

Features of “Sculpture” and “Painting” in Buddhist Statue Art

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Abstract: The solemn radiance of the Buddha, coupled with delicate brushwork, vibrant colors and exquisite craftsmanship, captivates and dominates the art of painted Buddhist statues. This art form, characterized by a unique style of representation, integrates the elements of sculpture, painting, engraving and drawing, enhancing the charm and spirituality of Buddhist statue art. Artists leverage their imagination and masterful skills, incorporating the essence of Tibetan Buddhism to depict the spiritual beliefs of mythical worlds vividly.

Keywords: Buddhist statue art; Buddhist sculpture; Painting techniques

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1. Introduction

Throughout China’s five-thousand-year history, a diverse range of artifact-making techniques has significantly contributed to the advancement of cultural endeavors. This research elucidates the features of sculpture and painting in Buddhist statue art through the discussion of relief techniques, color composition in painting, Tibetan Buddhist culture and gilding skills.

2. Basic overview of Buddhist statue art

China’s handicrafts have been praised worldwide since ancient times, with the craft of Buddhist statue-making holding a significant position in China’s cultural and historical development. Particularly, the art of painted woodcarving in China boasts a history of over 2,000 years. Through the ages, the art form of painted woodcarving evolved from its initial indistinct state, gradually incorporating elements from other art forms, thus forming a unique artistic genre. Traditional culture, serving as the foundation for the development of China’s cultural endeavors, plays a crucial role. Among these, the craft of making Buddhist statues, a representation of traditional skills, continues to evolve. However, in recent years, the craft has faced a crisis due to the impact of domestic and international cultures. The impetuous nature of the younger generation hinders deep and focused study of China’s traditional handicraft techniques. The scarcity of professionals and the absence of technical guidance

and support institutions almost led to the extinction of China's Buddhist statue-making craft. On the other hand, despite China's emphasis on the inheritance of traditional culture in recent years, the legal documents related to cultural inheritance remain imperfect, the system for managing cultural relics is not robust, and efforts in cultural promotion are insufficient, contributing to the crisis in traditional culture.

3. Features of “Sculpture” and “Painting” in Buddhist statue art

The art of painted wood sculpture has been part of China's artistic heritage for over 2,000 years. Documentation and excavations from the Western Han period provide evidence of this craft's historical roots, including the discovery of painted wooden barrels that, despite their rudimentary craftsmanship, indicate an early creative awareness of painted wood sculpture during the Qin and Han dynasties. With the continuous advancement of society's productive forces, the pursuit of art has reached higher levels. In the realm of painted wood sculptures, one can observe a diversity of vibrant and lively works that have captivated people with their unique styles. Moreover, artisans have employed innovative techniques in creating Buddhist statues, incorporating various methods and rich, appealing colors to meet aesthetic preferences. The zenith of painted wood sculpture occurred during the Tang and Song dynasties, with its influence persisting through the Ming and Qing periods.

3.1. Symbolism of “Sculpture” and “Painting”

The art of painted wood sculpture originates from folk traditions, growing to fulfill people's fundamental aesthetic desires. Individuals seek blessings for their families' safety, prosperity, health and longevity through the painted wood sculptures of Buddhist statues. These practices serve as psychological and spiritual support. People use the art of painted wood sculptures to depict and express their thoughts, ideals and aspirations. The use of various animals in painted wood sculpture decorations conveys positive meanings. For instance, animals like elephants, kirins, fish, deer, monkeys, egrets, magpies, bats, cranes, and roosters are employed, each carrying symbolic significance or auspicious connotations through homophony. These animals metaphorically express the homeowner's authority and status, as well as wishes for promotion, fortune, and well-being. For example, a wood sculpture painted with a kirin pattern on a sparrow's body symbolizes wealth and good luck. Carving a “double lion” design represents protection against evil and can also symbolize the homeowner's authority^[1].

Buddhism, as an ideological system, serves as a religion and represents the pursuit of spiritual life for over two millennia. Buddhist culture, appealing to the Western world, embraces a wide array of disciplines including science, philosophy, religion and ethics. Within the vibrant tapestry of traditional ethnic culture, Buddhism has perennially captivated hearts as a remarkable and mystical flower. Through Buddhist culture, one appreciates the national artistic flair and ingenuity encapsulated in the radiant Buddha figures. As an integral part of China's art domain, Buddhist sculpture art, with its rich content and diverse forms, imparts a vast and sublime religious ambiance, instilling a robust sense of faith in individuals.

In the vast expanse of Chinese culture, Buddhist statues stand as a perfect fusion of religion and art, bearing not only the teachings of Buddhism but also a wealth of cultural significance and symbolic meanings. “Sculpture” and “Painting,” the two pivotal techniques in the creation of Buddhist statues, uniquely showcase the solemnity and compassionate wisdom of these figures through their distinct expressive methods.

“Sculpture” plays a crucial role in creating Buddhist statues, involving removing excess material to reveal the form latent within the raw medium. This process symbolizes the shedding of falsehood to preserve truth, embodying the quest for wisdom and truth. In sculpting Buddhist statues, artists strive for lifelike forms and aim to capture the essence of the statues' spiritual expressions. Through masterful carving techniques, they vividly depict the dignity, compassion and wisdom of the figures. Thus, “Sculpture” in Buddhist art symbolizes the exploration

of truth and the pursuit of wisdom, serving as an artistic representation of life's profound truths.

“Painting”, on the other hand, employs colors and lines to bring Buddhist statues to life with depth and dimensionality. When painting Buddhist statues, artists focus on color coordination and transitions while adeptly using various brushstrokes and application methods to enhance the statues' textures and three-dimensionality. The application of these painting techniques enhances the aesthetic appeal and artistic expressiveness of the statues. Therefore, “Painting” in Buddhist statues signifies vitality and diversity, representing an artistic expression of a vibrant life and rich emotions.

The integration of “Sculpture” and “Painting” propels the artistic expression of Buddhist statues to a pinnacle. Sculpted forms are life-like and expressive, while painting adds vibrancy and depth. This fusion of technique and art highlights the solemnity and compassionate wisdom of the statues and reflects artists' profound understanding of Buddhist culture and their exceptional skills.

The application of “Sculpture” and “Painting” in Buddhist statues encapsulates the essence of traditional Chinese culture, which emphasizes the harmony between humans and nature, and between individuals and society. The use of these techniques embodies this philosophy. Through their masterful skills and deep cultural insights, artists link Buddhist statues with nature, society, and life, transforming them into meaningful symbols.

The symbolic meanings of “Sculpture” and “Painting” in Buddhist statues are vast. They represent artistic manifestations of truth, wisdom, life and beauty, and perpetuate the essence of traditional Chinese culture. Moreover, these techniques demonstrate artists' deep comprehension of Buddhist culture and their adept craftsmanship, elevating Buddhist statues to a unique art form of significant artistic and historical value. In today's fast-paced society, Buddhist statues' “Sculpture” and “Painting” might offer inspiration and strength, prompting a reevaluation of one's inner self and life aspirations toward achieving inner peace and harmony.

3.2. Characteristics of “Sculpture” and “Painting” in Buddhist Statues

A consistent historical feature in the art of Buddhist statues is the use of precious materials such as gold and silver, regardless of the size of the statue. This practice enriches the layers and clarity of the statues' contours, with dazzling colors expressing people's aspirations for a beautiful life. In painting, the use of bright yet not garish colors and delicate lines that are not stiff renders the statues gracefully poised and vividly expressive, providing a pleasurable aesthetic experience. The elements of painting add a visual beauty to the art of Buddhist statues ^[2].

As a crucial component of traditional Chinese culture, Buddhist statues' “Sculpture” and “Painting” aspects represent the pinnacle of artistic pursuit. Both “Sculpture” and “Painting” imbue the statues with unique charm and deep cultural significance.

- (1) The sculpting of Buddhist statues is characterized by masterful craftsmanship and intricate lines. With their skilled techniques, sculptors carve materials such as wood and stone into lifelike statues. They focus on smooth lines and realistic forms, aiming to convey the majesty and sanctity of the statues. Throughout the sculpting process, artists strive for perfection in form and pay meticulous attention to details like clothing patterns and facial expressions, ensuring the statues are vividly realistic.
- (2) The painting of Buddhist statues is distinguished by its vibrant colors and rich layers. Painters employ various pigments to meticulously decorate the statues' faces, bodies and garments. They focus on the harmony and transition of colors, making the statues' colors more cohesive and natural. Additionally, painters adeptly use different brushstrokes and application methods to create a sense of depth and dimensionality. The application of these painting techniques not only enhances the aesthetic appeal of the statues but also amplifies their artistic expressiveness.
- (3) The “Sculpture” and “Painting” of Buddhist statues encapsulate the essence of traditional Chinese culture.

Both “Sculpture” and “Painting” are significant art forms within traditional Chinese culture. Their use in crafting Buddhist statues represents not only the transmission of traditional skills but also the promotion of traditional culture. The “Sculpting” and “Painting” of Buddhist statues embody rich cultural connotations and profound meanings, such as “compassion” and “salvation of all beings,” which are core values of traditional Chinese culture.

In summary, Buddhist statues manifest the characteristics of “Sculpture” and “Painting” in their exquisite craftsmanship and delicate techniques, as well as their profound cultural significance and symbolism. These features render Buddhist statues a unique art form with immense artistic value and deep cultural and historical significance.

3.3. The role of line in the “Sculpture” and “Painting” of Buddhist statues

In the realm of traditional Chinese Buddhist art, line stands as an essential expressive medium and a pivotal element in the articulation and transmission of the cultural and spiritual essence of Buddhism. The application of lines is not confined to the shaping of the Buddha’s image but also extends to the depiction of attire and details. The employment of lines transcends simple delineation, delving deeper into conveying diverse emotions and connotations through the lines’ form, thickness, and curvature. For instance, straight lines are often used to convey solemnity and strength, whereas curved lines depict softness and compassion. The utilization of lines also conveys notions of time and space, engendering a transcendent atmosphere for viewers as they behold the statues.

In Buddhist sculpture, lines are adeptly used to depict the folds in the Buddha’s robes and the strands of hair. The lines in the robes are typically fluid and rhythmic, underscoring the statue’s dignity and solemnity. The hair, on the other hand, is often represented with fine curves to signify softness and compassion. The use of lines is not solely for portraying physical forms but also serves as an expression of the inner realm. Through the meticulous use of lines, artists can imbue their works with the wisdom and compassion of Buddhism, allowing viewers to appreciate not only the outward appearance of the Buddha but also the inner strength and aesthetic contained within.

In Buddhist murals and paintings, the application of lines is also crucial. The thickness, length, and curvature of lines can convey various emotions and meanings. For example, a curved line with rhythm can depict movement and vitality, whereas a straight line can evoke stability and solemnity. Artists can express rich themes and connotations within limited spaces through skilled manipulation of lines, offering viewers spiritual fulfillment and enlightenment. Taking the Lushena Buddha as an example, lines delineate the statue’s contours and skin textures, showcasing the majesty and dignity. The use of lines in the Great Buddha is exquisite, accurately outlining the statue’s contours and details while conveying the Buddha’s compassion and wisdom. The Buddha’s gaze, smile, and gestures are all conveyed through lines, touching the viewer’s soul beyond the material realm. This inner sense of sanctity and peace is the essence of the line’s role.

In the Sakyamuni Buddha statues of the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang, the use of lines is even more delicate. Lines are employed not only for outlining contours and details but also for depicting the statue’s adornments and expressions. Through refined handling of lines, sculptors vividly render the folds and fluidity of the robes, making the statue more lifelike and three-dimensional. This technique not only demonstrates the artists’ adept use of lines but also adds a dynamic and elegant quality to the Buddha statues.

During the Wei, Jin, Northern, and Southern Dynasties, the role of lines in the sculpture and painting of Buddhist statues was further emphasized, especially in the depiction of clothing details. Taking the “robes flowing like water” technique as an example, this method uses lines to outline the sleeves of garments and is widely applied in Buddhist sculptures and paintings. The effect simulates the natural flow of water by carving

the Buddha's robe to resemble undulating waves. This use of lines not only brings the statues to life but also symbolizes the widespread dissemination of the Buddha's teachings, akin to water nourishing all things. Through exquisite handling of lines, sculptors and painters vividly depict the folds and fluidity of the sleeves, rendering the statues more lifelike and three-dimensional. This technique showcases the artists' skillful use of lines and adds a dynamic and elegant quality to the Buddha statues. The importance of lines in shaping the image of the Buddha is evident. In these statues, lines are more than just a tool for representation; they symbolize religious significance. The posture, adornments and expressions of the Buddha, masterfully crafted through lines, embody the Buddhist virtues of wisdom and compassion, guiding viewers to transcend the mundane and seek inner peace and liberation ^[3].

4. Measures for the inheritance and innovation of Buddhist statue art

The root of China's cultural development lies in its traditional culture. To promote the growth of China's cultural endeavors, it is essential to inherit traditional cultural skills and promote advanced culture with Chinese characteristics. As an important component of traditional culture, the craftsmanship of Buddhist statues holds particular significance.

4.1. Enhance technical skills training to pass on the craftsmanship of Buddhist statue making

The craftsmanship spirit involved in making Buddhist statues needs to be passed down through generations. It is crucial to strengthen the training of talents in this field, improve the level of statue making and attract more young people passionate about traditional culture to learn and carry on the craft. Facing the current shortage of skilled artisans in statue making, it is necessary for cultural departments to conduct regular training and assessments to enhance the skill level of craftsmen. Peers should learn from one another to accumulate expertise in statue-making techniques. Moreover, artisans must innovate within the tradition, enhancing their skills while preserving Buddhist relics through professional methods.

4.2. Improve legal and regulatory framework related to Buddhist statue art

The management system for the inheritance of traditional cultural skills in China is currently insufficient. There is a need to deepen the transmission of traditional culture, improve laws and regulations and establish mechanisms that encourage innovation in Buddhist statue art. It is also vital to enhance the management responsibilities of cultural heritage protection departments. Additionally, the responsibility bearers for the traditional culture concerning Buddhist statue art should be identified promptly. The awareness of national cultural heritage regulatory bodies should be heightened to vigorously promote the development and protection of traditional cultural practices, safeguarding the traditional craftsmanship of Buddhist statues.

4.3. Enhance traditional Buddhist statue craftsmanship and fostering innovation

In recent years, China has notably strengthened the protection and management of traditional Buddhist statue art. However, some challenges persist in the cultural sector that hinder the further development of traditional culture. The promotion of the cultural atmosphere surrounding traditional craftsmanship in Buddhist statues remains insufficient. There is a need for intensified efforts to deepen public understanding of Buddhist statue culture and the importance of traditional art. By organizing various related activities, more individuals can engage in innovatively preserving Buddhist statue art, ensuring its transmission to future generations.

5. Conclusion

The “Sculpture” and “Painting” in Buddhist statue art reflect people’s aesthetic pursuit of traditional beliefs and an ideal life. Throughout the long course of historical and cultural development, painted wood sculptures have always possessed an enchanting allure. Buddhist statue art holds a significant place in the cultural evolution of China, contributing immensely to the international reach of Chinese cultural endeavors.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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