

Observe Stylistic Vitality from Afar, Refine Filling in Detail — Implementation of Artistic Principles in Ancient Sculpture Restoration

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Abstract: China's cultural relic protection started in the 1950s, with established scientific principles including minimum intervention, reversibility, re-treatability, and recognizability. However, artistic protection still depends on restorers' personal competence, leading to damage from poor restoration. Focusing on ancient Chinese painted sculptures, this paper proposes the artistic restoration principle "Observe Stylistic Vitality from Afar, Refine Filling in Detail" based on scientific rules, aiming to optimize preservation methodologies.

Keywords: Painted sculpture; Icon; Stylistic vitality; Restoration; Aesthetics

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1. Reviewing the splendor

Ancient Chinese painted sculptures, with a thousand-year history dating back to the Sixteen Kingdoms Period (exemplified by Gansu Jinta Temple), represent the peak of local plastic art. They fall into two main categories: Wooden Frame Statues and Stone Core Statues (popular from Northern Wei to Tang, e.g., Maijishan Grottoes) (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Clay sculptures of the Twenty-Eight Mansions, Iron Buddha Temple in Gaoping, Ming Dynasty

1.1. Representative of ancient plastic art achievements

Painted sculptures have three core attributes: religious (original driving force as worship icons), artistic (fundamental value integrating craftsmen's skills, aesthetics, materials, and techniques), and cultural (tangible evidence of art history). Shanxi Province, blessed geographically and culturally, preserves the richest, highest-quality temple painted sculptures, forming a complete Chinese sculpture art system^[1].

1.2. Two basic ancient restoration methods

Historic painted sculpture restoration prioritized religious purposes over original appearance, often obscuring styles due to contemporary aesthetics, funding, and personal preferences, reducing historical value.

Key methods: (1) Repainting and reshaping, a religious merit act sponsored by monks or nobles. Examples include Republican-era repainting of Foguang Temple East Hall sculptures and Ming-Qing repainting of Tang attendant bodhisattvas in Nanchan Temple; repeated reshaping obscured some works' original ages. (2) Layout

adjustment. Post-Song-Jin temple renovations (e.g., column-reduction construction) shifted sculptures for functional needs, disconnecting statue and layout ages, such as the Ming-Qing adjustment of Five Dynasties sculptures in Bu'er Temple (**Figure 2**).



Figure 2. Painted sculptures of the Five Dynasties Period, rearranged in later periods at Bu'er Temple

2. Restoration cases and problem analysis

Preventive conservation has advanced high-tech warehouses, but temple-preserved painted sculptures still face poor conditions and urgent restoration needs. The core domestic issue is inadequate modeling capabilities, resulting in subpar artistic quality.

2.1. Pujing Temple sculpture restoration case

A Yuan Dynasty bodhisattva sculpture in Shanxi Xiangfen Pujing Temple was damaged after the head was stolen. Without original data, the restored head had distorted proportions, clumsy craftsmanship, and a cartoonish look, losing Yuan-style solemnity. The original neck was altered to fit the new head (no distinction between old and new), severely undermining value.

Scientific strategies: Verify stolen relic recovery potential; build archives via surveys, measurement, and material analysis; create virtual models with 3D scanning; engage senior sculptors to 1:1 copy using traditional techniques (aligning head-neck-shoulder structure); distinguish filled parts with degradation-resistant transparent materials (ensuring reversibility); document the whole process.

Overlooked vs. Dunhuang, Shanxi's painted sculptures suffer from human damage and weathering. Restoring their original form and era characteristics while preserving historical information remains a core challenge.

2.2. Clay sculpture restoration case from the Liao Upper Capital site

Liao Dynasty arhat statues unearthed on the west slope of Liao Upper Capital (2012 Top 10 Archaeological Discoveries) broke into tens of thousands of fragments, with clay-low temperature pottery textures due to fire damage. Three-year restoration recovered 6 complete arhats and 14 heads, winning the Golden Goblet Award.

Initial restoration relied on pottery experience (gypsum and triacryl resin splicing) but stalled at 70% due to poor modeling. A CAFA team took over, using traditional clay sculpture rules and techniques: positioning fragments via drapery folds, restoring layouts with the “front-focus principle” (detailed front, simplified back), and solving head-neck-chest connection via extension lines and 3D models (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Under restoration: Painted clay sculptures of Arhats unearthed from the Buddhist Temple Site on the West Slope of the Upper Capital City of the Liao Dynasty

Core problems revealed: (1) Lack of dedicated studios; university programs overemphasize science, neglecting plastic art. (2) Improper materials: gypsum limits reversibility and aesthetics. The case proved that art professionals excel in splicing accuracy, while B72 acrylic resin is ideal for clay reinforcement.

3. Establishing artistic principles for cultural relic restoration

Cultural relic restoration is by no means a simple technical mending, but a systematic work integrating cultural inheritance and artistic reshaping. Establishing its artistic principles is a key prerequisite for balancing the historical features of cultural relics themselves and the aesthetic expression of restoration. It is necessary to respect the original artistic characteristics and historical context of cultural relics, and integrate scientific restoration concepts, so that the restored cultural relics can continuously convey the cross-temporal cultural charm.

3.1. Observe stylistic vitality from afar, refine filling in detail

“Stylistic vitality” reflects era and regional characteristics, embodying historical spiritual temperament as the unity of form and spirit. “Observing vitality from afar” requires capturing the work’s overall spirit; “refine filling in detail” emphasizes precise partial restoration. Together, they form the core principle for painted sculpture restoration.

3.1.1. Cultivating modeling capabilities

Restorers need systematic traditional modeling training, in-depth sculpture history knowledge, and mastery of icon norms, anatomy, and craftsmanship. Details like upper eyelid thickness carry era spirits and demand accurate restoration. Later traces should be acknowledged to preserve historical layers.

3.1.2. Applying materials

Restorers must understand traditional material properties for “mind-hand integration.” Restoration should select materials suitable for artistic effect on a scientific basis, avoiding material-induced damage.

3.1.3. Learning history and culture

Pre-restoration research should explore historical backgrounds, compare regional styles, and master evolution rules. Grasping stylistic vitality integrates skills, history, and image interpretation, preventing mechanical “restoring as old.”

Dazu Thousand-Hand Guanyin restoration controversies reflect poor public aesthetics and dilemmas of “restoring as old.” Restoration must balance religious, artistic, and cultural attributes to pass on values ^[2].

3.2. Historical mission of professionals

In 1928, Hua Tianyou restored Luzhi Baosheng Temple’s half-wall arhats via fragments and old photos, setting a protection model. In 1957, CAFA and the China Academy of Art masters copied the Yongle Palace murals for relocation, providing the core restoration basis (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Hua Tianyou at work (Image sourced from the Internet)

Contemporary universities strengthen training: CAFA and Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts offer traditional modeling programs; the China Academy of Art established cultural relic protection majors. The CAFA Sculpture Department built a local sculpture teaching system (e.g., “Traditional Sculpture Survey”). Graduates with strong modeling awareness serve as backbones in institutions like the Palace Museum.

4. Conclusion

2021–2024 field surveys and practice show ancient painted sculpture restoration needs independent artistic principles beyond material science. “Observe Stylistic Vitality from Afar, Refine Filling in Detail” addresses modeling shortcomings, integrating capabilities, material application, and historical literacy to inherit artistic and historical values.

The field urgently needs art professionals. Universities should strengthen training, promote interdisciplinary cooperation (e.g., CASS Institute of Archaeology and CAFA), and build a comprehensive framework. Upholding science-art unity sustains the glory of traditional Chinese painted sculptures—a long-term industry mission^[3].

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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