

A Study on the Characteristics of the Technology of Carved Lacquerware in the Past Dynasties of China

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Abstract: Lacquerware is a representative model of Chinese traditional arts and crafts. The carved lacquerware art as an important manifestation of lacquer arts has unique artistic value and research value. This paper systematically analyzes the technological features of carved lacquerware art in the Tang Dynasty, the Song Dynasty, the Yuan Dynasty, the Ming Dynasty and the Qing Dynasty of China, and chooses some representative carved lacquerware works as examples. In order to make a brief summary of the development history of Chinese carved lacquerware art and to play a guiding role for the future development of lacquerware art.

Keywords: carved lacquerware art; crafts technology; past dynasties; China.

1. INTRODUCTION

China has a long history of painting. More than 7,000 years ago, Hemudu culture of Vermilion Lacquer Wooden Bowl opened the prelude of Chinese lacquer culture and as a cultural carrier inheritances the Chinese nation's aesthetic concept. As early as in the Tang Dynasty there formed a unique lacquerware making process called red carved lacquerware or Ti Hong in Chinese, which was the beginning of human carved lacquerware art history (1). Before this, people usually painted on the surface of lacquerware, or inlaid some decorations on the lacquerware (2). Carved lacquerware art is totally deferent, the bottom mold was first be painted dozens or even hundreds layers of red paint and then according to the craftsmen's created patterns, carving and producing concave and convex relief effect. This method of production is completely different from the other paint process, its exquisite and elegant are marvelous. In addition to red carved lacquerware, there have other colors of lacquer as the paint layers, such as yellow, black, green, etc., showing different levels of colors in a lacquerware, but basically the red is the common color.

The carved lacquerware art was established in the Tang Dynasty in China and developed in the Song Dynasty and Yuan Dynasty and has become very popular in the Ming Dynasty and Qing Dynasty. Due to the favor and promotion of the royal family, the production of carved

lacquerwares became enlarged; the lacquerware types and making techniques have diversified. Lots of big works such as screen, bed, seat, cabinet table, hanging, and seat screen and so on, could be seen from that time, formed a carved lacquerware technology development peak. The making process of lacquerware is very complex, going through the processes of paint-concocting, mold-making, sculpting, grinding, polishing and other processes. The procedure of making a piece of carved lacquerware is time and manpower consuming, so it is very expensive, usually can only be consumed by the royal nobles. Qiao Shiguang, a famous Chinese lacquer art researcher, mentioned in his book *Lacquer Art*: “During the Sui Dynasty and the Tang Dynasty, lacquerware making techniques such as Gold- and- Silver- Flushing-Exposure, Mother-of-Pearl-Inlay and so on has reached to a very high level. The most notable achievement of this period is the emergence of carved lacquerware, which began to use the lacquer itself for artistic creation, stepped into the gate of the relief art, and soon became a unique variety of lacquerware”.

2. THE CARVED LACQUERWARE IN THE TANG DYNASTY

The carved lacquerware of the Tang Dynasty was developed on the basis of dry lacquer and embossed lacquer in the Han Dynasty but the antique carved lacquerware made in the Tang Dynasty has not been found till now. Xiushi Lu, the only extant ancient painter monograph written by Huang Cheng in the Ming Dynasty had mentioned that: “Carved lacquerware means sculpturing on the red lacquer, with the thick or thin coating, the color of the light and shade, the fine or clumsy parts. The carved lacquerware in the Tang Dynasty was not very perfect, the pattern and the brocade were in the same layer like woodcut plate lacking of depth change and the carving method was clumsy but still appreciable”. From that infers we know that the carved lacquerware process was originated in the Tang Dynasty.

Before the Tang Dynasty lacquerware was carved directly on board and then painted. In the Tang Dynasty a new technology appeared, that is, paints repeatedly on the original bottom molds till it reaches a certain thickness. Then use the knife to carve on the paint layers so as to form a different depth of relief and made the appearance of a much textured effect. The Tang Dynasty carved lacquerware types mostly were ground screen lacquerware, table screen lacquerware or partition screen lacquerware. Color is mostly in red paint but some works also with yellow color as a brocade. The carving skill is more rigid and simple but very mature.

3. THE CARVED LACQUERWARE IN THE SONG DYNASTY

The carved lacquerware process in the Song Dynasty is quite unique. The famous artist named Gao Lian in the Ming Dynasty wrote in the book *Yan Xian Qing Shang Commentary* that “workers in the Song Dynasty carved red lacquerware such as the boxes for royal family. They use gold and silver as the bottom mold, painting with dozens to hundreds layers of red lacquer pile, and carving figures such as pavilions, terraces, characters and flowers on it after the lacquer layers dried. The skill of cutting and carving is wonderful which made the lacquerware a stereo-picture”. The carving techniques in the Song Dynasty differed from the way of the

Tang Dynasty which using plate engraving methods. Instead, they carved to different levels of depth according to the picture pattern so that the works has stereograph sense (3). Zhang Yingwen, a famous painter in the Ming Dynasty also wrote in his book *Royal Collection*: “the carved lacquerwares of royal palace in the Song Dynasty usually used gold and silver as the bottom molds. The carving technique was very skillful at that time, the lacquer color was bright red, and the paint was very thick and strong without any crack. The carved landscape, pavilion, and characters were very much looked like the real pictures”. Xie Kun, another famous painter in the Qing Dynasty wrote in the book *Jinyu Trivial*: “the Song Dynasty has carved lacquerware plates and boxes. The carving layer was nearly to the surface of the bottom mold and the pattern was beautiful. Gold and silver were usually be used to make the bottom molds in the royal collections, while in the popular society silver molds, clay molds were often used.” All these fully embody the artistic and craft characteristics of the carved lacquerware art in the Song Dynasty. The carved lacquerware art in the Song Dynasty was promoted on the basis of lacquerware technology in the Tang Dynasty, and the carving skill was more delicate and exquisite.

Here is an example of the typical works in Southern Song Dynasty, which was a black carved lacquerware plate called *Children Play in Yard*. It is 4.5 cm high and 31.2 cm in diameter. The whole pattern was carved in inner and outer circles. Inner circle carved a triple courtyard, front as the play yard with baby play in, the moon hanging on the treetops, displayed a panoramic view of the mid-autumn night. Flowers and branches were densely carved in the outer ring. The whole work looks very nice and harmony. This plate is now kept in the Japanese Culture Hall. (Fig. 1)



Fig 1. The black carved lacquerware *Children Play in Yard* Plate, made in the Southern Song Dynasty

Here is another red carved lacquerware example which was made in the Southern Song Dynasty, the *Osmanthus Pattern Box*. It is 3 cm high and 8.7 cm in diameter. It's a round box; the painted lacquer is very thick. The box lid surface carved an osmanthus tree, the side wall was carved slant fret pattern. The inside and the bottom of the box are painted in black. This article now is kept in Beijing Palace Museum.

Water Chestnut Flower Shape Box is a special kind of carved lacquerware made in the Southern Song Dynasty. It is called the rhino-horn-like carved lacquerware, because its cutting surface reveals several lacquer layers in different colors very much like the cutting surface of the horn of rhinoceros. The box is 17 cm high and 15 cm in diameter. It was made from a wooden bottom mold, which is in a six-petal-flower shape and was in three layers. Lacquer colors are purple, yellow and red. The cover surface of the box was carved with rhombic branch figures and the side wall carved with two loops of auspicious clouds. The wall of each layer of the body is carved with moiré and cirrus stripes. The box is now kept in the Fuzhou City Museum in China.

4. THE CARVED LACQUERWARE IN THE YUAN DYNASTY

The highest lacquer technique achievement in the Yuan Dynasty is carved lacquerware. Zhang Cheng and Yang Mao were the two most outstanding masters in that time. Zhang Cheng's works are characterized by smooth and mellow with thick lacquer layer and nearly with no knife marks. Yang Mao's carved lacquerware was classic with exquisite realism and skillful carving technique as the main feature. Their lacquerware carving process technology deeply influences the production of carved lacquerware works of later generations.

The royal and the civilian lacquerware production in the Yuan Dynasty were coexisted. The official workshop is called Paint Plant, according to the Yuan History records: 'In the first year of the Yuan Dynasty, the government set up Paint Plant, designated five members including the general manager and deputy manager, in charge of the Royal Palaces painting work.' In the 12th-year of the Yuan Dynasty, the Paint plant was incorporated into the Ministry of Industry, and chief officer, deputy officer were appointed to supervise the manufacture of lacquerware. South of China is the lacquerware production center in the Yuan Dynasty, red carved lacquerware, black carved lacquerware, rhino-horn-like carved lacquerware, and the gold inlay and silver inlay lacquer products are the main features at that time. In Jiaxing County of Zhejiang Province and in Lu Ling County of Jiangxi Province etc., emerged a number of paint experts like Zhang Cheng, Yang Mao, Zhang Minde, and Peng Junbao and so on. They became the most outstanding representatives of lacquerware makers in the Yuan Dynasty.

The carved lacquerwares in China has red, black, yellow, green and other color varieties; there was also a special kind of carved lacquerware called Rhino-Horn-Like Carved Lacquerware or Ti Xi in Chinese words. The carved lacquerware in the Yuan Dynasty only had red, black and rhino-horn-like carved lacquerware three varieties but the majority was the red ones. The production types were round box, rectangular box, octahedral boxes, sunflower petal type box, and wine vessel etc., but the majorities were plate and box. The decorative patterns were flowers, landscapes, figures and birds and so on. In the flower theme of the works generally with no brocade carved; instead, with the yellow paint as the background, on which directly carved red or black lacquer flowers. Usually, a huge flower was carved in the center of the plate, surrounded by some small flowers and buds, the primary and the secondary are distinct and picture gradation is very clear. The lacquerware of the Yuan Dynasty commonly used peony,

camellia, lotus, gardenia, okra, plum blossom, peach blossom and chrysanthemum as the pattern, these eight kinds of flowers may performance separately, such as red carved lacquerware Gardenia flower Pattern Plate, or several kinds of flowers concentrated on the same appliance, such as red carved Flowers Pattern Vessel.

Here are some representative examples of the carved lacquerwares made in the Yuan dynasty. The red carved lacquerware Gardenia Flower Pattern Plate, made in the Yuan Dynasty is 2.6 cm high and 16.7 cm in diameter. It is round with curved wall and short circle foot. Both inside and outside backgrounds are yellow lacquer, carved in vermilion pattern; the plate carved a blooming gardenia flower, interspersed with four flower buds. The pattern layout is much exaggerated. The flowers are huge, plump and flourish, well highlighted the gardenia flower theme. The author uses different carving methods to portrayal the front and back of the foliage and made it true and natural. The outer wall carved curling grass pattern, the bottom is painted ochre, on the left side needle engraved Made by Zhang Cheng in Chinese characters in vertical section. The plate is painted up to about 0.4 cm thick. The paint is rosy and bright and beautifully patterned. The carving technic is exquisite with smooth grinding and polishing. Now, there were only three pieces of Zhang Cheng's carved lacquerware works remained, this one is kept in the Beijing Palace Museum. (Fig. 2)



Fig 2. The red carved lacquerware Gardenia Flower Pattern Plate, made in the Yuan Dynasty.

The red carved lacquerware Flowers Pattern Vessel, made in the Yuan Dynasty is 9.4 cm high and 12.8 cm in diameter. It is a short neck, drum belly, short circle foot vessel. Both inside and outside of the mouth was painted vermilion, a string line around the neck, separating the neck and the abdomen. The vermilion flower patterns were carved in the yellow lacquer background. The vessel mouth was carved peach blossoms, neck carved chrysanthemum, gardenia and lily, etc., and belly carved camellia, peony, peach blossom, and lily and so on. The bottom is painted brown lacquer, near the left margin needle engraves Made by Yang Mao in Chinese characters. The vessel's shape is stocky with soft outlines. It set four seasons flowers in a device, feel liking flowers are vying with each other in beauty. The lacquer color of the vessel is jujube-red; the paint thickness is slightly thinner than that of Zhang Cheng's. The pattern density is

arranged very proper. The carving skill is exquisite, the edge of the flower leaves are grinded beautifully. This vessel is collected by the Beijing Palace Museum.

The double layers red carved lacquerware called Camellia and Begonia Pattern Plate was made in the Yuan Dynasty. It is round with short circle foot, 3 cm high and 26.8 cm in diameter. The plate was carved two layer flowers. The lower layer is the purple camellia, while the top is red begonia flowers. The outer wall of the plate is marked with curling grass pattern in rhino-horn-like carved lacquer, and the bottom is painted in black. The two kinds of flower patterns were carved in an opposite direction. It is a fine artwork of double layer carved lacquerware of the Yuan Dynasty. This plate is now kept in Beijing Palace Museum.

The red carved lacquerware Narcissus Flower Pattern Plate, made in the Yuan Dynasty is 3.4 cm high and 21 cm in diameter. It is round with short circle foot. The inside and outside of the plate are painted with yellow lacquer as background. The inside of the plate is carved with narcissus, and the outer wall of the plate is carved with curling grass patterns. This is a very adventurous composition, flowers and leaves are all in a spin pattern, though complicated but not disorderly. The sculpture mark hides but the detail is clear. The lacquer color is in dark red and shiny. Taking flowers and birds for the theme and the outer wall carved of curling grass pattern were the typical decorative styles of the lacquerware in the Yuan Dynasty.

The works which take the landscape and characters as themes are generally engraved with three different forms of brocade to represent different space in nature. The sky is depicted in a narrow, slender line, similar to the parallel palindrome, to make the feeling like the vast sky dotted with white clouds. The water surface uses smooth curved lines, like the flow of endless rolling waves. The land is shaped by squares or oblique squares with eight-petal small flowers carved within the lattice, like the flowers blooming everywhere. These three kinds of brocade grains are referred to as the Sky brocade, the Water brocade and the Earth brocade in different space background, to serve as the foils to the trees, flowers, pavilions and characters. For example, these brocades were used in the carved lacquerwares of Picking Chrysanthemum Near East Fence, Viewing the Waterfall, Enjoying Flowers with Leisure, and Viewing Scenery at the Lotus Pool and so on, to depict the images of extraordinary literati and scholar-bureaucrat.

The red carved lacquerware viewing the Waterfall Box, made in the Yuan Dynasty is round, flat-topped, straight wall and flat bottom. The lid surface carved three kinds of brocade, namely Sky brocade, Water brocade and Earth brocade. A phoenix tree was carved at the left side of the ground brocade, a huge Taihu rock at the right side. Water came and falling down from the rock cave. An old man dressed in robe with a stick in the right hand standing opposite of the waterfall and there are two lads followed him. The bottom of the box painted in ochre black, in the left edge needle carved Made by Zhang Cheng in Chinese characters. This box is the masterpiece of the landscape and figures works made by Zhang Cheng in the Yuan Dynasty.

The red carved lacquerware Pavilion and Figures Plate, made in the Yuan Dynasty is 3.2 cm high and 17.6 cm in diameter. The plate body is made of metal with circle foot; the edge of the plate raised four lines. Inside the plate carved three kinds of brocade, standing for the Sky, the

Earth and the Water. In the picture there is a triple pavilion. Outside the house there are two young boys boxing in the courtyard; an old man sitting and watching in the anterior chamber and a woman looking back to them in the posterior chamber, each characters had a boy waiter carrying a tray standing behind. Around the house are weeping willows and banana trees, two swallows flying in the air. The outer wall of the plate is marked with rhino-horn-like carved curling grass pattern; the bottom is painted black. This plate is carved in four layers with very strong sense of three-dimensional. In addition, there is a small hole in the center of bottom which was drilled by the servants of the palace because they suspected that the plate was made of gold mold for its heavy weight. The item is now kept in the Beijing Palace Museum.

The red carved lacquerware viewing the waterfall Plate, made in the Yuan Dynasty is 2.6 cm high and 17.8 cm in caliber. It is an octa-square plate. At the plate center carved pine and stone; an old man stands in front of the pavilion watching the waterfall, two young boys standing behind him. Inner and outer wall of the plate are painted yellow lacquer, carved camellia, peony, gardenia, peach blossom and other seasonal floral pattern. The bottom was painted in black with a vertically needle carved Made by Yang Mao in Chinese characters on the left. The carved words almost mix with the bottom's natural break pattern and nearly illegible. This plate is the most delicate production of Yang Mao. Its composition is elegant and the procession conforms to the rules with very skillful carving technics. Although the characters were all in a lateral view, but the elegant, free and easy personality is vividly portrayed. This object is now collected at the Beijing Palace Museum.

The red carved lacquerware Enjoying Flower Picture Box, made in the Yuan Dynasty is 7.5 cm high and 20.4 cm in diameter. It is flat-topped, straight-walled and flat-bottomed. It was painted in red lacquer. Box lid surface were carved two elderly in the courtyard enjoying the flowers, one of the old man pointing to the flowers, another old man holding his hands standing aside. Two pages were preparing tea in the pavilion. The wall of the box was painted in yellow lacquer and carved peach blossom, gardenia, peony, and camellia and so on. On the inside wall of the lid there needle engraved Made by Zhang Minde in Chinese characters. The carving of the lacquerware is very fine, the window lattice and the railings are depicted exquisite and meticulous. The composition is also perfect and lifelike, exhibited a beautiful relief picture. The box now is kept in the Beijing Palace Museum.

The carved lacquer box and plate which takes flowers and birds as the theme, usually using yellow paint for the background instead of engraving brocade, with a variety of flowers carved in the plate or box cover. Among the flowers there usually are two birds flying or plying each other, such as Ribbon and Peony, Ribbon and Camellia, Egret and Hibiscus, Double Crane and Chrysanthemum, to symbolize the human sweetheart couples in pairs. For example, the red carved lacquer round box named Picking Chrysanthemum Near East Fence unearthed in a Yuan Dynasty tomb in Qingpu County of Shanghai City, is a typical representative of this style in the Yuan Dynasty.

The red carved lacquerware Flowers and Birds Pattern Box, made in the Yuan dynasty is 12 cm high and 24.5 cm in diameter. The outer surface of the box is in red carved lacquer, the lid's

surface is lined with the peony flower in full bloom, sculptured with two flying birds, the wall of the box carved with very fine pattern. The bottom is attached with the circle foot in black lacquer. At the left side of bottom needle engraved Made by Zhang Cheng in Chinese characters. The work is now kept in the Hong Kong Museum of Art.

The rhino-horn-like carved lacquerware Cloud Pattern Sunflower-Petal Saucer and Cup, made in the Yuan Dynasty. The overall height of cup and saucer is 8 cm. The cup is 12cm in diameter; the caliber of the saucer is 21.8 cm and the circle foot of the saucer is 11.1 cm in diameter. The saucer is a sunflower-petal type stem dish. The inner surface of cup and the saucer was painted in black lacquer looked dark and shining. The outer surface of the cup and saucer is in purple-red paint, carving auspicious clouds decorations, some of them are peach-like shape. Peach-like auspicious clouds pattern in rhino-horn-like carved lacquerware is very rare in the Yuan Dynasty, seen only in this case. The carving surface exposed a black paint line. The carving manipulation of this item is very smooth and skillful and indicated the characteristics of lacquerwares in the Yuan Dynasty. rhino-horn-like carved lacquerware also known as Cloud Carving, the process of production are painting on the bottom mold with several color layers of lacquer firstly, each color layer contains some dozens of painting procedures until it gets to a considerable thickness, and secondly, sculpts obliquely of the cloud hook, fret pattern and so on, so in the surface of carving section, you can see different color layers. The cup and the saucer are collected in the Beijing Palace Museum.

The rhino-horn-like carved lacquerware Cloud Pattern Box, made in the Yuan Dynasty is 9.5 cm high and 14.5 cm diameter. The box is flat-top and flat-bottom. There are three layers of red lacquer within the black carving layers. The lid and body of the box were carved with three loops of auspicious clouds. The box mold had been painted with hundreds layers of lacquer before carving, so the lacquer heap is very thick and mellow, smooth and shining, known as the most thick lacquer works forever and the carving depth even reached to 1cm. Its lacquer color is shining and eye-catching; its pattern is very plump with bold and unconstrained lines; its style is simple but vigorous. All these fully embody the Yuan Dynasty arts and crafts characteristics. The box is now collected by the Anhui Provincial Museum in China. (Fig. 3)



Fig 3. The rhino-horn-like carved lacquerware Cloud Pattern Box, made in the Yuan Dynasty.

5. THE CARVED LACQUERWARE IN THE MING DYNASTY

The carved lacquerware technology of the Ming Dynasty became more mature, which was most famous for the period of Yongle and the period of Xuande. The famous lacquerware sculptors were the son of Zhang Cheng, named Zhang Degang and the son of Yang Mao, named Yang Xun. A lacquerware factory was established in Beijing during the period of Yongle in the Ming Dynasty, named Guoyuan Factory especially for making carved lacquerware crafts for the Imperial Palace with high production and skillful techniques.

In the Ming Dynasty, the color of carved lacquerware was still mainly in red. The works looked smooth, decorous, simple and vigorous. The types of the lacquerware included box, plate and case, etc. The theme patterns mainly were landscape, characters, flowers and birds. The craftsmanship was skillful with exquisitely smooth-carved figures and vivid images.

5.1 The carved lacquerware in the early Ming Dynasty

5.1.1 The carved lacquerware in the Hongwu Period of the Ming Dynasty

The lacquerwares of the Early Ming Dynasty refers to those made in Hongwu, Yongle and Xuanwu periods. The lacquerwares unearthed from Zhu Tan's tomb in Zou County of Shandong Province, reflects the level of lacquerware produced at the beginning of the Ming Dynasty. Zhu Tan is the son of Zhu Yuanzhang, so the most likely of these lacquerware were made by the royal workshops.

The main decorative patterns of the lacquerware in the Ming Dynasty were the characters story, peony, pomegranate flower and composite flowers, peace bird and gardenia, peace bird and sunflower, chaffinch and pomegranate flower, parrot and longevity flower, pheasant and sunflower, titmouse and camellia, bamboo and plum, and so on. The side wall of lacquerware usually decorated with vanilla, Four Seasons Flowers, and fret lines. In the Early Ming Dynasty, nobles and the aristocrats were fond of carved lacquerware, large numbers of lacquerware production were made, except for meeting their own needs but also used as valuable gift given to the foreign countries and quests.

The carved lacquerware of Hongwu Period of the Ming Dynasty is extremely rare, so far only three pieces of them remained namely red carved lacquerware Four Season Flower Pattern Round Box, red carved lacquerware Character Story Map Water Chestnut Flower Petal Type Plate and red carved lacquerware Riding and Visting Friends Map Square Plate.

Here is an example, the red carved lacquerware Four Season Flower Pattern Round Box, made in the Hongwu Period of the Ming Dynasty is 19.2cm in diameter. It is a straight-wall cane-type, flat lid, lap foot. The grained surface carved vermilion pattern, the center of the lid carved a full lotus flower, surrounded by peony flowers, chrysanthemum, and camellia flowers. The branches were rolled and the flowers are delicate. The wall of the box carved chrysanthemum, camellia, and peony and lotus flower pattern. The inner of the box and the bottom painted in black and the bottom right needle carved in straight regular script Made in Yongle Period of the Ming Dynasty in Chinese characters. The paint is in jujube-red color, paint layer is quite thick and the carving skill is very high and rigorous. The flowers were carved in layers with the foliage lively nature. That is the typical masterpiece of the Early Ming

Dynasty. In that period, the carved lacquerware usually has only one kind of flower for decoration, four seasons' flowers for the decoration like this box was very rare seen in boxes or plates of that time. In addition, the maker inscription of lacquerware is generally engraved on the left side of the bottom, but the later engraved Made in Yongle Period of the Ming Dynasty inscription of this box was on the right. (Fig. 4)



Fig 4. The red carved lacquerware Four Season Flower Pattern Round Box, made in the Hongwu Period of the Ming Dynasty.

5.1.2 The carved lacquerware in the Yongle Period of the Ming Dynasty

Lacquerwares in Yongle Period of the Ming Dynasty were dominated by plates and boxes and the shape of the device changed less. A kind of lacquer plate is round shallow with circle foot, the center of the plate is fused with the margin, and the pattern gives the integration feeling. These kinds of plates were mainly ornamented with flowers; the others were sunflower petal type or chestnut flower type, ranging from eight to ten petals. The decoration of center and edge parts of plate is different; the center of the plate usually was the landscape and the characters, while the edge parts were carved with all kinds of flowers. The box also has two types, one is flat-topped and the straight wall, the flat-bottomed with slight convex, called the Sugarcane Section Type; another is lid slightly uplift, the up and the low parts of the wall adduced forming a curve and the bottom is slightly convex, called Steamed Cake Style.

The decorative patterns of carved lacquerware in Yongle Period of the Ming Dynasty usually were flowers, landscapes, characters. The composition of pattern has a certain regulation. Flower theme generally carved in the plates, sugarcane section type box or steamed cake type box. A large full blooming flower was in the center, surrounded by leaves, small flowers or buds. The full blooming flower gives the picture a perfect sense. The number of flowers is odd, often three, five or seven. If it is three, they are evenly distributed, while, if it is five or seven, a larger one is in the center and four or six slightly smaller ones were distributed evenly around, like stars around the moon, highlighting the theme. Flowers usually were peony, camellia, pomegranate, hibiscus, chrysanthemum and lotus and so on.

The double layers lacquerware works also appeared in the Yongle Period of the Ming Dynasty, that is, in the lacquer plate carved two layers of flowers, such as red carved Double Layers Peony Pattern Plate, red carved Double Layer Camellia Plate. The top and the bottom layers of flowers have their own system, never confused with each other. This high technique fully

reflects craftsman's superb skills in the Yongle Period of the Ming Dynasty. Taking flowers as the main theme of lacquerware, there generally without carved brocade, only painted yellow lacquer for the background. Yellow color foils red carved lacquer flowers and made it distinct and eye-catching.

Here is the example, the red carved lacquerware Double layers Peony Pattern Plate, made in the Yongle Period of the Ming Dynasty is 3.3 cm high and 21.2 cm in diameter. It is round and shallow with round foot. Both inside and outside the plate are carved red peony pattern on the yellow background. There are five peony flowers carved in the plate with several buds blossoming in bud. On the outer wall carved six peony flowers. The bottom is painted in brown, on the left needle engraved Made in Yongle Period of the Ming Dynasty in Chinese character. This item is now collected at the Beijing Palace Museum. (Fig. 5)



Fig 5. The red carved lacquerware Double Layers Peony Pattern Plate, made in the Yongle Period of the Ming Dynasty

Taking landscapes or characters as the theme of the works generally carved in sunflower petal type plates or sugarcane section type boxes. The background patterns were three kinds of brocades representing the Sky, the Earth and the Water. Sky brocade and Earth brocade processing technique are the same as in the Yuan Dynasty, the Water brocade of lacquerware in the Yuan Dynasty usually with curved wave lines performance standing for wave rolling, as if the water is flowing ceaselessly. But the Water brocade in the Yongle Period was different. It became a fixed pattern of the decoration with twists and turns lines. The left or right of the pattern often carved a pavilion with winding balustrade to open a certain space. Behind the pavilion there usually carved an ancient pine or weeping willows, the sky dotted clouds. The character activities usually were Bring a Guqin Visiting Friends, or Enjoy Waterfalls with Leisure, or Talk About. Most of them reflect the pure and leisurely life of literati and scholar-bureaucrats. In order to highlight the characters, the character image proportion was usually exaggerated

In addition to carving flowers, landscapes and figures, the decorative themes in Yongle Period of the Ming Dynasty are Peacock and Peony, Cloud and Dragon, Cloud and Phoenix and so on. The techniques and technology of making carved lacquerware in the Yongle Period of the Ming Dynasty has distinct characteristics. The molds were generally painted at a thicker level

in this period, usually more than some dozens to hundreds of layers, obvious different with the literature records that: “36 times of painting is enough”. The making stills inherit the styles of Zhang Cheng and Yang Mao, the great masters of Yuan Dynasty. The carving methods are exquisite: the processing of detail places is fine and just perfect. For example, the veins of the leaves are clear and lifelike, with different carving methods to show the front and back of the foliage; the edges of the pattern are rounded and smooth, without revealing edges and corners.

5.1.3 The carved lacquerware in the Xuande Period of the Ming Dynasty

The carved lacquerwares of Xuande Period of the Ming Dynasty have red carved lacquerware, gold inlay polychrome carved lacquerware and so on. The styles have the round, the square, the lotus leaf shape and the chestnut flower shape plates; and have the sugarcane section type, the steamed cake type, and the split angle type boxes and so on. The decorative theme is basically the same as the Yongle Period of the Ming Dynasty, they are flowers, landscapes, characters and Cloud and Dragon and so on. The pattern processing appeared the Reserved Panel technique. On the lid or in the plate, lotus petal, sunflower petal and rotundity were usually used as reserved panels. There are two different brocade decorations in and out of the reserved panel. On the one hand, the reserved panel can highlight the theme; on the other hand it will separate the two different decorations from each other and also to beautify the artistic effect of the picture. This method is often used in the carved lacquerware in the Ming Dynasty and the Qing Dynasty.

Here is the example, the red carved lacquerware Cloud and Dragon Pattern Box, made in the Xuande Period of the Ming Dynasty is 8.2 cm high and 19.8 cm in diameter. It is a sugarcane section type box carved in red lacquer. The lid surface carved a dragon chasing a fire ball and flying in the sea of clouds. The outer wall of the box carved moiré. The inner of the box and the bottom are painted in black. The bottom has a gold inlaid knife engraved words Made in the Xuande Period in Chinese character. The theme of this red carved lacquer box is distinct, the carving style is smooth and mellow maintained the style of the Yongle Period, and was an early work in Xuande Period. This box is collected in the Beijing Palace Museum.

5.2 The carved lacquerware in the Late Ming Dynasty

In the Late Ming Dynasty, lacquerware style evolved gradually from the simple, smooth and mellow into a gorgeous, elaborate exquisite style. The sorts of lacquerware were expanded, appeared boxes, cabinets, tables and other items; In addition to red carved lacquerware and polychrome carved lacquerware, the number of gold inlaid polychrome carved lacquerware was significantly increased. The lacquer art development of China came into a new period. People generally divided the Jiajing Period, the Longqing Period, the Wanli Period and later lacquerwares into The Works of Late Ming Dynasty.

5.2.1 The carved lacquerware in the Jiajing Period of the Ming Dynasty

The red carved lacquerware is still the majority in Jiajing Period. There came a large number of red carved lacquerwares which uses green paint as the background. Red and green colors are in strong contrast and eye-catching, played a prominent role in enhancing the main theme. There are two styles of carved lacquerwares during the Jiajing Period: one is fine-carving style with a

very high carving skill, although the front edge is exposed, but still maintained the smooth and mellow characteristics of the Early Ming Dynasty; another kind of carving style is not very fine with the sense of roughness: paint was not good, the cutting edge was poor. Although there has been the polish process it was not very smooth and mellow.

The polychrome carved lacquerwares in the Jiajing Period of the Ming Dynasty mainly were red, yellow and green three colors. The flowers usually were carved in red color and leaves in green. In carving the dragon, the body was carved in yellow, the fin was carved in red and the hair in green. When carving the double dragons theme, the red and yellow colors were used to distinguish. If carving phoenix the red, yellow and green colors were used to express its wings and the long tail. The use of the three colors embodies the colorful and beautiful feathers of the phoenix. In the performance of the children theme, the coats and trousers were carved in red and green to show their innocence and lively.

The polychrome carved lacquerware producing process in Jiajing Period of the Ming Dynasty was also different from that of in the Xuande Period. The color effect of carved lacquerware in Xuande Period was gained by polishing and showing the inlaid paint colors, while in the Jiajing Period it was obtained by carving and revealing the different color layers of the paint. At this time the production of gold inlay color paint carved lacquerware was obviously increased than that of in the Xuande Period. The shapes of gold inlay color paint carved lacquerware have silver ingot type, plum blossom type, chrysanthemum flower type and so on. In the process of making gold inlay color paint carved lacquerware production, the contour line of the pattern and the leaves veins texture were filled with red, yellow, green and other color lacquers, after the grinding and polishing process there showed a painting-like effect. Another kind of gold inlay color paint carved lacquerware practice was: filling several colors of paint into the brocade first, and then the gold pattern. This practice is time-consuming, but with the better performance effects. There has also a very special kind of gold inlay color paint carving technique, the background is not color paint nor brocade, but a densely arranged small circles pattern. This small circle pattern is called the Rhino-Horn-Like Perforated Pattern which was used with the gold inlay craft together, not a purely lacquer art craft.

The sugarcane section type box made in the Jiajing Period was slightly higher than the early stage, and appeared some new types of carved lacquerware, for example, the pot type box, the longevity-word box, silver ingot type box, cross-square type box, plum blossom type box. In addition, there have been melon ridge pots, cabinets, pen container, small table, octagonal bucket, spring-word box, the mirror and other new models. The appearance of the brocade pattern of carved lacquerware in the Jiajing Period also had a great change, which broke through three kinds of brocade patterns in the Early Ming Dynasty, and appeared swastika-words brocade, hook-cloud brocade, etc. Some even carved out five or six kinds of brocades.

Because the Shizong Emperor of Jiajing Period of the Ming Dynasty believed in Taoism, the lacquerware in that period mostly took longevity, becoming immortal as the theme, such as Five Eldly Birthday Picture, Group Immortals Birthday Map and Fairy Mountain and Pavilion

and so on. Text pattern became appeared. For example, the word Pine, word Bamboo and word Plum winding together forms Fu, Lu and Shou three Chinese character words; taking the Chinese character Fu as the lacquer plate decoration; there are three peaches, each carved a word, composed Fu, Lu and Shou auspicious image, in the Reserved Panels usually carved the word: The Empire Lasts Billion Years, Long Life Emperor, World Being Calm and Peace, Longevity, Good Luck Forever, and so on.

The word spring and longevity in Chinese characters is a typical decorative theme in the Jiajing Period, and it has influenced the decorative pattern in the Qianlong Period of Qing Dynasty. The Spring Box has two forms, the red carved lacquerware and polychrome carved lacquerware. In the lid of the box carved a cornucopia, inside there are auspicious knot, coral sticks, silver ingot, coins, rhino horn, colored glaze, etc. The basin raises in myriads of sun rays, like a raging flame, a Chinese character spring is located above the flames. In the reserved penal within the word spring, there carved a God of Longevity. These works are related to the theme of immortality in Taoism. In addition, those which have the meaning of longevity like pine, cranes, ganoderma lucidum, peach, etc. are often used as decorative theme. The Eight Diagrams Chart, kylin, lions, seahorses, elephants and miscellaneous mascots were also parts of the decorative theme. Besides, some folk art style like Dragon Boat Race, Peddler Picture and Baby Play Pattern were also taken as the theme. But dragon pattern is still the major theme of lacquer decoration in this period.

The polychrome carved lacquerware Dragon with Ganoderma Lucidum and the character longevity, made in the Jiajing Period of the Ming Dynasty. It is 24 cm in diameter. The colors of the lacquer are red, green and yellow. The surface of the cover carved a red dragon in the center, flying in the ganoderma lucidum. The eyes of dragon were open widely with hair and beard flowing. A cursive word Longevity in Chinese was in above the dragon. The body of the box and the lid side has eight reserved panels, carved flowers and fruits patterns. (Fig. 6)



Fig 6. The polychrome carved lacquerware Dragon with Ganoderma Lucidum and the Character Longevity, made in the Jiajing Period of the Ming Dynasty.

6. THE CARVED LACQUERWARE IN THE QING DYNASTY

In the early Qing Dynasty, carved lacquerware art began to flourish. The carving craft was excellent fine at that time with the complex technics, formed the elegant artistic style. Many

new lacquer factories on the basis of the Guoyuan Factory named Zao Ban Workshop were established, which were specialized in making lacquer products. At this time the carving technology has reached its peak, utensils and crafts are not the same as the previous generations and brought very strong effects to the products of Qing Dynasty. The carved lacquerware style of the Qing Dynasty began to differentiate. In north of China it was rugged and unconstrained, while in the southern of China the carving style was very soft. The two styles fully embody the regional cultural differences of South-exquisite and North-grandeur.

There is no carved lacquerware of the Shunzhi Period, the Kangxi Period, and the Yongzheng Period of the Qing Dynasty found in the large number of collections of the Qing Imperial Palace, the earliest and the most carved lacquerware is the works of the Qianlong Period of the Qing Dynasty. After the Jiaqing Period of the Qing Dynasty there was no year-labeled production found.

The carved lacquerwares of the Qing Dynasty have red carved, yellow carved, polychrome carved, black carved, rhino-horn-like carved and other varieties. The carved lacquerware works involved almost all aspects of the imperial court life. The laws and etiquette products have throne chairs, screens, Ruyi, etc.; The furniture categories include tables, chairs, embroidered piers, cabinets, and so on; And the artware have bottles, flower vessels, wine vessels, table screens, celestial bottle, Censer-Bottle-Box sets, etc.; The stationery supplies have brush pot, brush casket, complete sets of stationery appliances, etc. There are a large numbers of lacquerware exquisite curios.

The carved lacquerware of the Qing Dynasty inherited the styles of the Jiajing Period and the Wanli Period of the Ming Dynasty. The carving edge was exposed; although the carving edges have been ground and polished, it still was not as smooth and mellow as those of the Early Ming Dynasty. Nevertheless, the rich expression forms of the carved lacquerware technology, the carving skill and other aspects in the Early Qing Dynasty still surpasses the previous generation and reached the peak of the history of carved lacquerware art.

Here is an example, the red carved lacquerware Children Play Picture Box, made in the Qianlong Period of the Qing Dynasty, which is 8cm high and 14.2cm in diameter. It is round; the basis mold is made of tin. The box cover and bottom are decorated courtyard background, the playing children were shallow carved, some are riding the bamboo horse, some setting off firecrackers or wrestling. The scene is very vivid. The side wall of the lid and body carved the children playing patterns: cricket bugs fighting, cocks fighting, playing hide-and-seek and so on. On the center of the inner side of the lid engraved the theme of the box with the golden Script Children Playing Picture Box in Chinese characters. On the center of the inner side of the bottom engraved with gold script Made in the Qianlong Period of the Qing Dynasty in Chinese characters in double line vertically. The paint of the box was very thick, sculpture skill was very fine. The carving of the children uses relief techniques, much like a convex sculpture. Besides, the boy's image is very vivid. These carved lacquer work represents the lacquerware style of the Qianlong Period of the Qing Dynasty and is a very fine quality lacquerware. The box is now collected at the Beijing Palace Museum. (Fig. 7)



Fig 7. The red carved lacquerware Children Play Picture Box, made in the Qianlong Period of the Qing Dynasty.

The majority of the carved lacquerware in the Qing Dynasty was polychrome carved lacquerware; a few was two colors brocade ground. The themes of the works are mainly flowers, fruits and vegetables. The pattern of that time was rigorous exquisite and gorgeous smart. Strong sense of three-dimension and distinct level feeling is the typical feature of this period's lacquerware works. However, with the Late Qing Dynasty economic recession and political unrest, lacquerware production demand plummeted quickly. The prosperity of carved lacquerware began to decline from the Jiaqing Period of the Qing Dynasty. The carved lacquerware technology finally lost in the Guangxu Period of the Qing Dynasty. The revival was restored until the middle of 20th century.

As China's outstanding folk traditional culture, the carved lacquerware art has been the production of more than 1000 years of history, the superb and unique skills renowned worldwide. The carved lacquerware art set design, paint, sculpture, grinding and many other crafts in making process, fully embodies the superb skills and intelligence of Chinese artists from ancient times to the present day, is a dazzling national treasure of the Chinese traditional crafts. It fully demonstrated the wisdom and accumulation of Chinese culture, as an outstanding intangible cultural heritage left a valuable wealth for the future generations.

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