

# Design Aesthetics of Lacquer Food Ware in Qin and Han Dynasties

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## ABSTRACT

During the Qin and Han Dynasties, the development scale of lacquerware was gradually expanding, inheriting the Warring States style in craftsmanship and decoration, and developing its unique characteristics of the times. This article takes the Qin and Han lacquer food ware as the research object to trace their origins, and explores the aesthetic ideas contained in them by analyzing their functions, shapes, colors, and decorations. The lacquer food ware of the Qin and Han Dynasties not only reflect profound cultural and ideological connotations and precious artistic value, but also become a rare work of handicrafts that can take care of the past in the present.

**Keywords:** *Design aesthetics, Qin and Han Dynasties, Lacquerware, Food ware.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Lacquerware, as one of the three important arts and crafts that can represent China's long-standing cultural traditions, ushered in an important period of development during the Qin and Han Dynasties. [1] The production quantity and variety of lacquerware have increased, and the quality of the body is diverse. Various lacquering techniques began during the Qin and Han Dynasties, and the production process is closely and orderly. "A thousand pieces of wood are painted." [2] This shows the large number of lacquersmen in various markets during the Western Han Dynasty. Ancestors not only used a lot of lacquerware before death, but also brought it to the tomb to be buried with them after death. "Discourses on Salt and Iron" once mentioned that lacquerware was used as people's "tools to support the old and send the dying" at that time. In terms of appearance, the lacquerware is beautiful and generous, and according to the usage requirements and types of artistic processing, it achieves a combination of aesthetics and practicality. In terms of decorative patterns, it follows the traditional patterns of bronze and develops rich, extensive, and romantic and elegant themes. Moreover, "the development of decorative techniques such as painting, carving, needle carving, and silver carving in craftsmanship has made it possible to depict gold and silver, carve

patterns, carve patterns, and buckle silver pieces." [3] This demonstrates that ancient lacquersmen implemented the "carving the craftsmen's names on ware" system in the production process to cater to the preferences of emperors and monarchs, requiring them to exert the best effect of their skills at each step of the production process and engrave their own names on the objects.

"The wine cups are filled with wine, while the cups and bowls are adorned with ornaments." [4] The appearance of lacquered food ware dates back approximately 6,500 years. The vermilion lacquer wood bowl mouth unearthed in Yuyao County, Zhejiang in 1978 was the earliest representative lacquered food ware. [5] From the late Neolithic to the mid Qin and Han Dynasties, the types, shapes, functions and uses of eating utensils have changed significantly. Its main impact comes from the influence of ideological systems on the one hand, and the continuous progress of design and manufacturing technology on the other hand. Before the Shang Dynasty, the production method of food lacquerware was simple and unsophisticated, but the types of lacquerware also began to appear in the form of scale and combination of utensils: bowls, jars, beans, cups, cylindrical vessels, etc. The types of Shang Dynasty food lacquerware, such as beans, bowls, cups, and cylindrical vessels, had been developed compared to before. After the Western Zhou Dynasty, a

system of etiquette was established, and due to the long-term control of the highest social class and the influence of etiquette, lacquerware gradually replaced its position in daily utensils. During the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States period, "the state's major events are to worship and fight". Lacquerware was often used as sacrificial ritual vessels due to its easy availability and durability, and its function division becomes clear. In the Qin and Han Dynasties, the production process of lacquerware was further refined, and new ideas were created in the quality of lacquerware bodies and lacquering techniques. The types of lacquerware in the Han Dynasty already covered various aspects of daily life, and were produced in large quantities due to their simpler production techniques compared to bronze ware. The lacquerware of this period simultaneously absorbed the aesthetic ideas of Chu culture, and had a romantic and elegant style in various aspects such as patterns and shapes. Therefore, the characteristics of Qin and Han lacquered food ware were as follows: firstly, they have transformed from being used as ritual vessels in the past to being mainly practical utensils for daily life. Secondly, on the basis of inheriting the painting techniques of the Warring States period, rich and colorful painting techniques had been developed, and more options had been developed for the shape of utensils. Thirdly, lacquered food ware had become daily necessities for nobles due to their lightweight and easily obtainable materials, as well as their smooth and beautiful surface. The rulers naturally gathered financial, material, and human resources to create perfect craftsmanship and integrate the characteristics of various ethnic groups. They had fully felt the advantages of cultural diversity in lacquered food ware, which have been passed down to this day. This article analyzes from the following points:

## **2. BEING PEOPLE-ORIENTED, BEAUTY OF FUNCTION**

In the first peak of the development of lacquerware, a hundred schools of thought argued, and the "humanistic pragmatism" advocated by Confucianism had gradually become a mainstream of society and has been recognized and affirmed by feudal rulers. It was precisely because the pragmatism-oriented "humanistic pragmatism" thought contained in Confucianism was consistent with the social needs of the early Han Dynasty, so it occupied absolute advantage in the ideology, culture and other aspects. "Overall, Confucianism

only cared about social personnel and did not explore natural sciences, and even emphasized the understanding of nature should also serve ethical doctrines. He pointed out that Confucius' unique achievement was to make systematic and pragmatism amendments to the facts from the perspective of propriety." [6] From this, it can be seen that Confucianism holds a positive attitude towards human cultural values. Embodied in the design of lacquer food ware, practical functionality was fully considered in the daily use of the utensils, which was the top priority in the design of the creation and maximizes the satisfaction of users' needs.

Through data investigation, it was found that many lacquer food ware in the Qin and Han Dynasties were unearthed in areas such as Hubei and Hunan, which were the birthplace of Jingchu culture in ancient times. These lacquerware, which were time-consuming, laborious, and valuable in production, naturally served the daily necessities of the aristocratic class and entertain guests. Due to the vast variety and quantity of lacquer food ware, people can apply two classification methods, namely category and function. Classified by category, it can be divided into various categories based on its shape and size, such as flat pots, boxes, plates, ear cups, etc. If the functional classification is based on the unearthed situation of lacquer food ware, there are five categories: first, there are a large number of food containers, such as tripods, bowls, plates, etc., used for placing food; Next, there are feeders used to scoop or pick up food, such as spoons, knives, chopsticks, etc., often used in conjunction with food containers; and the food dispensers, such as the bottom of the case, are food containers placed for use; there are three common types of drinking utensils, such as flat pots and cups, used to hold the wine or soup needed for banquets. Finally, there is a utensil for storing food utensils, commonly used for storing food utensils such as ear cups and wine bottles. The detailed classification of its categories can be seen from the different types of lacquer food ware produced to meet the various daily dietary needs of the nobility, and various types of utensils are also closely integrated with reality. See "Table 1" below for details:

Table 1. Types of Qin and Han lacquer food ware. (Source: self-made)

Functions	Food containers	Feeders	Food dispensers	Drinkware	Containers
Categories	Cauldron, box, jar, bowl, plate, food stuff, basket	Knife, spoon	Board	Ear cup, goblet, wine cup, flat pot, pot, zhong, fang	A utensil consisting of two parts, the upper cover and the body, that are basically the same in shape and are buckled together with the snap fasteners
Application aims	Containing food, fruits, soup, etc.	Spoons stir or pick up the food in cauldron. Meat is usually placed on chopping block and then shared and eaten with knives. The two are always used in a set. Knives have the functions of separating food and picking up food.	Placing food utensils such as cups and plates.	Ear cups, goblets, and wine cups are common drink and food vessels in ancient times, distinguished by the shapes. Flat pots, pots and goblets are for containing drinks on the banquets.	For containing and placing utensils such as ear cups, wine pots. From the Warring States period to the Han Dynasty, the number of items contained in utensils gradually decreased, and after the Han Dynasty, only ear cups were kept.
Usage occasion	Dietary scenes in daily life				

The utensils among them are a typical representative of the "people-oriented" function. The shape design of this type of lacquer food ware meets the purpose of storing utensils for the ancestors, catering to the needs of handheld devices in daily life, measuring the size of the palm for shape design. For example, there are a relatively large number of ear cups stored in the utensils unearthed in Mawangdui, Changsha. In order to facilitate the user's handling and easy cleaning and removal of water stains after use, the utensils were designed to be easy to pick and stack. At the same time, in order to ensure more stable movement of the ear cup when using the tool to hold the ear cup, the craftsmen had designed a heavy edge and triangular profile ear cup to prevent the ear cup from tipping.

### 3. BEING GENTLE IN MANNER, THE BEAUTY OF NEUTRALITY

The design of traditional artifacts is deeply influenced by the Confucian culture of etiquette and

music. In various design and manufacturing activities, it is common to use various elements such as shape, decoration, and structure to symbolize specific political and ethical concepts. [7] During the Qin and Han Dynasties, lacquer food ware was naturally constrained by specific ethical concepts and ideas as it was used in various etiquette and daily activities. As one of the Confucian culture of etiquette and music, "being gentle in manner" had become an organic component of traditional design. The beauty and cultural upbringing of the speech, appearance, and various aspects of life of a "gentleman" are unified with the inherent qualities of benevolence, righteousness, and morality that gentlemen possess. Only by achieving the unity of these two can one be the "gentleman" in Confucius' ideal, which is different from the "savage" in Confucius' ideal. From this, it can be seen that Confucius' ideology of 'gentle and elegant' is inseparable from his affirmation of human nature and ideals, as well as his affirmation of human comprehensive development." [8] From this, it can be seen that

Confucius' literary and elegant demeanor, although often considered the highest pursuit of moral personality, was also the pursuit of aesthetics at that time. The unity of "literature" and "quality" is also the unity of "beauty" and "goodness". [9] This aesthetic viewpoint can be summarized in one word as "harmony", which is reflected in the design of lacquer food ware that emphasizes both function and form. Through observation and analysis of the overall shape design of lacquer food ware unearthed from Han tombs, it can be found that their shape has the characteristics of simplicity, practicality, and functional fit, realizing innovative forms of art in creation, and then presenting unique artistic forms. The culture of the Han Dynasty was influenced by the Confucian concept of "being gentle in manner", advocating for integrity and unity. One of the representative artifacts is the "Jun Xing Jiu" cloud patterned lacquer ear cup found in the Han tomb of Mawangdui. The overall shape is oval, with round lips and a small flat bottom, and crescent shaped ears slightly upturned. The interior of the lacquer ear cup is decorated with red paint, while the decorative cloud patterns are painted with black paint to distinguish colors. When the wine bottoms out, people can see the three characters "君幸酒 (Jun Xing Jiu)" written in black paint on the bottom of the wine vessel, meaning "please drink". The outer wall and bottom of the cup are painted with black paint, with no pattern on the surface. The open edges of the object and the two ears that are convenient for handheld use are painted with elegant geometric cloud patterns in two colors: red and ochre. By flipping over the back of the object, the word "一升 (one liter)" can be found on the back of the two ears, which are painted in red to indicate the volume of the ear cup. And the term ear cup is also due to its shape resembling that of a bird (sparrow), with its left and right ears resembling the wings of a bird; at the same time, feathers can be inserted on the cup, indicating that the drinker should drink as soon as possible. At the same time, the rounded and full overall design of this lacquered wine vessel presents a balanced and steady, respectful and serene visual effect. It fully demonstrates the pursuit of the design concept of "literary and elegant" in Qin and Han artifacts. (See "Figure 1")



Figure 1 "Jun Xing Jiu" cloud pattern lacquer ear cup. (Image source: "Hunan Han Dynasty Lacquerware Catalogue")

#### 4. CONTRAST BETWEEN LIGHT AND DARK, BEAUTY OF COLOR

The descriptions of "Xia people preferred black", "Shang people preferred white", "Zhou people preferred dark red", and "Chu people preferred red" are scattered in various ancient literature materials [10]. During the Qin and Han Dynasties, the Five Elements and Five Colors view were often associated with the Five Directions and Five Virtues. The five colors of white, green, black, red, and yellow correspond to the Five Elements of gold, wood, water, fire, and earth. The Five Directions are east, west, south, north, and middle, and the Five Virtues are benevolence, righteousness, etiquette, wisdom, and faith. As early as the Yellow Emperor's period, painting was used as a means of moral education to assist the rulers of the upper class, and the colors in painting also had this function. In the Qin and Han dynasties, color was linked to the theory of emperor's morality: Qin was water virtue, while the Han dynasty destroyed Qin was fire virtue. Therefore, red color was considered an important color for the use of nobles. From the unearthed cultural relics, it can be seen that the lacquerware of the Qin and Han Dynasties was influenced by the color psychology and color moral education of the ancestors, with red and black as the main colors. The common painting method of using red paint to decorate the interior of Qin and Han lacquerware, while using black paint to decorate the exterior of the objects, was created. Some objects can be seen with red background

black characters or black background deficit text decoration, and the strong visual contrast between the two colors has also been passed down as the color painting rules of Qin and Han lacquerware from generation to generation, determining the color tone of ancient Chinese lacquerware and evolving into a color recognition symbol unique to the Chinese nation. The unearthed Qin and Han lacquer food ware also follows this rule, mostly with black paint applied to the outer walls, and red paint used to draw or write on the black paint base; red paint is used on the inner wall and or write with black paint is drawn on the red paint base. This color combination of internal infrared black creates a sense of spatial difference between the inside and outside, which is a harmony between things themselves and their essence. The perfect combination of active sensory red paint and calm and introverted black paint on lacquerware complements each other to form a perfect color, showcasing the aesthetic connotation of the era behind it and also showcasing China's traditional aesthetic color concepts.

## **5. BEING ROMANTIC AND ELEGANT, BEAUTY OF FLEXIBILITY**

Li Zehou, a famous aesthetician, once said that "Chu culture is Han culture". [11] Han culture, as a fusion of multiple ethnic groups, is closely related to Chu culture in a sense. Although the Han Dynasty inevitably inherited the pre Qin and Central Plains culture politically, economically and legally, the unique preference of the southern Chu people has been maintained in artistic aesthetics and ideology in the Han Dynasty. The harsh living conditions and backward social structure make the Chu people who have just separated from their primitive state stubbornly maintain an ancient and colorful aesthetic culture, and immerse themselves in bizarre fantasies and absurd romanticism. The prevalence of "witchcraft" in the state of Chu has had a significant impact on the aesthetic concepts of the Chu people, demonstrating unique and open artistic creativity and romantic pursuit when creating lacquerware. Therefore, the absorption and annexation of Chu culture in the Qin and Han cultures will inevitably inherit the artistic pursuit of Chu's lacquerware creation, which is to believe that all things in heaven and earth have the existence of gods. "The difference between the 'feminine beauty'

of Chu lacquerware and the northern Zhongyuan culture is that this unique aesthetic form reflects another kind of vital cultural spirit of Chu people. It is a beauty of movement and power in a vast and profound space." [12] Therefore, various animals, plants, and cloud patterns on the decoration of lacquer food utensils during the Qin and Han Dynasties display a graceful, continuous, and rhythmic beauty.

Taking the lacquer food ware of the early Western Han Dynasty as an example, there are also patterns of different themes painted on them. The cloud pattern lacquer ear cup of "Jun Xing Jiu" unearthed from Mawangdui is shown in "Figure 1". The interior of its wine set is decorated with continuous and smooth cloud patterns using a pen. The ears that are convenient for use are also painted with smooth lines of cloud patterns [13], while the remaining parts are monochromatic and have no patterns. One part of the cup body is decorated with cloud patterns, while the other part is left blank, creating a sense of air flow and artistic design breathing. In the middle of the cup body, text patterns can also be seen as identification, and to some extent, the three characters "君幸酒 (Jun Xing Jiu)" can be used as part of the patterned layout to form the pattern. The overall cup shape reflects the profound influence of Chu witch culture on the decoration of Han Dynasty lacquerware from the appearance.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

As an important component of Chinese culinary culture theory, the harmonious unity of cuisine and beauty is indispensable. Both cannot be separated from the dietary habits, festival customs, and creative techniques of the Qin and Han Dynasties. The excellent design concepts of the pre Qin period and the shift in Han Dynasty design towards daily needs led to a comprehensive development of the design of food lacquerware during this period. The Qin and Han lacquer food ware vividly demonstrates the wisdom of ancient working people in creating things and their yearning for a better life. The study of lacquerware provides valuable reference materials for contemporary craftsmen to study lacquerware, and also provides an undeniable reference value for scholars to study the artistic and aesthetic characteristics of the Qin and Han Dynasties. ("Figure 2")

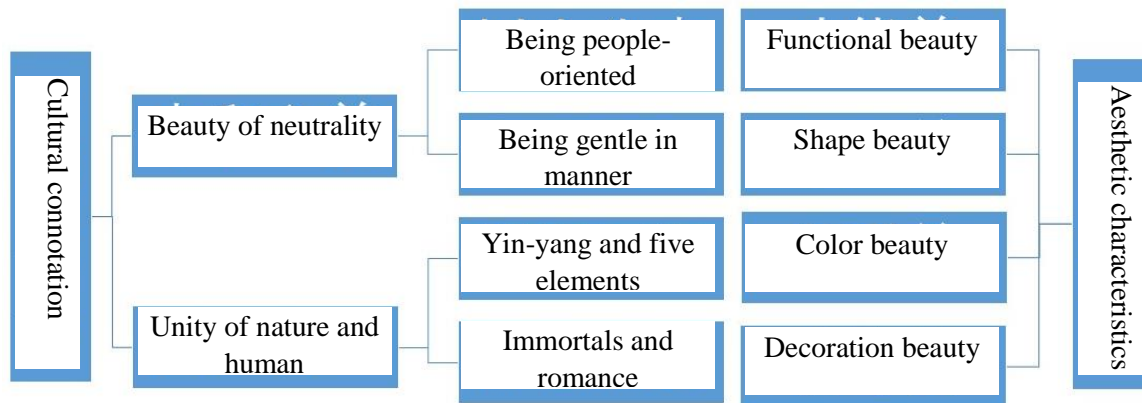


Figure 2 Main structure of the paper. (Source: self-made)

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