns were mostly common plants in life. In ancient China with a vast and broad territory, most areas had geographical conditions with sufficient water sources, fertile soil and suitable climate, which provided a good foundation for the growth of flowers. Therefore, tens of thousands of kinds of flowers grew in these places. In ancient China where plants were used as living tools at that time, flowers accounting for 40% of plants had penetrated into the daily life of the ancestors and us today, which also became a necessary condition for the formation of flower patterns. As the ancestors became more and more familiar with the use of plants and gradually formed daily habits, when survival was no longer the most urgent problem, art emerged. They incorporated common things around them into it, and flower patterns came into being.

In the surface decorations of ornaments that appeared in the Hemudu Culture, Dawenkou Culture, Yangshao Culture and other eras, there were plant patterns reflecting the farming life. However, in fact, during the Shang Zhou period, Qin and Han Dynasties, plant patterns were not common, and the mainstream was still animal patterns. It was not until the Period of Wei, Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties that they gradually became the mainstream. By the Sui and Tang Dynasties, the flower patterns among plant patterns often had auspicious meanings and became a separate major category. After that, flower patterns had developed more maturely, showing a prosperous scene with an open mind to absorb foreign patterns and making innovations on the basis of absorption and integration.

(2) Types of Flower Patterns

Lotus Petal Pattern: The lotus petal pattern is a decorative pattern shaped like a lotus flower. It began in the Spring and Autumn Period and was popular from the Southern and Northern

Dynasties to the Song Dynasty. Initially, the lotus petal patterns were independent between petals, and there were unique patterns on the petals, mostly with straight lines. Later, the petal patterns became more natural, with more realistic contents and smooth and undulating lines. Meanwhile, according to the decorative style and the manifestation form of lotus petals on ceramics, it was divided into various sub-categories, such as lotus petal patterns, geometric patterns, branch-broken lotus patterns and bunch lotus patterns, and also produced combined lotus patterns combined with animals. [4]

The lotus petal pattern is highly associated with Buddhism, which is inseparable from Buddhism's high praise of the lotus. And later, because of the noble character of the lotus since ancient times and its homophonic meaning with auspicious significance, the lotus petal pattern has become an important carrier for people from the imperial family to ordinary people to place good wishes and carry people's pursuit of a happy life. [5] As a special auspicious pattern, the lotus petal pattern is widely popular in blue and white porcelain. The lotus in the blue and white porcelain pattern has inherited the aesthetic taste of the contemporary people and the simple and characteristic connotations of the people of past dynasties. During the Kangxi-Qianlong Golden Age, the West was very enthusiastic about Chinese ceramics. Nobles bought them for art collections to show their profound family backgrounds and did not use them as ordinary utensils in daily life. It was precisely because the export porcelain sold to the West was in short supply that in order to cater to the preferences of Europeans, the export porcelain at that time had a very obvious European art style. This European decorative style also had a considerable impact on the lotus petal pattern of Qing Dynasty porcelain. With the influence of exchanges between China and the West, some advanced Western scientific, cultural and technological achievements were also introduced to China. The combination of porcelain patterns and Western technologies led to innovations, and the decorative methods of porcelain patterns also changed accordingly. In the porcelain of the subsequent period, there were more or less traces of the combination of China and the West, becoming more realistic and textured.

Entwined floral pattern: also known as the "branch-penetrating pattern" or "Crankweed pattern", is one of China's traditional patterns. It mainly takes plants with vines as the main body, uses vines or branches as the framework, spreads out in all directions, overlaps and repeats to form a continuous pattern. The range of plants used for this pattern is very wide, with dozens of plants mainly including lotus, honeysuckle, peony, etc. This pattern is often used in lotus petal patterns and sets off each other with lotus petal patterns. In the early stage, the twining patterns were mostly realistic and detailed, and in the later stage, the painting method was bold, unrestrained, smooth and elegant. The twining pattern has been widely spread from the East to the West.

Honeysuckle Pattern (Figure 4): Honeysuckle is the name of a vine plant. It is mentioned in the "Etymological Dictionary" that "It is the name of a medicinal herb. It grows on vines and does not wither in winter, so it is called honeysuckle." This flower is also called "honeysuckle" among ordinary people and is generally known as curly grass. It is a flower that can be used as medicine and is well known to the public. Its petals are long and have hanging whiskers, half yellow and half white, so it is named "gold and silver". It is precisely because this flower can bloom in winter without withering that it has been widely used in Buddhism to symbolize the immortality of the human soul and the eternal cycle of reincarnation. [6]



Figure 4. Honeysuckle pattern



Figure 5. Different Treasure - phase pattern

Bao phase flower Pattern (Figure 5): This was not a flower existing in reality originally but was born by integrating auspicious flowers such as peonies and lotuses. Its shape is complex and changeable, with petals arranged in a radial symmetry around the flower center, forming a magnificent pattern based on the "cross" as the benchmark and the "meter" as the structure. This is also the most prominent feature of the Bao phase flower pattern. The Bao phase flower pattern can be used alone or combined with twining patterns and curly grass patterns to form branch-penetrating Buddhist flower patterns. In the early Tang Dynasty, the Bao phase flower pattern was basically formed. Its evolution mainly went through three stages. In the first stage, the shape and pattern were fine and fragmented, and some still retained the prominent features of pomegranate flowers, from the founding of the country to the early Zhenguan period. In the second stage, from the middle Zhenguan period to the middle Kaiyuan period, the Bao phase flower pattern was simple and elegant, with not many petal structures. In the third stage, the Bao phase flower pattern had a tendency to transform into a peony flower, with a full outer contour and an initial realistic style.

(3) Changes in Pattern Styles and Reasons

The lotus petal pattern of Buddhism provided a lot of inspiration for many later petal pattern formats. After continuous development and changes, this pattern has become a very distinctive decorative pattern. With the development of the export porcelain trade and the continuous changes of decorative patterns, the flower pattern styles on China's export porcelain have changed from realistic to decorative, from three-dimensional, complicated and traditional to simple, plain and flat.

This change did not happen suddenly. Firstly, after the Yuan Dynasty, the overseas demand for domestic blue and white porcelain increased significantly. Many countries and regions completed the process of Islamization, which also provided a huge demand market for blue and white porcelain. Therefore, a large number of blue and white porcelains with Islamic styles were fired in the early Ming Dynasty. The prosperity of blue and white porcelain during this period promoted exchanges in blue and white raw materials and technologies between China and foreign countries. After Europeans became the monopolists of maritime trade, blue and white porcelain changed greatly according to the preferences of the colonizers. Before the middle of the 17th century, the Carrack porcelain style became one of the most popular styles for China's sales to the West. Due to the inconvenience of transportation at that time, which led to a situation of supply falling short of demand, the price of Carrack porcelain was high. Later, because the Dutch East India Company brought a lot of porcelain back to Europe, porcelain

became popular in Europe. Therefore, the Carrack porcelain style influenced the styles of many export porcelains at that time. Secondly, in the continuous exchanges between the East and the West in the export porcelain trade, Western painting methods, such as perspective, continuously blended with China's decorative pattern styles, and a number of planar patterns appeared on porcelain.

3. The "Composition and Layout" of Plant Patterns on Export Porcelain

In porcelain, the composition and layout positions of plant patterns as decorations also involved a lot of ingenuity. "Composition and layout" is a very important aspect in China's painting theory work "Six Laws of Painting". With the development of overseas porcelain trade, the composition of plant patterns has also undergone many changes. The change from pattern segmentation to continuity also proves that porcelain foreign trade was a huge integration of Eastern and Western cultures. The traditional integral composition gradually changed into a segmented composition. In the composition of the late Qing Dynasty, patterns were grouped but were no longer in a completely isolated state. This is what is called "the brushwork is broken but the meaning is connected". Although some patterns were separated, their artistic conceptions were connected, which broke the originally closed composition form. The plant pattern is changed at the edge of the object or at the center of the center of gravity of the object. The innovative pattern design is carried out through circulation, concise, repetition, rhythm and other lace art forms. In the way of composition, the overall use of repeated, overlapping, combination, reconstruction, etc., forming a unique decorative aesthetic characteristics. The formal beauty of porcelain is mainly reflected in the decorative structure and color, and the relationship between points, lines and surfaces is properly handled, as well as the combination of color, composition. This form of beauty includes harmonious beauty, balance beauty, strength, rhythm and so on. It has an important influence on the development of decorative concept, and draws lessons from nature and other artistic techniques to promote each other.

4. Conclusion

In summary, plant patterns occupied a special position among the patterns on Jingdezhen export porcelain in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Accompanied by the "porcelain fever" in the West at that time and the rapidly developing European culture, special plant pattern border decorations for export porcelain were formed, which played an important role in the development of export porcelain. [7] And among the vast "sea of porcelain", plant pattern decoration is just a small part, and there are still many pattern systems that need our research.

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