

# Study on the Artistic Characteristics of Bronze Cattle Symbol

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## ABSTRACT

In order to promote the development of traditional culture, this paper explores the artistic characteristics and image connotation behind the cattle totem by studying the origin of the cow totem and combing the development process of the cow symbol in bronze. Through investigation, it is found that the origin of cattle totem comes from the agricultural civilization and the worship of cattle by the ancients. The ancients cast the image of cattle on bronze, reflecting the ancients' sustenance for spiritual activities. In the process of development of bronze ware, the cattle symbol has changed from complicated decorative patterns to practical cattle shaped appliances, and its artistic features have taken on a colorful posture to explore the cultural value of traditional creations.

**Keywords:** Bronze, Cattle symbol, Cattle image, Artistic characteristics.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Ancient Chinese bronzes occupy an important position in the history of Chinese art. They are full of ferocious beauty with their solemn and elegant shapes and intricate mysterious decorations. On the other side of ancient bronze art, some cattle-shaped bronzes and cattle-shaped bronzes are unique in the magnificent and mysterious bronze art, full of lively atmosphere. The purpose of this paper is to study the artistic characteristics and cultural connotation behind the bronze cattle symbol, and to uncover this mysterious veil.

## 2. THE ORIGIN OF CATTLE IMAGE AND ITS APPLICATION IN BRONZES

### 2.1 Origin of Cattle Image

The study of the artistic image of cattle originated from the study of rock paintings. In the new era, cattle and their lives were recorded on rocks, such as the "cattle consumption" rock paintings in the Mandala Mountains of the right banner of Alxa and the Heishan rock paintings in Jiayuguan City, Gansu Province ("Figure 1"), which recorded the scene of hunting wild cattle. The rock paintings express the image of cattle with

simple line and plane relationship, which is rough and mysterious, showing the ancestors' consciousness of fighting for life and worship of cattle.

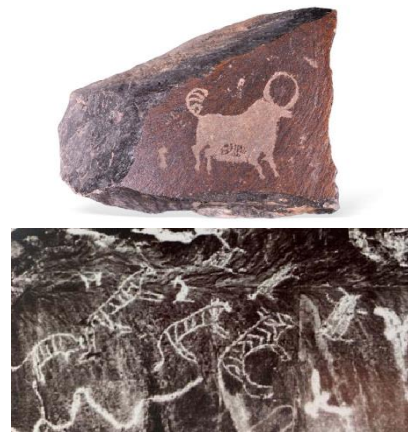


Figure 1 The "Bos grunniens" rock painting of Mandela Mountain in Alxa Right Banner and the rock painting of Heishan Mountain in Jiayuguan City, Gansu Province.

In the oracle bone inscriptions of the Yin and Shang dynasties, the ox is a symbol similar to the ox's head ("Figure 2"), as described in "Shuowen": "The catter, the matter is also, the reason is also, like the shape of three horns, and the tail is

sealed."<sup>1</sup> The two upright and curved horns of cattle were transformed into simple lines and then became the characters of cattle, which reflected that ancient ancestors grasped the most prominent characteristics of cattle in the process of creating characters.



Figure 2 Oracle "牛".

According to the records in the "Book of Zhou", the fourth citation of the "Yishi" by Ma Su in the Qing Dynasty, "When Shennong was born, it rained the millet. Shennong then ploughed and planted it to cultivate the axe, to cultivate the mind, and to cultivate the grassland. Then the grain grew, and the fruit can be harvest."<sup>2</sup> The image of Shennong is the head of cattle, which shows that the image of cattle is deeply rooted in agricultural civilization. "The great event of the country is to sacrifice to the army." The ancient ruling class regarded the sacrifice to the ancestors and the war as important events of the country. At that time, under the idea that all things were spiritual, cattle, as part of the sacrifice, had its own divinity, so the ancestors carved cow patterns on the bronze, and cast the bronze with the image of cattle to show respect for the gods.

## 2.2 Application of Cattle Image in Bronzes

After the Stone Age passed, the Bronze Age reached its peak in the late Shang Dynasty and early Zhou Dynasty, and until the Western Han Dynasty, the early bronzes were mainly ritual vessels and sacrificial vessels, while the late daily utensils increased, and the style also moved from divinity to secularization.<sup>3</sup> The superior

1. Hou Dongmei, Cattle culture source and change [J]. Journal of Henan Institute of Science and Technology, 2009, 37(04): 156-158.

2. Ding Lifu, Tang Jing, On Flexible Embodiment of the Chinese National Characters in Translating and Introducing Chinese Myths [J]. Journal of Anhui University of Science and Technology: Social Science, 2022, 24(04): 69-75.

3. Ruan Fuchun, From Divinity to Secularity — On the Image of Cattle in Cultural Relics and the Folk Customs of Cattle in the Zodiac [J]. CULTURAL RELICS WORLD, 2021(02): 4-18.

geographical environment at that time not only provided raw materials for the production of bronzes, but also made people have a higher level of pursuit of the spiritual world. They began to explore the pursuit of spiritual activities and pinned this pursuit on bronzes.

The ancients generally believed in the natural worship view that all things have spirits. In order to show the piety of belief, the ancients often worshipped these gods. Mr. Kwang-chih Chang pointed out that "the ritual and musical bronze ware was obviously used in the ceremony of ancestor worship at that time, and was buried with those who went to join the ranks of ancestors after death. Therefore, these bronzes are carved with mythical animal patterns as a medium of communication between the human world and the ancestors and the world of God."<sup>4</sup> As a kind of god at that time, the image of cattle was used as the motif of the religious decoration of bronze.

## 3. THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS AND ARTISTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF CATTLE SYMBOL IN BRONZES

### 3.1 The Development Process of Cattle Symbol in Bronzes

From the perspective of the image and decoration of cattle on the bronze unearthed from the Shang and Zhou Dynasties to the Western Han Dynasty, the image of cattle in the Shang and Zhou Dynasties has a strong divine color, which has changed in the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, and the bronze of the Western Han Dynasty also has a strong narrative hunting pattern and other patterns. The bronze figure images in the Shang and Zhou dynasties are obviously less than the animal images. From the decoration of the tiger cannibal you with the theme of animal defeating human beings, it can be seen that this is the use of animal images to express sublimity. In the Western Han Dynasty, there began to be a change. There were scenes of people fighting to kill cattle or other animals on the bronzes. It can be seen that people have turned from worshiping the power and courage of animals to controlling animals, becoming more rational and realistic.

4. Kwang-chih Chang, Bronze Age of China [M]. SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2013, p433-444.

In the Niufangding in the late Shang Dynasty ("Figure 3"), its striking features are the cattle head and animal face pattern on the abdomen of the instrument, the realistic image of the cattle horn, and the conservative and mysterious image of the cattle face. There are four feet at the lower part of the abdomen, and the two sides are decorated with standing cow patterns, which are beautiful and gorgeous. The body is decorated with bird patterns, dragon patterns and triangular banana leaf patterns. Under these relief patterns, cloud and thunder patterns are used as ground patterns, which are fine and regular, reflecting the highest level of bronze art represented by "three layers full of flowers" in the late Shang Dynasty. The belly of the ox tripod is also engraved with the inscription "cattle", which shows the side image of a cow, and echoes the cattle decoration outside the vessel, indicating that the tripod is used to hold cattle and animals.



Figure 3 Niufangding of the Shang Dynasty.

Some researchers believe that the upper and lower layers of the abdomen of the bronze pot ("Figure 4") in the middle and late Shang Dynasty are taotie patterns, which can be carefully distinguished. On the one hand, the eyes of the upper layer are different from the eyes of the lower layer. The upper layer is similar to a rectangle, while the lower layer is protruding outward in a hemisphere, similar to the eyes of a cattle. On the other hand, the double corners of the upper and lower layers of the decoration are also different. The curved shape of the upper layer is similar to the horn of sheep, while the lower layer is obviously similar to the horn of buffalo. The overall style of the upper and lower layers is unified, but there are

subtle differences between the two corners, eyes, ears and nose.



Figure 4 Pot with animal face pattern in the late Shang Dynasty.

The Shang and Zhou bronze cattle head unearthed in Jinsha Village, Chengdu, Sichuan. The cattle horn is raised, decorated with spiral patterns, the mouth is closed, the cheeks are developed, the face is facing forward, the eyes are cloud and thunder patterns, and the forehead is decorated with diamond patterns. This type of ox head is used as decoration on the shoulder and both sides of the lifting beam of the large bronze container.

Bronze cattle-head masks were also unearthed in the tombs of the late Shang Dynasty and the Western Zhou Dynasty, such as the bronze cattle-head masks of the early Western Zhou Dynasty unearthed in Yejiashan, Suizhou, Hubei Province, and the bronze cattle-head masks of the late Shang Dynasty unearthed in the Jiuwutou tomb in Wenxi, Shanxi Province. Both sides are cattle faces, with a pair of long horns, big eyes and ears. According to the chronological order, the image of cattle gradually becomes complicated, and the two corners and eyes gradually change from arc to square, with mysterious color. Some scholars speculate that this kind of mask is used in some sacrificial rituals, and its specific use needs to be verified. ("Figure 5")



Figure 5 Bronze cattle head and bronze cattle head mask in Shang and Zhou Dynasties.

The cattle-shaped copper wine cup ("Figure 6") of the Shang Dynasty is a wine vessel of the late Shang Dynasty. This is the only complete bronze cattle drinking wine found in the country. The overall shape is the common buffalo shape in the south of the Yangtze River. The head and back of the cattle are the lids of the implements, the belly is used to hold wine, the neck is the flow, and there is a tiger image standing on the back. The arched back is both a usable handle and a decoration. Cattles are also decorated with phoenix patterns, dragon patterns, animal face patterns, etc. The overall modeling reflects the integration of modeling beauty and practicality, and shows excellent process design ideas.



Figure 6 Cattle bronze wine of the Shang Dynasty.

The Western Zhou cattle jewelry four-eared Gui ("Figure 7") is now stored in the Baoji Bronze Museum. It has a round mouth and a deep belly, with four ears attached. The neck and abdomen are decorated with breast nail patterns, which are decorated with straight ribs, arranged in an orderly manner. The circle feet are decorated with four groups of dragon patterns that bow and roll the tail. This Gui has ears, and each ear is decorated with six cattle heads. There are 24 cattle heads on the Gui. The cattle head on the copper Gui has its horn arched forward, its eyes wide and firm, and its ears straight. The overall shape is majestic and solemn, which is a typical production of the Western Zhou Dynasty. The image of the head of a cattle implies grain harvest, peace and harmony.



Figure 7 Gui with four ears for cattle jewelry in the Western Zhou Dynasty.

There is an ancient Fujiyou in the early Western Zhou Dynasty in the Shanghai Museum. The lid, abdomen, handle and ears of the vessel are decorated with cattle head patterns. The cattle head on the handle is more concrete in relief form. The belly is decorated with cattle's head pattern by means of circular carving, and the horn of the cattle is raised upward to highlight the surface of the body. The local elephantine accessories break the static feeling brought by the geometric shape composed of straight lines, and add some dynamic feeling and momentum. This kind of decoration also appears on many bronzes, such as the Bojuli in the Western Zhou Dynasty, which has a large overall shape and complex and exquisite decoration. From the cover to the body, there are seven different styles of cattle head animal face patterns. The part of the cover is based on the axis of the two ears, and is decorated with symmetrical cattle head animal face patterns at the front and back. The eyes are round, the cattle mouth is open, and there are fangs in the mouth. The horns and ears are protruding from the table. The part of the cover button is composed of two cattle heads protruding from the table. The three baggy feet are decorated with similar cattle head animal face patterns, which show that the long horns are upwarped, which is more thick and tall than the horns on the cover. The whole shape is solemn and dignified, with generous decoration. The contour lines strengthened by the three-dimensional cattle head and the raised horn and ear are decorative ("Figure 8").



Figure 8 Ancient Fujiyou and Bojuli in the early Western Zhou Dynasty.

The Spring and Autumn Sacrifice is a wine container and wine warmer in the late Spring and Autumn Period ("Figure 9"). Unlike the Shang and Zhou Dynasties, the animal face patterns in the Spring and Autumn Period are no longer ferocious and mysterious, but full of vivid decoration. The

body of the device is in the shape of a buffalo. There are three holes on the back of the buffalo, and the middle hole is equipped with a portable pot device. From the perspective of its structure, this is a wine warmer, which can be used to warm wine by filling the cavity with water in Zun's belly. There is a ring on the nose of the cattle in front of the implement, which indicates that the ancestors can tame the buffalo in the Spring and Autumn Period.



Figure 9 Sacrifice zun in Spring and Autumn.

The bronze case of cattle and tigers in the Warring States Period, unearthed in Lijiashan Bronze Museum ("Figure 10"), is a sacrificial instrument in the Warring States Period. This device type is composed of a cattle, a calf and a tiger. The body of the cattle bends forward and stretches forward. In order to make the center of gravity of the device type reach a stable balance, there is a tiger at the tail, and a calf standing under the body not only enhances the stability of the table body, but also means that the cattle sacrifices himself to protect the calf. The overall shape is uniform in size, dynamic and static balance, unique in shape, novel in concept, and extremely valuable for artistic appreciation.



Figure 10 Bronze case of cattle and tigers in the Warring States Period.

The overall Han Dynasty copper lamp ("Figure 11") is in the shape of a cattle, with a round and strong body, bowed head, shrugged, round eyes, upturned tail, and a humble demeanor. The cattle is standing, the back of the cattle is attached to the lamp tube, the horn extends upward and bends and is connected to the lamp tube, after the copper lamp is lit, the smoke generated can enter the cattle's belly through the smoke pipe, and the cattle's belly contains clean water to dissolve the smoke, so that the indoor air is fresh. Han Dynasty copper lamp is scientific and advanced, for the picture to adapt to a variety of lighting environments, as well as use needs, will design reasonable size and structure, perfect integration of aesthetic art and practicality.



Figure 11 Han Dynasty bronze cattle lamp.

The eight cattle shell container ("Figure 12") is a unique bronze container for storing seashells unearthed in Lijiashan, Jiangchuan, Yunnan Province. The shell container lid is decorated with a number of cattle shaped three-dimensional sculptures by casting and welding. There are eight cattles of different shapes on the round cover, a cattle standing in the middle, seven calves around it, the horns of the cattle stand up, the waist is two tiger ears, the tiger shape is powerful, and the overall shape is dignified.



Figure 12 Eight cattle shell container.

### 3.2 Modeling Characteristics of Cattle-shaped Bronzes

After preliminary investigation, it was found that the cattle-shaped bronzes mainly appeared in the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period and the Western Han Dynasty, and most of them directly used the image of buffalo and cattle. The cattle symbol in bronze is no longer just a decorative decoration, but a combination of figurative and realistic modeling techniques and the practicality of the implements, and more attention is paid to the combination of function and aesthetics. For example, the main body of the bronze cattle lamp in the Han Dynasty is composed of three parts: lamp holder, lamp holder and smoke tube. Each part can be disassembled, which is convenient for users to clean the dirt on the lamp and has a strong practical function. The shape of the bronze ox lamp is based on the image of the cattle cast in bronze as the main body supporting the smoke tube and the lamp, and is naturally connected with the two parts of the lamp and the smoke tube, which vividly describes the static and dynamic image of the bronze cattle.<sup>5</sup> While objectively shaping the figurative characteristics of the image of cattle, the shape of implements also subjectively expresses the narrative nature of the implements, striving to achieve a state of good form and spirit. No matter how large or small the objects are, they all emphasize the expression of the overall balance. The modeling level is clear, the individual and the whole are unified and coherent, and the

5. Yu Liang, Objects Carry Theories, Men Goes Well With Nature — The creation aesthetics and environmental awareness of bronze lamp in Han Dynasty [J]. Creation and Design, 2012 (5): 24-29.

whole gives people a sense of flexibility, freedom, solemnity, mystery, calm and dignified.

### 3.3 Image Features of Bronze Cattle Decoration

The bronze craft in the Shang and Zhou dynasties has achieved unprecedented development. The production mainly adopts the model casting method, and the decorative patterns are exquisite and cumbersome. The decorative patterns with the cattle head as the artistic image are applied to many objects such as you, pavilion, and tripod. These cattle head patterns can be roughly divided into two types: one is the three-dimensional and more concrete image of the cattle head, and the other is the more flat image of the cattle head. The three-dimensional image of cattle head is mostly attached to the ears and shoulders of bronze ware as decoration. It depicts the positive image of the cow head, which is symmetrical from left to right. Some cattle heads are decorated with beaded patterns and banded Kui patterns, which are used to set off the face of the cattle head, such as the gluttonous pattern of the cattle head. It depicts a serious and lifelike image of the cattle head with a dotted line and plane composition combined with yin and yang expression.

Most of the flat cattle head images appear in the abdomen of the implements, and some even have decorations on the covers and feet. These cattle head images are frontal structures, with the bridge of the nose as the central axis, which is symmetrical from left to right, and the composition is neat. The central axis, from the forehead to the bridge of the nose to the mouth, bulges forward in different shapes, some are square and orderly arranged, and some are a undulating curve. The image of cattle horn is more realistic, which shows that the long horn is upturned, and the horn rhomboid is engraved on it. The ears are in leaf shape, and the inner contour of the ear is outlined by simple lines carved inside. The cattle's eyes changed from the original square to the round eyes. The cattle's mouth was wide and there were fangs in its mouth. The whole decoration was dignified and mysterious.

### 3.4 The Image Connotation of Bronze Cattle Decoration

Cattle have been the object of totem worship of human beings since ancient times. Cattle themselves have the characteristics of diligence and simplicity, which symbolizes wealth. For example,

eight cattle are decorated on the eight cattle shell storage, which fully reflects the wealth and status of the tomb owner. Some scholars believe that cattle are the sacrifice of sacrifice, and there is a great relationship between the number of cattle heads sacrificed and the status of the tomb owner. Zhang Weiwen, through describing the content of typical bronze images in the Western Han Dynasty, believes that it is common for Yunnan people to regard cattle as the messenger of gods, and to love and respect them.<sup>6</sup> When discussing the origin of cattle farming civilization, other scholars often mentioned that some bronze farming tools were used for etiquette but not for use. Cattle have divinity. In some minority areas, people regard cattle as a god of protection and also consider themselves as "children of cattle".<sup>7</sup> The national belief of the Li people is to regard the "cattle soul" gem as their own belief and to worship it, which is a manifestation of the worship of the cattle totem. The image of cattle head also exists in some bronze wares used for sacrifice in the Shang and Zhou tombs. These cattle elements have become a bridge to communicate with the gods in the sacrifice, which shows the sacred status of cattle in people's minds.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The research on the artistic characteristics of bronze cattle totem is of practical significance. In order to speed up the cultural construction, this paper analyzes the origin of cattle totem and its application in bronze. Through the research, it is found that cattle totem originated from agricultural civilization and the worship of cattle by ancient people. The image of cattle is cast on the surface of the bronze or cast into cattle-shaped bronze to show the respect of ancient people to gods. Based on the development of the symbol of cattle in bronze, this paper analyzes the shape and image characteristics of cattle totem as well as its meaning, which provides a reference for future design research.

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