





## Research on Animal and Plant Patterns of Pingyao Lacquerware in the Ming and Qing Dynasties

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### ABSTRACT

Lacquerware is one of the oldest traditional handicrafts in China. Pingyao lacquer art began in the Spring and Autumn Period, developed better in the Tang dynasty, and reached its peak in the Ming and Qing dynasties, when Pingyao lacquerware was exported both at home and abroad with the continuous development of Jin merchant culture. Pingyao lacquer art gained popularity as a handicraft culture of the time. The lacquer decorative ornaments of this period were also influenced by religion and rulers on top of that, forming a fine and rich style characteristic. At the same time, its different themes and painting styles reflect the outlook and spirituality of the local people. This study takes the animal and plant ornamentation of Pingyao lacquerware in the Ming and Qing dynasties as the main object, based on a large number of photographic materials, and systematically analyzes and summarizes the morphological categories and cultural implications of the decorative ornamentation of Pingyao lacquerware through literature and fieldwork, which is an in-depth investigation and study of the animal and plant ornamentation of Pingyao lacquerware, making up for the deficiencies of the existing decorative ornamentation studies, contributing to the inheritance and development of traditional decorative ornamentation, and providing a basis for modern decorative ornamentation design. It is also conducive to the inheritance and development of traditional decorative ornamentation and provides a basis for modern decorative ornament design.

**Keywords:** Ming and Qing Dynasties; Ornament Patterns; Pingyao Lacquerware; Animal and Plant Patterns.

### INTRODUCTION

China is the first country in the world to use lacquer. Lacquerware is a kind of everyday utensils and arts and crafts made with lacquer as the main decorative coating, and while people have a certain amount of material wealth, their spiritual and cultural needs will continue to grow. With the continuous development of people's aesthetic needs, lacquerware gradually changes from the initial daily-use products to artworks. In addition to the distinctive hand palm pushing light and gold painting techniques, decorative decoration was also a basic means of expression (Rong, 2020). At the same time, it also reflects the social and cultural background and natural folklore of the time.

"Decoration can be understood not only as an art, but also as a culture. Decoration as culture, firstly, because of the cultural nature and cultural significance of decoration as a way of human behavior and creation, and secondly, because of the cultural significance of the existence of decoration as an ornament." (Y. Z. Li, 1993). As the most basic means of expression of Pingyao lacquer art, decorative decoration is a record of visible and rhythmic graphic symbols (Qian, 2015). Decorative ornaments not only carry the ideology of people to avoid evil and seek wealth in peace, but also have the role of beautifying and decorating, which is an important embodiment of the mutual combination of practicality and aesthetics (Wang, 2022).

Nikolay Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky said that "Art comes from life" and that labor and life are the sources of art. The birds, fish, frogs, flowers, leaves and other ornaments on various objects in ancient times were things that people often came into contact with in their lives during gathering, fishing, hunting and farming (Tan, 2020). The ornaments in Pingyao lacquerware are mostly drawn from various things in nature, such as birds and animals, flowers, birds and fish, etc. These decorative motifs are the inevitable result of people's observation, analysis and understanding, and through rich imagination, they are linked to the allegory of the beautiful things they aspire to, expressing people's expectations and aspirations for a happy and beautiful life (Q. Zhang, 2019).

During the Shang and Zhou dynasties, humans began to give different ornaments to different objects, from animal, plant and geometric ornaments (Cao, 2022). During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Pingyao lacquerware continued to innovate and change based on the inheritance of previous generations, and the development of religious culture and Jin merchant culture contributed to the new expression of lacquerware decorations (Lian, 2018). During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Pingyao lacquerware was decorated with lively and naturalistic motifs, mostly using animal motifs such as dragons and phoenixes and plant motifs such as birds and flowers. In the middle and late Ming and Qing dynasties, the lacquerware decorations were more complicated, mostly with flowers and plants, landscapes, and figures, and were accompanied by writing, and their style was more delicate and mature. The traditional Pingyao lacquerware ornaments are mostly plant and figure ornaments that symbolize wealth and good fortune, and the subject matter is also more extensive (Qian, 2015). For animal ornaments, dragons and phoenixes are predominant, mostly in the form of single or combined lacquerware sizes (Jia, 2020).

## METHODS

The richness of decorative motifs is also reflected in different fields, such as architecture, costume, and artifacts. In terms of artifacts, it involves ceramics, bronze, lacquer, jade, bronze, etc. The decorative ornaments of different artifacts in different periods have a certain correlation in the process of development. In order to analyze the animal and plant decorations in Ming and Qing dynasties in depth, this study chooses to use the methods of literature collection, field survey and inductive analysis to carry out.

In this study, we have collected and reviewed literature and books related to the field of lacquer ware both at home and abroad, and collected relevant materials about Pingyao lacquer ware, including texts, pictures and ornaments. Through systematic arrangement and analysis, we summarized the morphological categories and cultural implications of animal and plant ornaments on Pingyao lacquerware in the Ming and Qing dynasties. The morphological characteristics of flora and fauna decoration and the external factors of lacquer ware development (such as social development background and aesthetics of different classes) are combined and studied systematically, and at the same time, the observations and interviews during the fieldwork are helpful to prepare a theoretical basis for this study.

The Lacquerware Museum and most of the shops and workshops are concentrated in Pingyao Ancient City. Based on this, this study learned about the history, development, and current status of lacquerware in Pingyao by visiting these places on site and interacting with the curators and interpreters of the Tang Du Lacquerware Museum, the non-genetic inheritors of lacquerware in Pingyao, and the salespeople of the stores. A lot of valuable information was collected and a lot of photos were taken about the lacquerware decorations. Among them, 600 pieces of lacquerware were randomly selected as samples. This data was collected to serve as reference and supporting evidence in the process of generalization and analysis.

Based on the documentary research method and field investigation method, the collected texts and pictures are organized, summarized and summarized, and the content materials needed to complete this study are refined, based on which, the decorative motifs of animals and plants on Pingyao lacquer ware are analyzed and their themes, forms and cultural implications are studied. Finally, it provides reliable research material for the follow-up study of Pingyao lacquerware flora and fauna decorations.


























## THE FORM AND MEANING OF THE ORNAMENT






The decorative motifs of Pingyao lacquerware hold the good wishes of the people and combine the practicality of the appearance of lacquerware to express the good meanings that the motifs hold. Whether as household items, ritual items or handicrafts, the decorative motifs reflect the politics, economy and mainstream cultural thoughts of different historical stages and regions.

**Botanical ornamentation**

From the sample statistics, the images of plants are the most popular in Pingyao lacquerware, with their unique floral meanings and colors. The images of plants in Pingyao lacquerware include plum blossoms, pine trees, willows, peonies, and so on. As one of the most important images in Pingyao lacquerware, there are three different types of images: woody images, herb images, and crop images (Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of Plant Ornamentation

Classification	Name	Works		
<b>This wood category</b>	Plum Blossom			
	Pines			
	Peony			
	Willow			
<b>Herbs</b>	Lotus			
	Chrysanthemum			
	Orchids			
	Bamboo			
<b>Crop category</b>	Sunflower			

Classification	Name	Works		
	Pomegranate pattern			
	Peach pattern			

### Woody Plant Ornamentation

Pingyao lacquerware generally chooses suitable decorative ornaments according to the shape of the wares, and woody plant ornaments are abundant, mainly plum blossoms, pine trees and willows. Among them, the plum blossom decoration is more often used in lacquerware.

In traditional Chinese culture, the five petals of the plum blossom are regarded by the people as "blessing", "fortune", "longevity", "happiness" and "wealth". "It is also praised by many poets and painters for its unique purity and resilience, which is why the plum blossom has always been one of the traditional botanical ornaments that people are happy to see (Meng, 2021). The plum blossom decoration is more often used as a decorative decoration for jewelry boxes in Pingyao lacquerware. The painting process usually shows the sense of staggering and space of plum blossoms with a full visual composition and contrast of dark and light colors, and the lines are contrasted with the irregularity of the branch lines and the regularity of the petals, presenting a harmonious visual image aesthetics as a whole. The Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties were the period of maturity and the peak of auspicious patterns, and almost all of them were "intentional and auspicious", with a large number of combinations of plum blossom patterns with other patterns (Hu, 2019).

As the most typical Chinese traditional ornament with national characteristics, peony was regarded as a symbol of "prosperity" and "good fortune" in the Tang Dynasty (Lian, 2018). Zhou Dunyi, a scholar of the Song Dynasty, said in his famous article "Love Lotus" that "peony is the most rich and noble of flowers", and thus peony became a symbol of wealth and nobility, and was also known as "rich and noble flower". The peony was often found on brocade, porcelain and lacquerware, and was loved by the world, so it became a common plant decoration on ancient objects (Liu, 2012). The peony decoration in Pingyao lacquerware is rich in composition and generally decorated with colorful paintings. The color of the peony pattern is red, pink, orange, green and blue as the flower, and it has more than ten kinds of composition with the combination of a single color or compound color, two flowers in the composition, or six flowers.

Willow decoration is simple and generous, with a strong abstract generality, with simple brush strokes to summarize the complex and numerous branches and leaves. There are mainly two types of decorations: full-leaf decorations and combined branch and leaf decorations. In Pingyao lacquerware, most of the carvings are made with brief brush strokes, and the overall shape is flat. The willow branches are mostly expressed in the form of thick and thin contrast, with thick and curved branches and simple and orderly leaves.

The pine tree decoration is usually used on furniture and screens, which are large lacquer ware, and usually means "longevity" and "prosperity for the family" (S. Li & Hu, 2019). In terms of decorative expressions, pine tree decoration has both realistic and realistic expressions. The realistic type of decoration is very realistic, mostly in a three-dimensional shape with a side view or semi-lateral view, while the realistic type of decoration is more abstract and simple, mostly in a flat shape with a top view (Qian, 2015). The pine tree ornaments are relatively lush, and the leaves are usually expressed in a realistic way, combining the flat painting method and the process of stacking drums and covering lacquer to present the artistic effect of lush and layered leaves.

### Herbaceous Plant Motifs

Herbaceous plant decorations are very diverse, and the main herbaceous plant decorations on Pingyao lacquerware are orchids, bamboo, chrysanthemums, lotus flowers, etc.

The lotus flower is one of the traditional decorative motifs of the Han Chinese in ancient China (R. Zhang, 2017). The flower in the Buddhist saying "Blossom and see the Buddha's nature" refers to the lotus flower, which is regarded as a symbol of Buddhism. In Buddhism, the lotus flower is regarded as a symbol of holiness, and

because the word "lotus" harmonizes with "year", folk people also believe that the lotus flower has a good meaning of "yearly surplus". During its long history, the cultural significance of the lotus has been extended and developed, and its decorative patterns have evolved, from the initial single flower pattern to the entwined lotus pattern and the folded lotus pattern, and through new designs, to the two-sided continuous and four-sided continuous lotus patterns (Lian, 2018). Lotus patterns were also often combined with chrysanthemums and peonies to form decorative images. During the Northern dynasties, the lotus decoration was mainly realistic, with a frontal overhead perspective, and the center was usually represented as a disc-shaped lotus, with the lotus petals arranged radially in all directions, which evolved into the Sui and Tang dynasties, with a fuller shape. From the Song Dynasty, lotus ornaments were used as auxiliary ornaments, and from the Yuan to the Qing Dynasty, there were more variations of lotus ornaments, and they were often combined with animal ornaments (Liang, 2018). The lotus decoration of Pingyao lacquerware has three types of decorative techniques: realistic decoration, realistic decoration, and a combination of realistic and realistic decoration, and there are flat forms and three-dimensional forms. The combination of gilding and painting with the pile of drums and lacquer reflects the rich and full artistic characteristics of Pingyao lacquerware.

Chinese people have always regarded orchids as a symbol of high purity and elegance. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, orchid planting entered a prosperous period. A large number of orchid ornaments appeared on Pingyao lacquerware. There are two kinds of orchid decorations, petals and stems and leaves, and the orchid is usually realistic because of its thin shape.

Chrysanthemum is one of the ten most famous flowers in China and is given the meaning of good luck and longevity in traditional Chinese culture. Since the Song Dynasty, there has been a chrysanthemum appreciation event. There are also a lot of poems and songs about chrysanthemums. The chrysanthemum pattern of Pingyao lacquerware is usually painted by the technique of "piling up drums" to emphasize the sense of layers and distance of images. The combination of butterflies and other animal motifs forms a full visual image.

Bamboo decoration is also one of the more common ornaments among the herbaceous plant decorations on Pingyao lacquerware (Xu, 2018). Bamboo is popular among the Chinese for its straight, hollow and articulated characteristics. The bamboo leaves are often attached to the main body in a regular manner, mostly in a realistic way, and the outline and lines are three-dimensional, the leaves are clearly layered and distributed around the branches, the main decoration is prominent, and the picture is clearly defined.

### **Crop-Like Plant Motifs**

There are relatively few crops used in Pingyao lacquerware plant decorations, mainly sunflower, rice and pomegranate decorations.


















The sunflower decoration is one of the more commonly used ornaments in the plant decoration crop category. The angle of painting in Pingyao lacquerware is usually flat, with a flat spatial expression, and the decoration is a local close-up, and the effect is eye-catching and bright through color matching. Rice decoration is often realistic.

The pomegranate has had many meanings since ancient times, because its fruit is full of seeds and has the symbolic meaning of having many children and grandchildren, it is regarded as an auspicious object, and often appears in the picture together with butterflies, which means "many children and many blessings". The pomegranate decoration of Pingyao lacquerware mostly highlights the seeds of the fruit on the outside, and the seeds are large and fleshy, which has a strong perspective effect. The peach, also known as the longevity peach, is an auspicious symbol of longevity and health, as well as a symbol of love, and the word "peach" is pronounced similarly to "flee", signifying escape from bad luck and disaster.

### **Animal Ornaments**

Pingyao lacquerware has a wide variety of animal decorations, including "dragon", "phoenix", "tiger", "butterfly", "mandarin duck" and so on. "They usually directly depict real-life animals, and are realistic and lifelike. The animal motifs are suitable for decorating almost all types of lacquerware, and usually appear in single or combined form depending on the size of the lacquerware object (Table 2).

Table 2. Summary of Animal Ornamentation

Classification	Name	Works		
Common animal print	Cattle			
	Birds			
	Fish			
	Mandarin ducks			
Gods and animals tattoo	Dragon pattern			
	Phoenix pattern			

### Common Animal Ornaments

The motifs of animal images are popular with birds, fish, mandarin ducks, cows, etc.

In Pingyao lacquerware, fish are the most popular fish ornaments. In ancient times, fish were used as a metaphor for women, and because fish have a strong reproductive capacity and grow rapidly, they are used to symbolize many children, prosperity and family prosperity (Zhou, 2013). As the ancient saying goes, "One life gives birth to two, two gives birth to three, and three gives birth to everything." In Pingyao lacquerware, multiple fishes are usually used to symbolize life and prosperity, and water has the meaning of prosperity, so it is also called a prosperous picture, which expresses the beautiful meaning of good fortune, prosperity and prosperity. Fish motifs are also mostly found in lacquer boxes, usually with carp playing with each other, with simple and lively shapes and bright colors.

The bull pattern is often used in Pingyao lacquerware, and can be divided into single bull patterns and multiple bull patterns according to the combination of patterns (Lian, 2018). The angle of drawing is usually from a side view. The five cows are widely used in lacquerware to signify a broad career and good fortune.

The "mandarin ducks playing in the water" motif is a common auspicious theme, usually appearing in pairs. The mandarin ducks motif is mostly used on wedding jewelry boxes and screens to express the meaning of a couple growing old together, symbolizing fidelity and eternal love. In Pingyao lacquerware, the mandarin ducks are usually placed in the middle as the main object, with both realistic and realistic expressions, combined with gilding and painting techniques and other ornaments, to achieve a full composition and a clear picture effect of priority.

### Animal Motifs of Sacred Animals

The animal ornaments of the sacred animals mainly include dragon and phoenix motifs.

The dragon is one of the traditional Chinese decorative motifs, often used in combination with the cloud and

phoenix motifs. According to the records in ancient books, the "dragon" is a miraculous animal in China's myths and legends. It is known that the dragon has a long body, a long body, horns on its head, feet to walk, walking on clouds, and making wind and rain (Zhou, 2013). The dragon is an omnipotent miraculous animal respected by people, representing sacredness, solemnity, rights and status. Nowadays, it is regarded as a symbol of Chinese culture by the whole country and even the world (Gan & Li, 2019). In the ornamentation, the dragon pattern is divided into cloud dragon pattern, kui dragon pattern, double dragon playing pearl pattern, seawater swimming dragon pattern, grass dragon pattern, and group dragon pattern because of the different postures of the dragon pattern. The most frequently used decoration on Pingyao lacquerware in the Ming and Qing dynasties is the dragon decoration, which represents "auspiciousness and dignity". Most of the dragon ornaments exist as the main decoration of the picture, usually with realistic, three-dimensional expression technique of lacquer pile to portray the real-life animal image, lifelike. It signifies peace, good luck, wealth, and divine power, etc. It has become the representative decoration of animal images in Pingyao lacquerware.

Among them, the dragon and phoenix pattern is the more common pattern style. Dragon and phoenix patterns are often presented in a painted style, slightly decorated, with the effect of totem, a strong sense of vision, dragon and phoenix in our country represent the meaning of good luck, which mostly means double happiness, for the wedding celebration increased the festive atmosphere.

## CONCLUSION

Lacquer decoration is the most basic expression of lacquer art. At the same time, in the process of field investigation, 600 decorative patterns samples were summarized, and the following conclusions were drawn: among all decorative patterns of lacquerware, plant patterns are one of the decorative patterns with a high usage rate, with bright colors, strong contrast and balanced composition, which is suitable for all types of utensils. It can be seen that plant patterns are one of the most accepted and loved decorative patterns by the public; Animal decorations take second place. In this kind of decorative decoration, animal patterns are usually taken as the center, and the central symmetrical composition form is adopted, and the form is full. The traditional animal and plant decorative patterns of Pingyao lacquerware are diverse, and the theme is rich in meaning, which entrusts people with the pursuit of a better life and the yearning for aesthetic taste. The application of animal and plant decorative patterns in furniture also expresses people's psychological needs to pursue happiness, wishful thinking, perfection, peace and other auspicious and beautiful realms, which is the continuation of China's traditional culture (Table 3).

Table 3. Summary of Animal Ornamentation

Type		Quantity	Specific Gravity
Botanical pattern		200	33.3%
Animal print		137	22.8%
Other ornaments	Figure	80	13.3%
	Natural landscape pattern	73	12.1%
	Text pattern	60	10%
	Geometric pattern	50	8.3%
Total		600	

During its historical development, the decorative patterns of Pingyao lacquerware show a variety of pattern drawing concepts and pattern styles, and its changes all bear the ingenuity and creative thinking of craftsmen in previous dynasties. In the constant changes of the times, Pingyao lacquerware patterns also bear different historical missions, which are not only the pattern creation under the special background endowed by history, but also the best witness to historical development.

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## ETHICAL DECLARATION

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