



A Contemporary Study on “Describing Objects as They Like” of Portrait Bricks in the Han Dynasty through the Lens of Museum Aesthetic Education

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Abstract

In the contemporary educational system, museums have become an important venue for aesthetic education owing to their rich cultural relics resources. The remains of ancient humans displayed in the museums are just like a bridge connecting the past and the present. By perceiving these precious historical relics, people can deeply understand the unremitting pursuit of beauty by our ancestors, which is beyond the reach of the traditional classroom. “Describing objects as they like” (Yingwu Xiangxing in Chinese) is one of the Six Principles of Xie He, which refers to the expression technique of depicting objective things and integrating subjective emotions in artistic creation. During the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, the centralization was further strengthened. The country was prosperous and the economy was thriving. With the opening of the Silk Road and under the influence of Confucianism centered on “filial piety”, the custom of sumptuous burial prevailed, and the portrait bricks in the Han Dynasty became an important carrier for people to remember their ancestors and express family affection. It is mainly distributed in regions such as Sichuan and Henan. There are various types, including hollow and solid ones with extensive themes covering many aspects such as daily life and mythology. People conveyed profound emotions through the formal beauty of lines and the narrative quality of the pictures, vividly showing the social outlook and spiritual world of that time. This paper aims to analyze portrait bricks in the Han Dynasty collected by the Sichuan Museum and explore their artistic characteristics of “corresponding to objects” (Yingwu in Chinese) and “depicting their forms” (Xiangxing in Chinese). These findings will provide new perspectives and inspirations for the development of modern museum aesthetic education.

Subject Areas

Art

Keywords

Portrait Bricks in the Han Dynasty, Museum Aesthetic Education, Lines, Narrative

1. Introduction

As a crucial concept in ancient Chinese art theory, “Describing objects as they are” (Yingwu Xiangxing in Chinese) is essentially about reflecting and reproducing the true appearance of natural objects through the creation of artistic forms, while infusing the emotions and vitality of the artists [1]. In the production and expression of portrait bricks in the Han Dynasty, these portrait bricks not only have practical burial functions, but also functioned as artworks. They are the material carriers through which the artisans of the Han Dynasty transformed their observations and understandings of real-life and natural phenomena into specific images.

“Corresponding to objects” means depicting objective things truthfully. In the Eastern Han Dynasty, Xu Shen’s *The Narration of Explanation of Script and Elucidations of Characters* proposed that “Pictographs are those that draw an object, following its shape and curving accordingly, like the characters for the sun and the moon [2].” As one of the “Six Categories of Chinese Characters”, pictographs originated from primitive pictorial record-keeping. Their essence is an intuitive depiction of objective things, emphasizing the creation of characters based on the forms of real objects. When Sima Qian wrote “Records of the Grand Historian”, he also adhered to the concept of “examining the relationship between heaven and man, understanding the changes of ancient and modern times, and forming one’s own opinion”, striving to record historical events and figures truthfully. This pursuit of objective facts subtly influenced the creation of Han portrait bricks. The content of Han portrait bricks usually takes farming, hunting, music, dance, and daily-life scenes as the narrative background. These activities are closely related to the production methods, political systems, military activities, and other social activities of the time, reflecting the social structure and economic foundation of the Han Dynasty.

“Depicting form” refers to the infusion of emotions into Han portrait bricks on the basis of “corresponding to objects”. Rodin once said, “Art is emotion.” Artistic creation is not just a representation of objective things but also a direct expression of the creator’s emotional experiences. At that time, craftsmen incorporated their personal emotions into the creative process. Through lines and narrative language, they formed “meaningful forms”, imagining the world of the deceased based on the lives of the living and depicting the art of the other world [3]. When

viewers appreciate these works, they can feel the emotions of the creators through the works and thus resonate.

2. The Meaning of “Depicting Their Forms” (Xiangxing in Chinese)

2.1. The Formal Beauty of Lines Texture Outlining

In the portrait bricks of the Han Dynasty, the craftsmen skillfully utilized the variations of lines, such as thickness, intensity, and speed, to reflect the status and social standing of the figures. Whether depicting human beings, animals, or birds, they were highly imaginative and were able to create vivid images that captured both the physical form and the spirit of the subjects, achieving a combination of form and spirit [4].

By comparing the “Portrait Brick of Queen of the West” and the “Portrait Brick of the Ax Carriage” collected in the Sichuan Museum, it can be seen that when depicting the Queen Mother of the West, soft curvilinear contours are mostly used. Delicate lines are employed to portray the toad standing upright and dancing, as well as the jade rabbit holding the *Ganoderma lucidum* around her, which self-evidently reveals the noble status of the Queen Mother of the West. When observing closely, there is an equally satisfactory effect between this and Gu Kai-zhi’s “High Antiquity Gossamer Drawing” in the Eastern Jin Dynasty. The former mainly conveys the extraordinary temperament and sense of majesty of the Queen Mother of the West through lines, while the latter tends to pursue the expression of the spiritual connotations of the figures. This kind of composition arrangement is like a microcosm of the social class structure, enabling viewers to intuitively feel the differences in the social status of the figures and gain an insight into the mythological beliefs and cultural psychology of the Han Dynasty.

When depicting the “Portrait Brick of the Ax Carriage in the Han Dynasty”, through the meticulous carving of the vigorous and powerful lines of the war horses, the sense of their galloping is vividly shown. When it comes to depicting the utensils, straight lines are often used to reflect the sturdiness of the carriage. In addition, the organization and arrangement of the compositions also demonstrate the initial understanding of the primary and secondary relationships among the people at that time.



Figure 1. Portrait brick of the western queen mother, collection of Sichuan Museum of Botany.



Figure 2. Portrait brick of ox cart, collection of Sichuan Museum of Botany.

In the entire painting, animals or birds become the visual focal points, while the features of **Figure 1** and **Figure 2** appear in the form of symbols. The whole picture emphasizes the strength and rhythm of the running carriage, thereby making the dynamic effect more prominent. For viewers, they can directly experience the culture of traveling by carriage and horse in the Han Dynasty, as well as the people's pursuit of strength and speed at that time. Meanwhile, this unique way of composition also inspires viewers to think about how to skillfully arrange elements in a picture to highlight the theme and create a distinctive atmosphere.

2.2. The Formal Beauty of Lines Exaggerated Modeling Figure

Upon careful appreciation of the patterns on the portrait bricks of the Han Dynasty, it is not difficult to discover the presence of the principle of frontality including the regular composition, two-dimensional and planar. The figures, animals, and scenes are mainly depicted in profile and silhouette, with exaggerated modeling and a strong decorative flavor.

For example, the modeling of the "Portrait Brick of the Moon Goddess" in **Figure 3** breaks through the limitations of reality. It mainly features a side profile, abstracting and exaggerating the moon in nature, and magnifying certain characteristics of the moon in order to express the understanding of the mystery and sublimity of the moon. Moreover, this exaggeration also reflects the cosmology of the Han Dynasty. It enables viewers to understand the unique cosmology of the Han Dynasty. At that time, people believed that celestial phenomena were closely related to human affairs. The changes in the phases of the moon were not only related to the transformation of seasons but also closely associated with agricultural production, the theory of Yin and Yang and the Five Elements. This prompts viewers to contemplate the relationship between humanity and nature from a more macroscopic perspective, as well as the profound insights into the laws of nature within traditional culture.



Figure 3. Portrait brick of moon goddess, the collection of Sichuan Museum of Botany.

In the “Portrait Brick of the Seven-Drum Dance”, the waist of the female dancer is as slender as a strand of silk, and her two long sleeves are like two long strips of silk fluttering in the air. Her figure is light and graceful. The female dancer in the upper left corner stands on her hands in an upside-down position, with her body bent like a ring. Her flipping figure has even surpassed the height of her head, and the dynamic posture is exaggeratedly presented. This not only highlights the beauty of her dance but also conveys a spiritual state that transcends reality [5]. This exaggerated expression of dynamics stimulates the viewers’ imagination and creativity, enabling them to perceive the vibrant vitality inherent in ancient art in modern life. It encourages them to break free from conventions in both artistic creation and daily life, and to pursue freedom and transcendence (See **Figure 4**).



Figure 4. Portrait brick of Seven-Drum dance, the collection of Sichuan Museum of Botany.

2.3. Narrative Stylization Principle

Stylization is a commonly used technique in design and artistic creation. It constructs a kind of order and rhythm through repetitive and regular elements and forms, enabling the rapid and effective expression of complex stories and scenes. At the same time, it simplifies the production process and improves production efficiency.

The patterns on the “Portrait Brick of Banquet” exhibit a special regularity and repetitiveness in their forms of expression. Whether it is the arrangement of the figures or the roof tiles, they all present a symmetrical beauty, providing viewers with a balanced and harmonious visual experience. These patterns depict the vivid scene of people gathering together to enjoy the happiness of family life, guiding the viewers’ gaze to form a complete story of the banquet [6].

Research has found that certain pattern elements will appear repeatedly on different surfaces of the bricks within the same scene, which enhances the symbolic meaning and visual memory points of the works. Taking the common labor themes in the “Han Dynasty portrait bricks from Sichuan as an example, we can observe that the images of farmers repeatedly appear in different works. Although there are some differences in details each time, they maintain a high degree of consistency in basic postures and movements. Viewers can appreciate a simple and rustic aesthetic from these seemingly simple yet highly consistent postures and movements. They can experience the Han Dynasty artisans’ ability to refine and generalize labor scenes, thus enhancing their own aesthetic appreciation skills (See **Figure 5**, **Figure 6(a)**, **Figure 6(b)**).



Figure 5. Portrait brick of banquet, the collection of Sichuan Museum of Botany.



(a)

(b)

Figure 6. (a) (b) Portrait brick of agricultural, the collection of Sichuan Museum of Botany.

2.4. Narrative Stylization Principle

The “auspicious” elements in the portrait bricks of the Han Dynasty are a typical feature. They are usually presented in a veiled way within the works, providing us with a unique perspective to interpret the aesthetic concepts and tastes of the Han Dynasty.

Take the “Portrait Brick of Salt Production” from Sichuan as an example. At that time, the production of well salt had already reached a certain scale, with a detailed division of labor and complete tools. Meanwhile, there were also mythical deer and red-crowned cranes interspersed in the scene. This not only represents an artistic reproduction of real life but also embodies the sustenance of good wishes and the yearning for an idealized world. When viewers gaze at this portrait brick, they seem to be able to touch the spiritual world of the people in the Han Dynasty. They can come to understand that no matter how the times change, the human pursuit of beauty is always universal. We should live in the moment and cherish every bit of beauty in life.

In the “Portrait Brick of Fuxi and Nuwa”, Nüwa is usually depicted with a human head and a snake’s body, coiling around each other with Fuxi, and holding the sun and the moon in their hands. The intertwined tails of the two dragons at the lower part further strengthen the symbolic meaning of fertility and creativity, containing the implication of the continuation and rebirth of life. Through these rich details, it showcases the understanding and imagination of the people in the Han Dynasty regarding the origin of nature, the universe, and human civilization. In particular, the image of Fuxi and Nüwa coiling around each other has become a prototype in ancient Chinese art. It is an artistic prototype that reflects the harmony between man and nature, the interweaving of Yin and Yang, the flowing of lines, and the creation of life [7]. Viewers can enhance their aesthetic levels, draw

nourishment from traditional cultural art, cultivate the ability to understand and appreciate diverse art styles, and strengthen their sense of identity and pride in traditional culture (See **Figure 7** and **Figure 8**).



Figure 7. Portrait brick of salt production, the collection of Sichuan Museum of Botany.



Figure 8. Portrait brick of Fuxi and Nyuwa, the collection of Sichuan Museum of Botany.

3. The Value of Applications

3.1. The Value of Lines

The artistic expression techniques of the portrait bricks in the Han Dynasty enable the audience to experience a beauty that is different from the traditional one. Compared with traditional artworks, the portrait bricks of the Han Dynasty emphasize the freedom of form. Their production is not restricted by fixed patterns. Their artistic expressions place more emphasis on the smoothness of lines and the simplification of forms, thus being closer to the true reproduction of the natural world.

When museums display the portrait bricks of the Han Dynasty, the application of the beauty of these line forms is of particular importance. Through means such as lighting, spatial layout, and illumination, the beauty of the lines can be reasonably presented in the exhibition hall. High-contrast lighting is used to emphasize the contours of the lines, making them the visual focus of the viewers and enhancing the conveyance of beauty.

Secondly, the staff should deeply interpret the connotations and values of the beauty of the line forms of the portrait bricks of the Han Dynasty in the exhibition

explanations. This allows the viewers not only to see their external forms but also to understand the culture and stories behind them. By elaborating on how the lines are combined with the objects they represent, and how elements such as dynamics and emotions are expressed through the use of lines, the audience can gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of these artworks.

3.2. The Value of Narrative Aesthetics

The artistic expression of Han portrait bricks also embodies a kind of narrative aesthetics. Different from the single and fixed narrative style of ancient Egyptian murals, which mainly record the life stories of pharaohs and religious ceremonies, emphasizing respect for authority and religious doctrines, and also different from the vivid and realistic narrative style of ancient Greek vase paintings, which pursue the accurate depiction of human body shapes and proportions. Each image on the Han portrait bricks tells an independent story and is rich in symbolic patterns. Although these stories are brief, they can clearly convey vivid plots and character images. The scenes on each brick tell an independent story and are filled with rich symbolic patterns. Although these stories are brief, they can clearly convey vivid plots and character images, providing an important reference for modern artists. That is, in artistic creation, one should develop their own expressive ability and learn how to tell their own stories through artworks, as well as convey emotions and thoughts.

This narrative quality provides abundant content for the educational activities of museums. Museums can design educational activities related to the portrait bricks of the Han Dynasty, such as role-playing and story retelling competitions. By making use of AR technology, the audience can “step into” the scenes through augmented reality and “interact” with the characters in the pictures. This can stimulate the audience’s enthusiasm for participation, enabling them to have a more vivid and intuitive experience of the historical scenes of the Han Dynasty.

4. Practice and Innovation

4.1. The Design of Interactive Experience Activity

In the aesthetic education practice of museums, how to make the artistic beauty of “describing objects as they are” (Yingwu Xiangxing in Chinese) in the portrait bricks of the Han Dynasty deeply rooted in people’s hearts is a subject worthy of in-depth consideration. Museums can design a series of interactive experience activities to enable visitors to feel the infinite charm of “describing objects as they are” through participation and experience.

Firstly, a set of interactive guided tour programs named “The Exploration Journey of Portrait Bricks in the Han Dynasty” can be designed to fully activate the art resources. In this program, visitors will take on the role of a historical explorer. They will first receive an “exploration map” at the entrance. Guided by clues and tasks, they will discover and learn about the historical background of the portrait bricks of the Han Dynasty and the meaning of “describing objects as they are”

involved.

At the “The Power of Lines” experience station, visitors can simulate the line drawing on the portrait bricks of the Han Dynasty by operating the interactive screen, and feel the power of lines in conveying emotions and stories. At the “Scene and Narrative” experience station, visitors can use virtual reality technology to immerse themselves in an ancient scene constructed with the portrait bricks of the Han Dynasty, and experience the beauty of the combination of patterns and characters. In addition, the “Detail Exploration” experience station will provide high-magnification magnifying glasses and detailed explanations to help visitors discover the details on the portrait bricks and understand how these details reflect the social life and aesthetic tastes of that time.

In the map, an “Interactive Puzzle-solving Game of Portrait Bricks in the Han Dynasty” can be integrated, allowing visitors to participate through touch screens or mobile phones to solve a series of puzzles, check in at various levels, and learn about the historical and cultural background and artistic characteristics of the portrait bricks of the Han Dynasty. This method not only enhances participation but also enables visitors to feel the process of combining “corresponding to objects” (Yingwu in Chinese) and “depicting their forms” (Xiangxing in Chinese) in the portrait bricks of the Han Dynasty through the form of the game, and deeply appreciate the ingenuity of the ancients in artistic creation.

4.2. Aesthetic Education Workshops and Creative Activities

In institutions like the Sichuan Museum, which are known for their historical and cultural exhibitions, holding relevant aesthetic education workshops and creative activities serve as an excellent medium. It allows participants to gain a deeper understanding of the artistic connotations of “describing objects as they are” (Yingwu Xiangxing in Chinese) and create artworks that not only carry traditional significance but also possess a contemporary sense.

The museum can collaborate with local art galleries to organize a series of creative activities related to the portrait bricks of the Han Dynasty, thereby optimizing art resources. For example, participants can be invited to create their own portrait bricks inspired by a certain image from the portrait bricks of the Han Dynasty. During the creative process, the staff should provide a variety of media, including traditional paper and ink, as well as modern materials such as acrylic boards and digital media, to enable participants to give full play to their creativity.

Workshops on sketching, sculpture, etc. can also be held, allowing visitors to use lines to recreate the images on the portrait bricks of the Han Dynasty and experience the charm of lines in artistic creation. They can either “correspond to objects” (Yingwu in Chinese) in a traditional way or “depict their forms” (Xiangxing in Chinese) to showcase their modern aesthetic.

In addition, through this platform, the museum can display the works of the participants. This not only affirms their creative efforts but also serves as a new form of aesthetic education, attracting more public attention and participation. In

this way, the aesthetic education work of the museum is no longer confined to traditional exhibition explanations. Instead, it becomes a vivid, interactive, educational, and innovative cultural platform that can engage with the public.

5. Conclusion

Taking the artistic technique of “describing objects as they are” (Yingwu Xiangxing in Chinese) as the starting point, this article conducts an in-depth exploration of the contemporary research value of the portrait bricks of the Han Dynasty from the perspective of aesthetic education in museums. The concept of “describing objects as they are” in the portrait bricks of the Han Dynasty is not only an artistic expression method but also an aesthetic education resource in museums with profound cultural connotations. Through in-depth research on it, we can more effectively discover the artistic characteristics and application values of traditional culture in museums. This, in turn, will promote the innovation and development of aesthetic education in museums, providing new directions and possibilities for their aesthetic education practices.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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A List of Words

汉画像砖 portrait bricks in the Han Dynasty

应物象形 Describing objects as they like

应物“corresponding to objects” (Yingwu in Chinese)

象形“depicting their forms” (Xiangxing in Chinese)