

The Significance of Clothing in Figure Sculptures

Wenhao Li*

School Wenhua College of Yunnan Arts University, Kunming 650501, Yunnan Province, China

*Corresponding author: Wenhao Li, 47496496@qq.com

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Abstract: Changes in clothing styles symbolize the continuation of history because clothes are a basic human necessity. The role of clothing has evolved over time from its primary purpose of providing warmth and modesty, to being a way to express one's identity, profession, tradition and aesthetic. The development and formation of clothing styles are influenced by regional, historical and cultural factors, as well as deep-rooted ethnic characteristics. When artists explore the incorporation of clothing styles in sculpture creation, they illuminate the inherent values, forms, connotations, and aesthetic qualities of clothing from different ethnic groups and historical periods. Therefore, the study of clothing in figure sculptures is a fundamental discipline in the research and process of sculpture creation. It is also a unique and specialized training method of modern sculpture, serving as a significant aspect of the basic training for modern sculpture creation.

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1. Introduction

The art of clothing is truly unique as it reflects the characteristics of society and serves as a witness the evolution of history. It empowers individuals to actively engage in society and exercise their freedom to choose their attire. Moreover, in terms figure sculptures, clothing plays a pivotal role in shaping people's views. When creating a sculpture of a person, not only can the era and national identity of the person be portrayed through movement, posture and image, but also by one's clothing.

2. Contemporary

How do you define the era of the sculpture figures you create? In China, different historical periods are characterized by the distinct cultural features of their period clothing. Clothing from the early days of the People's Republic of China, the 1980s, the 1990s, and the present day all reflect their own historical periods and regional historical style. The term "characteristic" refers to the form and connotation of a culture, a certain style or a person's clothes, considering its functionality, connotation, and aesthetic. Traditional attire holds great significance in the historical development of China as it reflects the evolution and change of human civilization. Its cultural characteristics are deeply rooted in society and locality, reflecting the history and culture of different eras in China.

Learning and exploring how to portray figures from different historical periods naturally becomes a focal point. By doing so, people can appreciate and understand how the expression of clothing styles in sculptures have gradually developed to become a rich and complete system for the expression of heritage and different periods around the world. Throughout the evolution of the creation of figure sculptures, the artistic orientations nurtured by diverse human cultures, geographical characteristics, and religious beliefs

can be expressed. These aesthetic expressions and figure forms contribute to the organization, summary, and enhancement of clothing design in figure sculpture creation, making it the main component of image portrayal in sculptures. Most Chinese sculpture art are local and folk. Traditional figure sculptures from the Central Plains Region in China focuses on showing the combination of images and clothing design, forming a regional sculpture style.

Artists use different sculpture methods to portray the image of ancient China, known for its highly formalized refinement and cultural sophistication. People clearly discern these distinct characteristics described by examining the sculptures. An example of such sculptures is as shown in **Figure 1**, this is the Four Masters of the Yuan Dynasty sculpture created by Li Xiangqun. Li included the spirit of Chinese traditional literati when portraying the figures, the general and vivid figure clothing are also impressive.



Figure 1. "The Four Masters in Yuan Dynasty" by Li Xiangqun

Other examples are as shown in **Figure 2** and **Figure 3**, where we can clearly see that the two authors created figure sculptures from different eras. We can distinguish the era of the figures portrayed by the author mainly from the perspective of clothing design. If we consider these two works as figure sculptures, can we still distinguish the era that the sculpted figures belong to? Personally, I think that it would be difficult, thus the expression of time period should be done through sculpturing time period specific clothing to a contemporary figure.



Figure 2. "Zhang Zhidong" by Lihe



Figure 3. "Roaring Youth" by Jiao Xingtao

3. Folk

Cultural and folk clothing vary across different regions, countries, and nations. Folk clothing can represent a nation as a whole, figure sculptures depicting people in national clothes can serve as visual indicators to swiftly convey the artist's nationality. Figure sculptures presented with national clothing should reflect cultural characteristics, visual aesthetics and language specific to different regions. It can also proudly display the cultural significance of its own nation to the world. Creating a sculpture with distinctive national clothing allows us to gain insight into the living environment, lifestyle and customs of a particular nation. An example of this can be seen in **Figure 5**, a figure sculpture titled "Tea and Horse Style" by Li Wenhao. Culture permeates every aspect of life, and even subtle elements can reveal the content of culture. When creating figure sculptures, artists must not only consider the dynamic, posture and image characteristics, but also pay careful attention to their clothing in order to distinguish between different nations.



Figure 5. "Tea and Horse Style" by Li Wenhao

Creating sculptures is also a way to preserve cultural clothing. People from different regions and nations silently safeguard their cultural heritage through clothing, which serves as a living form of art, to showcase their national civilization to the world. Folk clothing acts as a silent language to spread traditional culture and the essence of a nation through the visual transformation and forms that they take. Clothing culture is a vital component of a nation's survival and development, offering insights into their living environment, lifestyle, aesthetic preferences, and intrinsic character. It stands as a crystallization of a nation's spiritual and cultural essence. Simultaneously, it acts as a symbol of a nation's cultural and artistic accomplishments, and an embodiment of a nation's spirit and personality. Therefore, the preservation of clothing culture in a country or region is also the most important and profound spiritual inheritance of that particular place.

As an example, all 56 ethnic groups in China have their own unique clothing characteristics, patterns, styles, and wearing habits. Each ethnic group's clothing attire also showcases their unique national temperament and personality within the broader social fabric. In the large sculpture titled "Dream Chasing" as shown in **Figure 6**, there are 56 figures to represent 56 ethnic groups. There are obvious differences in the different ethnic groups' clothing characteristics, the figures are also portrayed in their cultural environment and folk customs in a poetic and picturesque manner. In the sculpture, alongside the ethnic group representatives, there are three children and fourteen other professionals which include teachers, party and government cadres, intellectuals, workers, soldiers, scientists, new economic workers, judges, doctors, farmers, and etc. The sculpture has a total of 73 figures, thus it would be difficult to distinguish them if there was no specific indication. Thus, the artist dressed the figures of each ethnic group in their own ethnic clothing, and the people from 14 different professions in their professional attire, so that the audience could distinguish between each ethnic group and each profession clearly.



Figure 6. "Chasing Dreams" by Li Wenhao

Folk clothing represents the characteristic of the era, humanistic elements, and historical elements. Through folk clothing, people can understand the survival strategies, working habits and historical background of a nation's social and economic development. Generally, the basic characteristics of folk costume are national, contemporary and practical. When creating national figure sculptures, it is crucial to incorporate body language to convey their culture and aesthetics. Folk clothing are imbued with individuality, hence each culture possesses its own unique aesthetic concept. This aesthetic concept is often expressed through body language, making cultural clothing a reflection of the aesthetic preferences within that culture. Furthermore, the clothing themselves communicate the language of the times, reflecting the prevailing cultural norms and values.

4. Occupational

Clothing can communicate certain characteristics or perceptions about the status, profession and personality to others. When depicting clothing on figure sculptures, the historical, social, political, economic, and cultural background of people should be considered. This approach allows for the deconstruction of the societal aspects of clothing within figure sculptures, facilitating a deeper exploration of the role of costume in the creation of these sculptures. By examining the various forms in which people create figure sculptures through their clothing, we gain insights into the diverse identities and professions represented, as they may be reflected through distinct clothing choices. Individuals of different identities and professions often wear different clothes. For example, soldiers have their own unique uniforms that vary depending on the specific branch or era, of which include the Eighth Route Army, the Red Army, the People's Liberation Army, modern soldiers, police, and fire fighters. However, this distinction extends beyond soldiers, various other professions and identities also have their specific attire. For instance, doctors, students, chefs, etc. Therefore, costumes not only serve as symbols of one's external image but also represent one's identity and profession within society.

By studying the role of clothing in figure sculptures, artists can understand and grasp the role it plays in shaping the image of the figures. As shown in **Figure 7**, the author portrays different professions in the five figures (party, government, military, civilian, and border soldiers). The distinguishing factor is not only based on dynamic and visual aspects, but also on the clothing and props, the five figures from different

professions are represented by their different clothing.



Figure 7. "Solidarity" by Li Wenhao

In our daily lives, people often play multiple roles that reflect their social relationships. Each individual plays a specific role in society, and each role comes with different expectations regarding their attire. It is important to note that the change in identity may vary depending on the environment. We can observe that people with a strong interest in creating art reflects that in their own clothing. While costume may be considered subsidiary in artistic works, it is evident that after the first art work created with clothing was released, the knowledge about the artistic expression on clothing continued to develop.

Comparing the figure sculptures in **Figures 8 and 9**, the identity of the figures cannot be distinguished based on their avatars alone as they are both bald, and have similar professions associated with religion. However, when inspecting their specific clothing designs, we can clearly distinguish the different identities of the figures. **Figure 8** is a Lama statue created by Yin Xiaofeng, whereas **Figure 9** is a statue of Master Hongyi created by Cao Chunsheng.



Figure 8. A Lama statue by Yin Xiaofeng



Figure 9. "Master Hongyi" by Cao Chunsheng

Another example is the sculpture in **Figure 10**, where we can immediately see that the author is portraying the image of migrant workers wearing fashionable clothing. This is the artist's artistic expression of migrant workers when working. However, the common misconception is that migrant workers rarely wear fashionable clothing to work. In reality, migrant workers have the freedom to wear various fashionable clothes, just like anyone else. The choice of clothing is a personal decision that individuals can make according to their preferences. In fact, farmers and workers can also embrace fashion trends and exhibit their own sense of style. However, it is worth exploring why the author expresses themselves in this manner. The author may have captured a unique fashion norm among our respected migrant workers, who express their artistic sensibilities through their work attire. By highlighting this aspect, the author acknowledges the creative and individualistic expressions that can be found even within certain professions or social groups.



Figure 10. "Farmers in City" by Liangshuo

5. Linguistic

When it comes to creating clothing in figure sculpture, studying and mastering the language and techniques of sculpturing clothing becomes an essential basic skill. The art of costume sculpture is intertwined with other sculpting techniques, forming a complementary relationship where none can be deemed dispensable. Just as completing a sculpture of a clothed figure requires the skillful utilization of costume's artistic expression, it serves as a crucial aid and reinforcement to ensure the exceptional creation of realistic figure sculptures. However, these expressive techniques do not exist separately, but rather intertwine with each other within the same artistic realm, forming a cohesive category of expressive techniques.

It is important to acknowledge that textiles made from various fiber materials possess distinct thicknesses and degrees of softness. Furthermore, the clothing characteristics in different seasons and climates are also different. Understanding and mastering the fundamental principles of costume sculpture language enable artists to attain a more nuanced expressive ability in their work. Therefore, it is unnecessary to formalize or conceptualize the language used to sculpture clothing. Instead, any costume design should be tailored to the individual characteristics of the figure image within a specific thematic context. This principle regarding the language of expression for dressed figures can be seen in **Figure 11**.



Figure 11. “Legacy” by Sui Jianguo

Figure 12 shows a sculpture titled “The Red Star Over China” by Li Xiangqun is a typical example of the personalized expression of figure images in specific works using language of clothing design. During the creation of this artwork, careful consideration was given to whether to adhere to the traditional mode of expressing leader figures, particularly by breaking free from the influence of aestheticism in the depiction of costumes. The ultimate decision was to adopt a realistic approach that effectively captured the spiritual style of Chinese revolutionary leaders. In this work, the simple and sturdy shape of the cotton coat assumes a significant role in accurately conveying the specific historical and political connotations embodied by these political leaders.



Figure 12. “The Red Star Over China” by Li Xiangqun

Aiming to better express the profound connotation of the figure's image, the linguistic phenomena and laws of clothing were studied, and the sculpting techniques to express clothing were mastered. This resulted in a rich form of expression for the processing styles of costume sculpture. The portrayal of dressed figures holds immense significance in the creation of sculptural works. The extensive history of sculpture's evolution strongly indicates the profound and dialectical relationship between inheriting traditions and fostering creative experiences. Clothing as a form of stylistic language also includes the possibility for innovation and development. Influenced by socio-economic, political, and cultural changes, the aesthetic changes reflected in human clothing had a profound impact on the development of sculptural costume language. The ever-changing clothing styles and materials had an impact on the language of clothing pattern design, introducing more diverse forms of clothing expression. The innovative exploration of sculpture clothing language will become a shared mission and direction for contemporary sculptural artists.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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