



A Study on the Dialectical Relationship Between the “Black” of Lacquer Art and the “Colors” of Painted Sculpture

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Abstract

Traditional Chinese lacquer art and painted sculpture are both important carriers of national aesthetic genes, with distinct differences in color expression. Lacquer art takes “black” as its main background color, embodying profound and solemn cultural meanings, while painted sculpture emphasizes “colors”, creating vivid and dynamic artistic effects through multiple color layers. Based on archaeological findings and in-depth research, this paper comprehensively analyzes the contradictory unity between the “black” of lacquer art and the “colors” of painted sculpture from three perspectives: cultural semiotics, craft characteristics, and aesthetic experience. It attempts to demonstrate the dialectical relationship manifested when the two integrate in materials, reconcile in aesthetics, and infiltrate in culture. Such analysis not only deepens the understanding of the underlying principles of traditional handicrafts but also provides credible theoretical support and guidance for the sustainable development and improvement of traditional crafts in modern society.

Keywords

Lacquer art; Painted sculpture; Black; Colors; Dialectical relationship; Traditional crafts

1. Introduction

Lacquer art and painted sculpture are two cornerstones of traditional plastic arts. Their origins can be traced back to distant historical periods, and after long-term accumulation and development, they have formed a unique artistic system rich in profound cultural heritage and aesthetic characteristics. Lacquer art uses natural lacquer as the main raw material, and in its color expression system, “black” is particularly prominent—a feature that has persisted from ancient times to the present. From the red-lacquered wooden bowl unearthed at the Hemudu Site to the Qin and Han dynasties’ tradition of “black exterior and red interior” lacquerware, black is not only the most striking visual highlight of lacquer art but also the key to its cultural value and craft aesthetics. Painted sculpture uses clay or porcelain clay as the base material, and artists apply multi-layered color rendering with various mineral pigments to create brilliant and rich visual effects. The Dunhuang painted sculptures have 72 carefully formulated color sequences, and the painted sculptures in the Shengmu Hall of Jinci Temple take blue-

green as the main color tone, which well reflects the uniqueness and profound connotation of painted sculpture art in color expression.

Currently, most studies focus on the innovation and investigation of lacquer art craftsmanship. Xu (2024) explored the innovative application of traditional lacquer art in contemporary sculpture creation, and Guo (2022) analyzed the color application principles of Dunhuang murals and painted sculptures. However, few studies on the color aesthetics of painted sculpture have conducted systematic research from the perspective of the dialectical relationship between the two colors. Based on detailed archaeological data and authoritative academic literature (Zhao et al., 2025; Yao, 2025), this paper explores the contradictory unity between the introverted characteristic of the “black” in lacquer art and the explicit characteristic of the “colors” in painted sculpture, attempting to provide a special theoretical perspective and application guidance for the cross-media integration and transformation of traditional art forms.

2. Cultural Connotation and Craft Characteristics of the “Black” in Lacquer Art

2.1 Cultural symbolism of “black” in lacquer art

In the field of lacquer art, black is a pure color form containing profound philosophical concepts and cultural implications of social hierarchy. From the perspective of Confucianism, black represents solemnity, orderliness, and decorum. When mixed with red, it forms the so-called “xuanxun” (dark red and black) color system, which occupied a very important position in lacquerware production from the Shang Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty. This reflects the inherent significance of etiquette systems and the ancient society’s emphasis on the values of hierarchy and harmonious coexistence. From the perspective of Daoist philosophy, black represents the original, unadorned state of nature. The deep, lustrous color achieved through lacquering and polishing aligns with the aesthetic ideal of “the Dao models itself on nature,” emphasizing the pursuit of inner tranquility by following natural laws. Archaeological evidence shows the central position of black in historical cultural heritage. For example, the double-layer nine-compartment lacquer cosmetics box unearthed from the Mawangdui Han Tomb, which uses pure black as the base color with vermilion lines outlining patterns, effectively demonstrates the solemnity and gravity of noble artifacts. Similarly, the Northern Song Dynasty lacquered Ashoka Pagoda excavated from the Baixiang Pagoda in Wenzhou uses a black lacquer surface as its foundation, incorporating gold thread inlays to achieve a harmonious unity between a solemn atmosphere and exquisite details, further showcasing the unique charm and symbolic significance of black in ancient craft design (Zhao et al., 2025).

2.2 Expression of “black” determined by craft characteristics

The unique material properties of natural lacquer endow black with a distinctive artistic expression form, which is highly charming both visually and tactilely. The black color produced by the oxidation of natural raw lacquer is warm and stable in texture, with high durability, and its vitality is far superior to chemical pigments (Wu & Xu, 2024). This is reflected in two aspects: first, its natural and environmentally friendly characteristics; second, it gradually shows rich layers and depth over time. In lacquer art, the multi-layered manifestation of black mostly relies on three key techniques: application, polishing, and inlay. The Pengxiu technique mixes black primer with metal powder and then undergoes careful polishing to produce a profound and layered texture effect, showing a gradient from light to dark. The inlay technique, by its nature, inlays colorful materials such as jade and mother-of-pearl into the black lacquer sur-

face, forming a distinct yet harmonious contrast between black and colors, and further enhancing the artistic appeal of the works. These craft characteristics make the black of lacquer art possess both unity and delicacy, laying a solid foundation for its integration with the colors of painted sculpture (Xie et al., 2025).

3. Aesthetic Characteristics and Cultural Expression of the “Colors” in Painted Sculpture

3.1 Construction of color spectrum and aesthetic pursuit of painted sculpture

The artistic expression of painted sculpture relies on mineral pigments as a key material, establishing a color system with decorative beauty and symbolic meaning. Guo (2022) elaborated on the color application of Dunhuang painted sculptures in his book “Traditional Chinese Colors: The Color Aesthetics of Dunhuang”, which includes rich color combinations composed of 72 different colors. Most painted sculptures of the Western Wei Dynasty used ultramarine blue, malachite green, and bright red as the main colors. This choice appropriately integrated the unique charm of Western Regions culture with the traditional essence of Central Plains art, reflecting the artistic transformation under the integration of multiple cultures. By the Guiyi Army period, the color style of painted sculptures underwent obvious changes, adopting more stable sea blue and ochre colors. The use of these colors also reflected the changes in social aesthetic trends at that time and indicated the adaptation and continuous development of artistic expression forms in the historical context. The Northern Song Dynasty painted sculptures in the Shengmu Hall of Jinci Temple followed the creative principle of “three parts sculpture, seven parts painting”. Their color application was mainly based on blue-green tones, integrated with vermilion and gold elements, striving to accurately reproduce the characteristics of Song Dynasty costume regulations. Through careful color contrast techniques, it vividly showed the hierarchical differences and personality traits among the sculpted figures.

Painted sculpture art emphasizes “expressing spirit through colors”, a concept that is more evident in works of different themes. For example, the Dunhuang Bodhisattva statues use the color effect of dark blue hair and emerald green eyebrows to create a sacred atmosphere for the sculptures through distinct color contrasts. The maid statues convey the warmth and human touch of the world with soft and elegant makeup, thus reflecting the characteristics of Buddhist art that are both solemn and full of human emotions. The painted sculptures in the Baixiang Pagoda in Wenzhou integrated the local characteristic “Ousu” (Wenzhou sculpture) technique, using porcelain clay as the main material and pigments mixed with tung oil to achieve the unity of color and shape (Wu & Xu, 2024). The delicate depiction of gold lines not only optimized the overall beauty of the works but also added a strong classical and elegant atmosphere. Such color expression is conducive to the transmission of religious themes and humanistic narratives, and also forms a unique aesthetic value system.

3.2 Cultural context and technical support behind the colors

The choice of colors in painted sculpture is a key part of artistic decision-making, which is related to the context of the times and the innovation of material technology. Most of the mineral pigments used in Dunhuang painted sculptures came from commercial activities on the ancient Silk Road. The application of pigments such as ultramarine blue and ochre not only shows the sophistication of color aesthetics but also reflects the historical traces of cultural exchanges on the Silk Road. The Wenzhou painted sculptures of the Northern Song Dynasty showed the uniqueness of regional craftsmanship. The local use of special local porcelain

clay and tung oil mixed with pigments greatly improved the adhesion of the pigments and enhanced the durability of the colors (Wu & Xu, 2024). This is not only a technical improvement but also a manifestation of local artistic wisdom. From the perspective of cultural core, the colors of painted sculpture are full of strong religious meanings. Gold represents sacredness in Buddha statue sculpture and reflects strict hierarchical order, which can be confirmed by the careful use of colors on the phoenix crown and python robe under the Shengmu statue of Jinci Temple. It is also an intuitive expression of folk aesthetics. The colorful folk painted sculptures reflect the rich customs and aesthetic tendencies of various regions, thus forming a diverse and unified color cultural system (Yao, 2025).

4. Practice of the Dialectical Relationship Between the “Black” of Lacquer Art and the “Colors” of Painted Sculpture

4.1 Opposition: differences in aesthetic orientation and expression logic

Lacquer art prefers black, while painted sculpture values colors, and their aesthetic orientations are completely different. Lacquer art takes black as the main color tone, creating an introverted and profound artistic atmosphere, and expressing rich connotations through subtle changes in a single color, which embodies the Oriental aesthetic concept of “less is more”. Painted sculpture regards a rich color system as the key, creating multi-layered visual effects through exquisite color contrast and harmonious matching, which well reflects the decorative art tradition of “complexity as beauty”. Such differences essentially reflect the expansion of the scope of material application. Natural lacquer is warm to the touch and full of strong emotions, and even a single color can enhance and deepen the artistic conception (Xie et al., 2025; Yao, 2025); while the surface of clay sculpture is relatively rough, its expressiveness is limited, and it often needs a variety of colors to fill to make up for the shortage in visual communication.

From the perspective of logical expression, the black in lacquer art is an “inclusive base”, and all decorative details develop in accordance with it. The luster of mother-of-pearl and the splendor of gold foil can only be fully displayed by relying on the black background. Painted sculpture is different. Its color application is a “dominant communication”. Color is not only a visual element but also directly involved in the shaping of the work’s narrative, and can clearly distinguish the identity, gender, and even hierarchy of characters through its rich changes. The Dunhuang painted sculptures effectively distinguish between gods and Buddhas and ordinary people, and between men and women through the depth and deployment of colors. Such contrasts are very distinct, thus endowing the two with unique and striking artistic characteristics and recognition.

4.2 Unity: material complementarity and aesthetic reconciliation

4.2.1 Practical exploration of material complementarity

Lacquer art and painted sculpture are traditional art forms with unique materials, thus showing natural complementarity. This complementarity promotes the in-depth integration of the two in craftsmanship, and achieves the harmony and unity of colors through the application of ingenious techniques, which also set off each other, thereby enriching their respective artistic expression and aesthetic value. Contemporary lacquer sculpture art has explored the technique of integrating the black base of bodiless lacquer art with the color presentation of painted sculpture, developing the aesthetic approach of “black lacquer as bone, colors as skin” (Xu,

2024). In the practical operation of integrating Fuzhou bodiless lacquerware with sculpture innovation, craftsmen first fully cover the sculpture surface with black lacquer, and then carefully apply colored lacquer to depict and decorate the details. This process organically combines the delicate texture of lacquer art with the colorful characteristics of painted sculpture, creating a unique artistic style that shows the warm texture of lacquerware while highlighting the color characteristics of painted sculpture, achieving the coordinated coexistence of materials and colors (Yao, 2025).

4.2.2 Historical cases of aesthetic reconciliation

In the field of ancient artistic practice, the “black” in lacquer art and the “colors” of painted sculpture merged with each other, forming a relatively complete aesthetic system and technical norms. Taking the archaeological findings of the Northern Song Dynasty painted sculptures and the lacquer Arya Amitabha Pagoda unearthed from the Baixiang Pagoda in Wenzhou as examples, the painted sculpture part cleverly adopted the gold-cutting technique, inlaying gold lines on the base, showing exquisite artistic techniques and luxurious visual effects; the lacquer Arya Amitabha Pagoda created a solemn and dignified atmosphere with its pure black lacquer surface (Zhao et al., 2025). These two works belong to the same era. By using the color contrast between “black” and “gold”, they not only enhanced the sacredness of religious art but also strengthened the overall artistic influence through a strong visual impact. In the production of cloisonné Buddha statues, the black primer of lacquer art is combined with the mineral pigments used in painted sculpture. The primer has durability, which can make the colors not easy to fade for a long time (Xie et al., 2025). The variety of mineral pigments greatly improves the artistic expression of Buddha statues, achieving the unity of both “solemnity” and “vitality”.

4.2.3 Symbiosis and commonality of cultural connotations

The cultural cores of the two have a high degree of similarity. The black in lacquer art has the characteristics of “solemnity and eternity”, and the colors of painted sculpture show the breath of “life and sacredness”. Both serve religious rituals and celebration activities (Yao, 2025). Through their unique visual language, they not only enhance the solemnity of the rituals but also deepen the participants’ understanding of the meaning of life and sacred values, achieving in-depth cultural resonance and spiritual integration in cross-media expression. In terms of Dunhuang art, the profound black of lacquer offerings carries out comprehensive spatial color communication with the gorgeous colors around the painted Buddha statues. This contrast on the one hand highlights the calmness and tranquility of black, and on the other hand emphasizes the lightness and agility of colors, together creating a solemn and humanistic religious atmosphere. Looking back at the funeral art of the Qin and Han dynasties, the black and red colors of lacquerware have a strong visual contrast with the painted costumes of painted pottery figurines. This feature aims to reflect the philosophical concept of “treating the dead as the living” (Zhao et al., 2025; Yao, 2025).

5. Contemporary Value and Inheritance Enlightenment of the Dialectical Relationship

Exploring the dialectical interaction between the “black” in lacquer art and the “colors” in painted sculpture reflects the tension and harmonious unity contained in it. This in-depth connection not only enriches the cultural connotation of traditional crafts but also provides important theoretical and application guidance for the innovation and development of contem-

porary traditional crafts (Yao, 2025; Wu, 2022). In terms of cross-media integration, modern lacquer sculpture art cleverly uses the dialectical thinking of “black base with colors”, combining the profound black texture with the specific images of painted sculpture (Wu, 2022). This can not only retain the main characteristics of traditional crafts but also create a unique expression form with contemporary artistic style (Yao, 2025).

From the perspective of cultural inheritance, this dialectical relationship well reflects the aesthetic core of “harmony in diversity” of traditional art. The black elements in lacquer art reflect the stability and remoteness of the cultural foundation, and the various colors of painted sculpture show the diversity and transformation of cultural expression (Yao, 2025). The two reconcile and coexist, not only showing the unique charm of traditional crafts but also forming a sustainable development path for the living inheritance of this craft (Yao, 2025; Ding, 2025).

From a practical perspective, the integration of Fuzhou bodiless lacquerware with the local sculpture industry reflects the great market value of the dialectical unity of “black” and “colors” (Yao, 2025). This example enables us to deeply understand and verify the possibility of the innovation and integration of traditional cultural elements in the modern economic context. The digital protection measures of Dunhuang painted sculpture colors are creatively linked with the black techniques of lacquer art, establishing a solid technical foundation for the inheritance and transformation of traditional color culture in modern society (Xie et al., 2025; Yao, 2025). For future research directions, we can further explore the principles of integrating the color wisdom of traditional crafts with modern design, public art and other fields, so as to promote the transformation vitality of traditional crafts in the contemporary social environment, tap their application potential, and thus add new life connotations and cultural values (Yao, 2025; Wu, 2022).

6. Conclusion

There is a dialectical relationship between the “black” in lacquer art and the “colors” in painted sculpture. This relationship can be said to be a specific manifestation of Oriental aesthetic concepts such as “upholding tradition and innovating”, “introversion and extroversion”, and “simplicity and diversity”. The black of lacquer art is calm and rich in cultural connotations, laying a stable aesthetic foundation for the color system of painted sculpture. The colors of painted sculpture have rich and varied expression forms and strong visual impact, adding vitality to the black of lacquer art. The two cooperate with each other in the process of craftsmanship, verify each other in cultural significance, and blend with each other in aesthetic considerations, together forming a complex and rich network system of color dialectics in traditional Chinese plastic arts.

This dialectical relationship reflects the key point of the operational wisdom of ancient artists, and is also the main guiding concept for the inheritance and innovation of traditional crafts in the present. That is, we must preserve the unique characteristics of our national crafts, and through the mutual enrichment and integration of various art forms, it is possible to inherit the traditional cultural values and aesthetic tastes in modern society, add new vitality, and thus achieve the modern transformation and sustainable development of traditional art.

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Ethics Statement

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