Elegant Style—Study on the Aesthetic Characteristics of Ceramics Art in the Song Dynasty

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ABSTRACT

Ceramics have a long history in China, and the Song Dynasty is the peak period of ceramics in our country. Ceramics made in Song Dynasty feature unique shapes with simple but elegant geometric patterns, glazed in natural and dignified color, satisfying people’s aesthetic demands to quietness and elegance. This paper analyzes elegant and quiet artistic styles and aesthetic characteristics of ceramics made in Song Dynasty from such three aspects as decorative patterns, shapes and glaze color, to improve people’s understanding of ceramic art in the Song Dynasty, and explore the ceramic art of the Song Dynasty comprehensively.

INTRODUCTION

The Song Dynasty is the prime time in the development history of Chinese ceramics. In the Song Dynasty, both the arts and crafts of ceramics improved greatly. Ceramics made in Song Dynasty feature unique shapes with simple but elegant geometric patterns, glazed in natural and dignified color, satisfying people’s aesthetic demands to quietness and elegance, and wing unanimous and high praise from people, so the Song Dynasty witnessed the boom of ceramics in its development history. Researching the artistic styles featuring elegance and simpleness as well as the aesthetic characteristics of Song Dynasty ceramics brings important historical and realistic significance to the development of ceramic art of our country. This paper analyzes the aesthetic characteristics featuring elegance, quietness, simpleness and conciseness of the Song dynasty ceramics from such three aspects as decorative patterns, shapes and glaze colors.

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UNIQUE AESTHETIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GEOMETRIC DECORATIVE PATTERNS OF CERAMICS MADE IN THE SONG DYNASTY

Geometric decorative patterns of ceramics made in Song Dynasty and the common types

Ceramics produced in the Song Dynasty are decorated with non-realistic patterns which are created by points, lines, planes and other basic elements based on Formal Beauty Law. The decorative patterns of Song dynasty ceramics are various, including those commonly used such as fret, Ru-yi pattern and Bead-connecting pattern, and some not being commonly used such as lines, checks and water-wave pattern.

Fret resembles the Chinese character "Hui pattern" (which has four right angles and connects at end and start), made of straight lines and right angles, with symmetric and regular overall structure, symbolizing auspiciousness for long term. Fret pattern, generally carved, painted or stamped at the mouth edge and bottom of ceramics, are used commonly and extensively.

Ru-yi pattern is mostly in the shape of cloud, Ganoderma lucidum or heart, meaning good luck, which is generally decorated at the mouth, neck, belly and bottom of ceramics as an auxiliary pattern, and it is one of the patterns commonly seen.

Bead-connecting pattern, also known as "bead-linking pattern", resembles many small beads arranged in an orderly way. As one of the typical patterns decorated on ceramics, bead-connecting pattern is usually painted on the shoulder and bottom of ceramics.

Decorative methods and application of geometric patterns painted on ceramics made in the Song Dynasty

Most patterns decorated on the ceramics made in the Song Dynasty are derived from natural life, such as fish, birds, flowers, landscape, which are changed and exaggerated a little. These patterns repeatedly use simple and delicate lines with symmetrical and balanced structure, engraved, stamped and cut on ceramics. In addition, these geometric patterns should be in consistent with overall design of ceramics and highlight the characteristics of overall design, playing the roles of dividing, enhancing and beautifying ceramics, without destroying the comprehensive design concept. As auxiliary lines, geometric patterns should match main decorative pattern and be in consistent with major decorative patterns and the shapes of ceramics to increase decorative effect, achieving the unity of aesthetics and practicability.

The single use of geometric patterns is relatively rare; they are usually decorated repeatedly by two or four in a group around the mouth edge or bottom of ceramics. Geometric patterns have special decorative effects and are widely used. The appropriate use of geometric patterns at the blank places of main decorative pattern can enhance the overall decorative effects. As for the
ceramics with regular and orderly decorative patterns, the proper use of geometric patterns can make the main pattern more vivid, enhancing its beauty with good decorative effect.

Implications of the geometric patterns decorated on the ceramics made in the Song Dynasty

The geometric patterns decorated on the ceramics made in the Song Dynasty are derived from people's daily life, and each pattern has its specific meaning. The single Fret pattern resembles the shape of Chinese character "Hui pattern" (which has four right angles and connects at end and start). The close and repeated arrangement of many Fret patterns symbolizes people's desire for happy life forever. Ru-yi pattern is usually decorated on vases with peony pattern, implying peace and happiness as well as wealth and good luck. Ru-yi pattern resembles the shape of cloud, which was used as the symbol of good luck and auspiciousness since ancient time, so Ru-yi pattern represents auspiciousness and best wishes. Turtle shell pattern signifies long life and good fortune, as turtle has longevity. Beard-connecting pattern looks like many beads linking together, as small bead are round and can roll smoothly, so Beard-connecting pattern symbolizes endless good luck, expressing people's yearning for a better life.

AESTHETIC FEATURES OF THE GLAZE COLOR OF SONG DYNASTY CERAMICS

The glaze of Song ceramics art adopts unique craftsmanship. Taking Jun Kiln as an example, the metal oxide contained in glaze show many natural colors such as blue, white, purple, red, green and black at high temperature, dispensing with the adding of any colors. Exclusive glaze craftsmanship combined with unique firing technology make the glaze display natural and ever-changing colors. With the distinctive textures of ceramics made in different kilns, the glaze makes the textures show special effect, reflecting the harmony of natural and artificial beauties.

The beauty of glaze color of Song dynasty ceramics

The Song dynasty ceramics have jade-like textures. The Song dynasty ceramics are as transparent and clear as jade with soft and subtle color, green is the mainstream color of Song dynasty ceramics. Song dynasty ceramics use soda lime as base glaze, which is thin and transparent with the similar texture as glass. It is burned unglazed for the first time and then glazed by multiple times to increasing the thickness of glaze layer gradually, making it has the similar texture and color with jade, which is elegant and graceful. The colors of thick-glazed ceramics made in Song Dynasty are various, some are brilliant and shining, opalescent and charming; some are as radiant as brocade, elegant and stylish.
The glazes of Song Dynasty ceramics feature such artistic characteristics as simpleness, dignity and solemnness. The shapes of Song Dynasty ceramics are simple, common and concise, without obvious changes. Their shapes match and complement with their glazes perfectly. Jun kiln, Yaozhou Kiln, Longquan Kiln, Ru Kin prospered in the Song Dynasty all adopted thick-glazing method, combined with the unique carving, stamping, embossment techniques, the patterns beneath the glaze appear and disappear from time to time, and the shapes become deeper and lighter at different times, featuring simpleness, subtleness and elegance.

The most representative thin-glazed Song Dynasty ceramics are those made by Ding kiln and Yaozhou Kiln in Northern China and those decorated with engraved and stamped patterns produced by Jingdezhen kiln. The thin-glazed ceramics are characterized by thin and transparent glaze, with visible color and decorative patterns of matrix. Ding kiln ceramics are as white as snow or in ivory color; Yaozhou Kiln ceramics are in olive green, dark green or yellow; Jingdezhen Kiln ceramics are in bluish white. Their colors and textures are similar with those of jades, reflecting the beauty of natural elements and simplicity, and embodying the aesthetics featuring kindness and integrity of Chinese people.

The beauty of the textures of Song Dynasty ceramics

The artistic beauty of Song Dynasty ceramic is not only reflected in its glaze color, but also in its texture. All Song Dynasty ceramics have beautiful glaze colors, but they have different and unique textures. Texture mainly refers to the touch feeling and patterns of a material, and the texture of ceramic refers to its touch feeling and visual effect. Ancient people favored jade-like ceramics, and also liked appreciating all kinds of natural textures of glazes. Song Dynasty ceramics have various and beautiful textures. For example, "ice-cracking texture" resembles cracked ices, which is crystal-clear and transparent; "caviar texture" likes a lot of fish eggs gathering densely; "cow hair texture" is seen on thick-glazed ceramics, resembling dense cow hairs; "partridge spot" refers to the white spot on black glaze, with the color and shape resembling a partridge which has black and white feathers; and "orange peel texture" forms on the surface of glaze when the dense bubbles burst at high temperature.

Among all Song Dynasty ceramics, people especially like green ceramics with ice-cracking textures, which resemble the cracks on the surface of frozen river, arranging in a crisscross pattern, mysterious and wonderful. The size and density of cracks are not designed artificially, showing the beauty of nature, which was popular in the Song Dynasty. Ice-cracking texture is defect originally, but the ancient people deliberately made this defect to display its beauty. Rabbit-hair texture is seen in black glaze, which is as black as lacquer, creating unfathomable feeling, quiet and deep, solemn and serious. The Song Dynasty craftsmen improved firing process and did innovative work on black glaze to break the heave atmosphere and reappear the original images and charm of natural elements by outstanding workmanship. Rabbit-hair texture looks regular
and unified, but is also arranged randomly with different shades of colors, combining change and uniformity together, in line with the laws of Formal Beauty. Rabbit-hair texture is created artificially, but it is not completely controlled by human, without revealing any artificial trace. It is an eye-catching masterpiece, integrating "craftsmanship and nature" with fascinating artificial charm.

AESTHETIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SHAPES OF SONG DYNASTY CERAMICS

Plain and simple shapes

In the Song Dynasty, urban economy was very prosperous and ceramic craftsmanship improved considerably on the basis of the development of Sui Dynasty, Tang Dynasty and Five Dynasties. The technologies of Song Dynasty ceramics were more sophisticated and the craftsmanship was more advanced. As the competition between private kilns and official kilns became increasingly fierce, different kilns developed their own unique styles in shape, glaze color and decorative patterns. So the Song dynasty ceramics developed rapidly and ceramic technology begun to spread to the common civilians, and different kilns developed their exclusive artistic characteristics and local features.

The ruling class of Song Dynasty worshiped Taoism, which values natural, plain and implicit art. Influenced by Taoism, the shapes of Song Dynasty ceramics are exquisite and elegant with pure colors, combining beauty, vividness, elegance and charm uniformly. With high artistic values, Song Dynasty ceramics have become aesthetic models. For example, the brown-glazed narrow-mouth bottle prevalent in the Song Dynasty is simple and graceful, without any decorative pattern. It has narrow and straight bottleneck, round shoulder, bulging belly and narrowed bottom. The bottle is narrowed at both ends and wide in the middle, changing gradually from the shoulder to belly and then from belly to bottom with soft changing curves, vertical bottle body and regular patterns. It looks sedate and elegant, symmetrical and beautiful, without any additional decoration, in line with Song people aesthetics of simpleness, plainness, honesty and elegance. It has independent aesthetic value and ornamental function, opening up a new aesthetic realm of Song dynasty ceramics.

Solemn and elegant shapes

Song Dynasty ceramics are implicit and emotional. Song dynasty ceramics emphasize natural charm, pursuing natural beauty, simple and unadorned shape, which have elegant national implication and high artistic values. For instance, phoenix vase produced by Longquan kiln has straight mouth, narrow neck and skewed shoulder. It resembles a wooden club, which is solemn and calm. The two symmetrical phoenixes located on both sides of bottleneck turn back against each other, which are used as the handles of vase. Both phoenixes look
dignified, overlooking in the distance, elegant and charming. Phoenix is a legendary bird, which is beautiful and auspicious, symbolizing happiness, nobility and pure love, and implying our national features. In the Northern Song Dynasty, ceramic art witnessed unprecedented development, and painting and calligraphy art were also applied to ceramic art, which created harmonious aesthetic effect, adding more charm to the Song Dynasty ceramics and pushing the art of Song Dynasty ceramics to a new stage.

CONCLUSIONS

Song Dynasty ceramics improved constantly, the technology became more and more advanced and mature, and Song people also developed the rules of decorative patterns, shapes and glaze colors. Song Dynasty Ceramics have made remarkable achievements both in design and the combination of patterns, with harmonious and intriguing overall shape and profound implications. The inheritance of Song Dynasty ceramics is of great significance to the prosperity and further development of Chinese ceramic art.

REFERENCES