



Media Liberation and Reconstruction: The Ontological Transformation of Contemporary Lacquer Art

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Abstract

Contemporary lacquer art faces a critical juncture. Its modernization cannot be achieved through superficial updates of visual motifs or simple functional shifts. Instead, what's needed is a fundamental restructuring of the medium's ontological foundations. This study examines how modern lacquer painting can achieve genuine autonomy by breaking free from its historical subordination to vessel-based forms. Through analysis of contemporary practices and theoretical engagement with material agency and medium specificity, this research identifies two major obstacles: technical fetishism (excessive focus on virtuosic craftsmanship over conceptual innovation) and medium aphasia (uncritical borrowing from other artistic traditions). The investigation of technical deconstruction processes—gestural mark-making, textural materialization, and subtractive aesthetics—reveals an emerging visual language rooted in lacquer's intrinsic material properties. The findings demonstrate that deliberate deconstruction of conventional techniques enables reconstruction of aesthetic systems that bridge Eastern philosophical traditions with contemporary visual experience, establishing lacquer art's distinct position in global contemporary practice.

Keywords

Lacquer art; Material ontology; Medium specificity; Technical deconstruction; Contemporary Chinese art

1. Introduction

For eight millennia, Chinese lacquer art has centered on what we might call “object adornment”—a sophisticated craft system devoted to enhancing functional vessels. But the twentieth century changed everything. Industrialization and Western modernist influences triggered an identity crisis that questioned the very foundations of lacquer’s cultural value (Song et al., 2019; Zhang & Liu, 2020). This crisis gave birth to “modern lacquer painting,” an ambitious attempt to liberate lacquer from utilitarian constraints and establish it as an independent artistic medium on par with recognized fine art forms (Xu, 2024).

Yet contemporary lacquer painting struggles with what might be termed “ontological dislocation.” Practitioners aspire to the subjective expression and spiritual depth of modern painting,

but they must contend with lacquer's stubborn material realities: prolonged drying cycles, rigid layering requirements, laborious production processes (Tang & Yu, 2022). Unlike oil painting's straightforward layering or ink wash's spontaneity, lacquer painting is slow, uncertain, mediated by complex material workflows. This tension—between the desire for free expression and the discipline of craftsmanship—lies at the heart of contemporary lacquer practice.

This study proposes moving beyond conventional heritage preservation discourse. Rather than simply safeguarding techniques as “intangible cultural heritage,” the research asks: How can traditional lacquer craftsmanship transform into an autonomous artistic language with genuine aesthetic value in contemporary contexts? This transformation involves not just material expression but fundamental restructuring of creative thinking, viewing paradigms, and value systems.

2. Theoretical Positioning

2.1 Material agency in lacquer practice

Recent developments in new materialism offer productive ways to think about lacquer. Instead of viewing lacquer as passive substrate, it can be recognized as an agentive material with intrinsic behavioral patterns, temporal rhythms, transformative potentials. Lacquer's properties—viscosity, photosensitivity, extended curing requirements, environmental sensitivity—function not merely as technical constraints but as generative parameters that shape aesthetic possibilities (Song et al., 2023).

This reorientation shifts focus from artist-centered intentionality to distributed agency across human-material assemblages. The artist doesn't simply impose form on passive material; rather, form emerges through ongoing dialogue between practitioner and material. Each layer of lacquer has its own temporality, its own responsiveness to environmental conditions, its own resistance and affordances.

2.2 Medium specificity reconsidered

The concept of medium specificity provides crucial grounding for understanding lacquer's contemporary trajectory. However, this discussion requires careful navigation. The analysis here does not invoke essentialist definitions that reduce each medium to its supposed “purity.” Rather, lacquer's unique material properties enable what might be called “differential specificity”—a medium identity constituted through distinctive technical supports and material behaviors rather than predetermined essential characteristics.

This framework allows theorization of lacquer's modernization as neither nostalgic essentialism nor radical abandonment of material essence, but rather critical reinvention of medium-specific practices responsive to contemporary aesthetic conditions. Lacquer remains lacquer not because it adheres to some timeless essence, but because its particular materiality continues to generate distinctive aesthetic possibilities.

2.3 Two methodological deviations

Current lacquer practice exhibits two problematic tendencies that impede productive modernization:

First, technical fetishism. Traditional techniques—carved red lacquer, mother-of-pearl inlay,

sprinkled gold—represent extraordinary craftsmanship and cultural heritage. But when technical complexity becomes valorized independent of conceptual content, works devolve into mere demonstrations of skill (Liu & Ren, 2021). The “how” overshadows the “what” and “why,” reducing artistic practice to craft exhibition.

Second, medium aphasia. Some practitioners uncritically appropriate compositional schemas from oil painting, ink wash, or printmaking, reducing lacquer to pigmented coating or surface treatment (Yin & Chen, 2023). This evacuates lacquer’s phenomenological distinctiveness—its translucency, deep luster, tactile warmth achieved through iterative polishing. Such derivative practices fail to establish genuinely distinctive contributions to contemporary aesthetics.

3. Methodology

This investigation combines theoretical analysis, technical examination, and comparative case studies. Contemporary lacquer practices were analyzed through three analytical categories that emerged inductively from sustained observation: gestural agency (mark-making versus coating), material texture (decoration versus spiritualization), and subtractive aesthetics (grinding philosophy).

Case selection followed specific criteria: innovative technical approaches demonstrating material deconstruction, critical recognition within contemporary discourse, substantial bodies of work evidencing consistent methodology, and accessible documentation enabling rigorous analysis. This allowed identification of representative practitioners whose work exemplifies distinct modernization strategies.

4. Technical Deconstruction and Reconstruction

4.1 From coating to calligraphic mark

Traditional lacquerware aesthetics emphasized flawless, mirror-smooth surfaces—a standard that effectively erased visible traces of manual intervention. The creator’s hand disappeared into perfect finish. Contemporary practice deliberately disrupts this convention through what might be termed “gestural inscription”—a shift from concealing to revealing bodily presence.

Raw lacquer’s high viscosity naturally resists the fluid brushwork of ink calligraphy. Yet contemporary practitioners have developed innovative “rough brush grammar” through material reformulation (mixing tung oil to reduce viscosity) and environmental control. This technical innovation enables dynamic imprinting of bodily movement onto material surfaces. Lacquer transitions from passive coating to active medium for writing. Finished works no longer conceal but actively manifest traces of artistic presence, imbuing objects with perceptible expressive vitality.

4.2 From pattern to texture

Traditional “bian tu” (transformative coating) techniques—exemplified by rhinoceros skin lacquer—originally served mimetic or ornamental functions. Contemporary practice radically reinterprets these as abstract “textural language.” What were previously considered flaws—shrinkage, cracking, wrinkling during curing—become primary expressive media.

Through precise environmental manipulation (temperature, humidity control), artists guide lacquer’s natural behaviors to generate specific textural formations. These patterns evoke geo-

logical sedimentation, erosion marks, organic growth-decay cycles. Materials cease being passive carriers; they transform into autonomous co-creators. Resulting surface textures transcend decoration, becoming narrative vehicles that convey temporal passage, material dissolution, vital resilience through simultaneous visual and haptic dimensions.

This elevates lacquer's physical properties to spiritual metaphors, establishing dialogues among materials, natural processes, and cultural meaning-making. The approach resonates with Taoist philosophical traditions emphasizing *wu-wei* (non-purposive action) and material spontaneity.

4.3 Grinding as archaeological practice

Traditional polishing pursued ultimate perfection—jade-like smoothness embodying Eastern aesthetic ideals. Contemporary practice reinterprets grinding as “subtractive aesthetics.” Rather than seeking flawless surfaces, artists deliberately reveal concealed temporal strata and material memories through controlled surface removal.

Each removed layer functions as temporal capsule. Previously hidden colors, textures, brush-strokes reemerge into perceptual fields, forming richly layered narrative structures that reconstruct creative trajectories from foundation to surface, inception to completion. This subtractive process establishes dynamic dialectics between concealment and revelation: each layering simultaneously obscures preceding phases while creating potential for subsequent disclosure.

Works acquire temporal depth and historical resonance. Polishing transcends terminal finishing, becoming archaeological practice—artists employ grinding as excavational tool, visually uncovering traces and unintended effects formed during creation within material substrates. Spontaneous textures—flowing pigments, accidental bubbles, stratified fractures—cease being perceived as defects. They're embraced as organic components. This deliberate integration of randomness and process traces enables lacquer to maintain traditional materials while radiating contemporary vitality.

5. Case Analysis

5.1 Abstract material cosmos

Artists like Su Xing and Tang Zhiyi exemplify movement toward abstract creation that grants materials autonomous narrative agency. Through deliberate deconstruction of conventional layering and mosaic techniques, they investigate intricate interactions among lacquer, metal foil, and mineral pigments.

Their works construct autonomous visual realms—sometimes suggesting infinite cosmic expanse, other times evoking primordial chaos and emergence. Central to these creations is profound focus on rhythmic light-texture variations, generating dynamic visual pulses across material surfaces and underlying structures. This material exploration engages Western Abstract Expressionism while remaining rooted in Eastern lacquer's material genetics. Their artworks generate immersive, meditative spaces inviting contemplative engagement with materials, forms, and perceptual experience.

5.2 Figurative material landscape

Cheng Xiangjun demonstrates how lacquer revitalizes figurative painting through innovative

material deployment. In his practice, lacquer transcends conventional material status, evolving into expressive medium that reinterprets natural structures through contemporary perspectives. Rather than focusing on representational accuracy, Cheng harnesses lacquer's unique properties—viscosity, malleability, density—to meticulously reconstruct earth's internal frameworks and geological formations.

His technical approach synthesizes printmaking's decisive knife marks with lacquer's layered depth, forging distinctive personal visual language. This methodology avoids superficial illustration, instead transforming nature's visual weight into palpable tactile weight through medium's inherent physicality. Viewers perceive almost tangible textures through purely visual means. His works testify how traditional craftsmanship, subjected to conceptual transformation, offers unique tactile expression.

5.3 Divergent strategies

These approaches reveal complementary pathways toward modernization. Some practitioners pursue material abstraction, privileging lacquer's intrinsic behavioral patterns over representational content. Others maintain figurative reference while fundamentally transforming representation through material specificity. Both strategies share commitment to material agency and resistance to derivative appropriation, yet differ in balancing abstraction versus figuration, spontaneity versus control, Eastern versus Western frameworks.

6. Cultural Implications

6.1 Eastern aesthetics in global context

Lacquer's modernization represents sophisticated evolution within Eastern traditions rather than simple departure. Core values—restraint (hanxu) privileging subtlety and implication; warmth (wenrun) conveying gentle, harmonious material presence; appreciation for quiet refinement—are consciously positioned in productive tension with Western modernist expressivity (Yang & Xie, 2022).

This comparison functions not as dismissal of Western traditions but as invitation to complementary cross-cultural dialogue. Through innovative approaches and conceptual depth, contemporary lacquer artists translate ancient philosophical tenets into universally resonant visual language. This demonstrates that cultural specificity can serve as gateway to global relevance rather than barrier.

Contemporary lacquer illustrates that “Chineseness” in artistic practice need not rely solely on archaic motifs or stereotyped symbols. It manifests through distinctive sensibility—particular regard for natural materials' beauty, patient engagement with time-intensive processes, fundamentally contemplative worldview valuing depth over immediacy. Contemporary lacquer offers vital Chinese perspective, contributing meaningfully to diverse, pluralistic global contemporary landscape.

6.2 Embodied cognition and craft

In the digital era, traditional “craftsman spirit” requires significant reinterpretation beyond simplistic associations with diligence. This study proposes reconceptualizing it as “embodied cognition”—dynamic process where knowledge, skill, and meaning are rooted in physical practice and sensory experience.

Lacquer production demands months or years of sustained physical engagement, unwavering patience, meticulous attention to minute details (Song et al., 2019). Such immersive practice constitutes meaningful resistance against alienation and ephemeral shallowness characterizing rapid virtual production methods increasingly dominating modern life. Through artists' intimate, ongoing dialogue with materials—relationships built on touch, sight, deep understanding of possibilities and constraints—richer forms of spiritual and cognitive cultivation emerge.

This tactile, deliberate, inherently slow art form serves as vital humanistic anchor in unprecedented accelerating world. It reminds observers that despite relentless technological advancement, most profound aesthetic experiences remain rooted in direct sensory, physical interaction between human body and enduring, tangible material world.

7. Conclusion

Lacquer art's modernization fundamentally represents dialogue between material constraints and expressive freedom. The medium's inherent limitations—toxicity, extended curing periods, unpredictable material properties—function not as developmental hindrances but as generative conditions cultivating unique artistic expression. Authentic modernization requires navigating between fundamentalist adherence to ossified forms and nihilistic abandonment of material essence. True transformation emerges through creative breakthrough—deconstructing traditional paradigms while remaining faithful to material ontological core.

This research contributes to contemporary art theory in several dimensions. It extends materialist philosophy into specific craft modernization contexts, demonstrating material agency theory's practical applicability. It refines medium-specificity discourse for post-medium conditions, illustrating how differential specificity operates in non-Western traditions. It develops analytical framework for understanding technical deconstruction as aesthetic strategy rather than merely procedural modification.

For practitioners, several insights emerge: technical innovation should be conceptually motivated rather than pursued for novelty; material properties can function as generative constraints rather than limitations; tradition and modernity need not be oppositional but can engage in productive dialogue; global relevance can be achieved through cultural specificity rather than despite it.

Future research should investigate comparative analysis of Japanese, Korean, and Southeast Asian lacquer modernization trajectories; reception studies examining how diverse audiences engage with contemporary works; longitudinal studies tracking emerging artists and evolving innovations; collaborative interdisciplinary research integrating materials science with art historical analysis.

Only when lacquer is no longer viewed as fossilized heritage demanding preservation, but instead recognized as living medium capable of contemporary philosophical reflection, can it achieve genuine liberation. The future lies not in nostalgic preservation nor radical rupture, but in critical, creative engagement with material traditions that honor their richness while embracing contemporary possibilities. This path requires courage to deconstruct, wisdom to discern what remains vital, and imagination to reconstruct—qualities embodied in the most compelling contemporary lacquer practices examined here.

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Ethics Statement

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