

From Technique to Method: Contemporary Transformations and Pathways of Innovation in Porcelain Carving Decoration

Jingmei Xiao*

School of Design and Art, Jingdezhen Ceramic University, Jingdezhen, 333000 ,China

Abstract: In current researches on Arts and Crafts, traditional art development usually follows the linear pattern of “Inheritance-Development -Innovation”, and regards innovative ability as the prominent measurement criteria for its practical value. As one of the Chinese traditional porcelain ceramic decoration craftsmanship, carving art also encounters the theoretical and practical pressure of innovation. Current researches mainly discuss porcelain carving innovation from the aspects of source of Craftsmanship, formal characteristics, or changes in theme, the analysis often remains at the result-level, rarely reflect the evaluation logic behind the innovation appeal. Based on this, this article starts from the artistic performance, focuses on the image generation method centered around engraving marks in porcelain carving, analyses the structural tension it presents in contemporary social context. And the intaglio engraving should be understood as shifting from a fixed artistic style to a generative artistic technique. Further discussion will be made on its innovative possibilities in contemporary creation. It also provides a different understanding perspective and methodological thinking for the contemporary research of intaglio engraving and related traditional crafts through a transformation of the perspective at the methodological level.

Keywords: Porcelain carving; Traditional craftsmanship; Carving language; Innovative approaches; methods

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1.Introduction

In recent years, as traditional craftsmanship has gradually been incorporated into the research scope of contemporary art and design, its actual positioning and development methods have become a topic that scholars have repeatedly discussed. “Innovation” is often regarded as an essential precondition for traditional crafts to enter contemporary context, and is continuously emphasized in academic research, policy discourse, and creative practice.^[1] However, when innovation is taken as a default premise, the evaluation logic implied behind it is seldom examined independently. “craft is not a residual category of pre-industrial labor, but a mode of thinking through material and process.” This perspective suggests that the value of craft lies not primarily in visible outcomes, but in the ways meaning is generated through making itself.^[2]

Porcelain carving is one of the decorative techniques in Chinese ceramic art. Currently, most studies on it focus on the origin of the technique, the decorative style or the type of subject matter, but pay less attention to the technical features and the expression of decorative language demonstrated in the creative process of porcelain carving. Moreover, when discussing the contemporary development of porcelain carving, most discussions are only about whether its form has changed or whether the subject matter has been repeated. This result-oriented understanding approach has led to the technical characteristics and decorative language of porcelain carving being to some extent simplified to merely visual image expression.

Based on this phenomenon, this study regards porcelain carving as a way of creation that centers around scratches and continuously generates images through the process of porcelain carving, rather than a fixed artistic style or style type, and re-understands the contemporary significance of porcelain carving at the level of craftsmanship expression. At the same time, this study does not aim to propose specific innovative solutions. Instead, It analyzes the structural tension presented by the artistic language of intaglio engraving in its contemporary innovative development. And explores alternative possibilities for traditional crafts beyond established paths of innovation.

2. Definition and Technological Characteristics of Porcelain carving

The Art of Carving Porcelain is a distinctive form within the Chinese traditional porcelain ceramic decoration craftsmanships. It is usually a ceramic decoration process that uses special engraved tools combined with hammering to directly act on the ceramic glaze surface. Unlike other carving techniques, porcelain carving art does not remove the carving material itself to shape the form, but is a comprehensive expression of writing, painting, and sculpture. Its core lies in "creating shapes with lines and forming images with marks" [3][4]. Compared with decorative methods such as painting and decals that rely mainly on color depiction and coverage, the porcelain carving process emphasizes more on leaving physical marks on the surface of the object, which is a common effect.

Porcelain carving has obvious irreversibility. Each point at which the carving tool touches the porcelain surface has a direct impact on the final result, and once a line is formed, it is difficult to revise. This characteristic makes porcelain carving highly dependent on the creator's ability to grasp the overall structure and practical experience during the creative process. The artistic value of this form of craftsmanship is precisely based on the skills that have been repeatedly practiced. Its artistic expression is difficult to improvise but gradually forms through long-term practice. Therefore, scratches have become the most representative formal feature of engraved porcelain. The scratches on porcelain are not only a functional representation of images, but also a record of the creator's creative trajectory. The changes in the depth and shape of scratches, as well as the sense of rhythm and cadence generated during the creator's creative process. These factors together constitute the important features that distinguish porcelain carving art from other ceramic decorative techniques. However, in the existing research and evaluation systems, the scratches on porcelain is often regarded as a technical means of image effect, and its expressive potential as an independent artistic language has not been fully discussed. In the system of traditional craft research and evaluation, porcelain carving is often classified as a decorative craft, and the evaluation and judgment of its artistic value are often based on the aesthetic standards of painting or carving, such as whether the image is complete, whether the lines are smooth, and whether the subject matter of the picture is novel. This evaluation method to some extent erases the unique artistic language of porcelain carving, which is centered on the craftsmanship process, making it easy to be equated with a way of "painting on porcelain". In fact, the artistic expression of carved porcelain is precisely composed of its linear structure itself, which is a form of expression with process and temporality.

Therefore, to re-understand the art of porcelain carving from the perspective of craftsmanship, it is necessary to shift the focus of attention from the final image result to the process of porcelain carving. The scratches not only reflect the artistic experience of creators, but also reflect the dynamic relationship between material characteristics and creative behavior. It is in this sense that porcelain carving can be seen as a process of continuously generating forms through scratches, rather than a decorative technique solely dependent on visual effects. The re-understanding of the characteristics of porcelain carving technology also lays the foundation for further discussion on the evaluation issues and innovative possibilities in its contemporary development in the following text.

3. From Image Representation to Trace Expression: The Performance Mechanism of Porcelain Carving

In the study of traditional Chinese ceramic decoration, creators usually pre-set the completed image before creation, which is called "having confidence", and then present it through personal exquisite artistic expression. However, if this method is directly used to explain the generation logic of porcelain carving, it ignores the artistic language in the process of porcelain carving creation. Unlike decorative methods that rely mainly on brushstrokes and colors, the image of carved porcelain is not simply a reproduction result, but a visual form gradually generated during the carving process. The basis of porcelain carving lies in the scratches, and the direct action of the carving knife on the ceramic surface gives the lines both visual and physical properties. On the one hand, scratches constitute the basic structure of the image; On the other hand, its depth, width, and direction directly affect the light and shadow changes and tactile sensation on the surface of the object. The lines of carved porcelain are not simply a flat

reproduction of painted lines, but rather a result of the joint shaping of tools, materials, and body movements. In the creation of porcelain carving, lines are not completely subject to the needs of image reproduction, but always retain traces of the operation process. It is precisely through this continuous adjustment process that the image obtains its specific form during generation.

As Richard Sennett succinctly observes, “the hand speaks to the brain as much as the brain speaks to the hand”^[5]. On this basis, porcelain carving can be understood as an expression centered around traces. Scratches are both visual elements and records of actions. Unlike painting strokes that can be repeatedly covered and corrected, each scratch on engraved porcelain records the creator's judgment and choice at a certain moment of creation, including control of force, changes in direction, and response to the state of the material. This characteristic makes the artistic value of porcelain carving not solely dependent on the integrity of the final image, but is reflected in the rhythmic relationship and overall charm formed between the marks.

However, when porcelain carving is placed in the context of contemporary art and technological innovation, this trace centered expression mechanism is often easily overlooked. Innovation is often understood as the updating of visual styles or image content, and is often measured by whether the image is complete, the lines are exquisite, or the picture has ornamental value to determine whether a carved porcelain work is "successful", with less attention paid to the logical process of scar formation. The true potential of porcelain carving lies precisely in the way it generates images. If we only evaluate porcelain works from the perspective of results, it is difficult to fully understand their unique value as a technical language.

Based on this understanding, the contemporary value of porcelain carving does not necessarily depend entirely on whether it presents new image forms, but can be examined from its generation mechanism itself. When porcelain carving is regarded as a technique that uses scratches as a medium to continuously generate form and meaning through operation, its research focus shifts from "what was done" to "how it was generated". This shift in perspective provides a theoretical basis for further discussion of the structural tension faced by porcelain carving in contemporary contexts. This mechanism of expression is precisely the key to the re understanding of porcelain carving in contemporary contexts.

4. When “Innovation” Becomes a prerequisite: The Structural Dilemmas in the Development of Porcelain carving

The existing discussions on the contemporary development of porcelain carving are mostly focused on theme updates, style fusion, or cross media attempts, with the core concern often pointing to "what changes have occurred compared to tradition". The innovative practice path often focuses on updating the theme or increasing the complexity of the picture, such as introducing realistic themes, modern narrative, or concrete realistic styles into porcelain carving creation. However, most of these innovative methods are still based on an image centered evaluation logic, which takes whether the ceramic carving has successfully completed a certain visual reproduction as the main criterion for judgment. When the focus of evaluation is overly on the changes at the level of results, the contemporaneity of porcelain carving is simplified as a novelty issue at the visual level.

This situation is manifested in practice as a structural tension: on the one hand, the technological characteristics of porcelain engraving emphasize the continuity of the creative process, material properties, and scratch generation; On the other hand, contemporary evaluation systems tend to use the completed visual effects as the main criterion for judgment. In order to meet this evaluation standard, porcelain carving often needs to actively approach visual storytelling or conceptual expression in contemporary innovation, and its engraving language is reorganized or even weakened. For example, in order to enhance visual narrative or conceptual expression, scratches may be deliberately processed to be closer to painting lines, thereby reducing their perceptibility as creative traces^[6]. This change is not a simple adjustment of creative techniques, but the result of evaluating the impact of logic on the structure of craftsmanship. When porcelain carving is required to "look more like a completed work", its generative features as a

process method face the risk of being compressed. The irregularity and contingency formed during the process of porcelain carving are often seen as manifestations of "insufficient completion" or "immature skills", rather than a formal language with expressive value^[7]. This way of understanding essentially places porcelain carving within the evaluation framework of painting or carving, while ignoring its generation logic as an independent craft form, making it difficult to enter the mainstream evaluation field.

At the same time, the intervention of contemporary intangible cultural heritage protection discourse has also exacerbated the structural dilemma of porcelain carving innovation to a certain extent. In the context of protection and inheritance, porcelain carving is more likely to emphasize the standardization of its craftsmanship and the stability of its style, while innovation is often limited to fine-tuning existing styles. If traditional crafts are excessively fixed as replicable technical paradigms, their dynamic characteristics will be weakened instead. In this situation, porcelain carving is often required to maintain its traditional appearance while also being expected to reflect modernity. This contradiction further limits its innovation space, thereby compressing the space for experimentation and exploration at the linguistic level.

Therefore, if one wishes to reconsider the contemporary innovative possibilities of porcelain carving. Firstly, it is necessary to reflect on the existing evaluation criteria and discourse framework. Instead of continuing to rely mainly on the ability of image reproduction or the novelty of the subject matter, it is better to shift the focus to the generation method of engraved porcelain itself, and re-examine the significance of scars, linear organization, and creative process in the work. Only by recognizing this structural tension can contemporary research on porcelain carving avoid simply using changes in results as evaluation criteria, thus providing necessary theoretical space and feasibility for the subsequent shift in understanding of porcelain carving.

5.From Technique to Method: Another Understanding Path of Ceramic Carving Innovation

The innovation challenges faced by porcelain carving in the contemporary context do not stem from the decline of the technique itself or the lack of expressive ability, but rather from the singularity of evaluation frameworks and understanding methods^[8]. When porcelain carving is placed in an aesthetic system centered on image reproduction for a long time, its unique technical language becomes difficult to fully recognize. If there is an independent evaluation system for arts and crafts, there will be significant changes in their inheritance and development^[9]. Therefore, contemporary innovation in porcelain carving requires a shift in consciousness, recognizing that development must shift from "how to express" to "how to generate", that is, starting from the technical language itself and re understanding its possibilities.If craft is understood, as Adamson suggests, as a way of thinking through material and process, then innovation need not be measured by stylistic rupture or visual novelty alone.It may instead be located in the reorganization of technical procedures and the rearticulation of making as method.^[5]

The primary change is to view porcelain carving as a creative process centered on craftsmanship, rather than a simple image carrier. Scratches are not a substitute for drawing lines, but the result of the combined action of tools, hands, and materials under specific conditions. The linear marks left by the carving knife on the surface of the porcelain body not only contain the technical experience of the maker, but also record the rhythm and intensity of the current creation. This formal feature directly generated by the process makes engraved porcelain naturally have process readability and temporality, which is an important characteristic that distinguishes it from painting and printing images. At the same time, in innovative practice, the unfinished and trace feeling of porcelain carving can also be regarded as a positive language resource. The rhythm, overlap, and variations in depth of the marks precisely constitute the most expressive part of porcelain carving. As Richard Senet pointed out in his discussion of handicrafts, the value of manual labor is not only reflected in the results, but also in the process of repeated exploration and correction. Introducing this perspective into porcelain carving creation can help break through the inertia of evaluation that prioritizes completion. Furthermore, innovation in porcelain carving does not necessarily rely on subject matter updates or technological stacking, but can be achieved through the reorganization of the

scratch organization. For example, without changing the basic tools and materials, by adjusting the density, direction, and rhythm of the engraved lines, porcelain carving can shift from depicting images to constructing structures, thereby strengthening its independence as a linear modeling language. This innovative approach does not negate traditional techniques, but rather further unleashes their language potential after fully understanding their generative logic. When porcelain carving is no longer solely aimed at reproducing existing patterns, each movement of the carving knife has a stronger decision-making significance. The start, end, turning, and pause of the engraved lines are not just technical actions, but the result of the creator's continuous negotiation between material conditions and visual expectations. This process makes the creative act of carving porcelain itself an important link in generating meaning.

Understanding porcelain carving innovation from the perspective of craft language is not only an adjustment of creative methods, but also a shift in conceptual level. It can remind the public that the contemporary development of traditional crafts does not necessarily rely on drastic changes in external forms, but can be updated through a re understanding of the generation process and expression logic in continuation. Promoting the contemporary transformation of porcelain carving from the perspective of craft language also means a need to re understand the relationship between the creative subject and the creative behavior. In the context of traditional craftsmanship, craftsmen are often seen as executors of established procedures, and their value is more reflected in their proficiency in technical specifications. In contemporary creation, the role of porcelain carvers is changing - from simple inheritors of techniques to practitioners exploring the possibilities of craft language. This transformation may be the key to achieving sustainable development of porcelain carving in the contemporary context.

In addition, in the perspective of contemporary craft research, there is also an emphasis on the process oriented creative concept, which regards craft works as a continuously generated result rather than a static finished product^[10]. This concept also provides important inspiration for the innovation of porcelain carving, and helps porcelain carving to break free from its dependence on painting logic and establish its own linguistic independence.

6. Conclusion

Through the analysis of the characteristics of porcelain carving technology and its contemporary situation, it can be found that the core problem faced by porcelain carving in contemporary arts and crafts research is not simply whether it is innovative, but how it is understood and evaluated. When innovation is used as the main measure of the practical value of traditional craftsmanship, porcelain carving is often included in a result oriented evaluation system, and its generation logic centered on scratches is easily simplified as a visual level change problem.

This article starts from the artistic expression of porcelain carving, emphasizing that scratches are a direct presentation of the creative process and material response. It points out that porcelain carving does not rely on established images to express itself, but rather generates images and meanings through continuous artistic practice. In this sense, porcelain carving is more suitable to be understood as an artistic language rather than a fixed artistic style. Its contemporary value does not need to rely solely on the updating of visual forms, but is reflected in the continuous operation and adjustment ability of craftsmanship methods in different contexts. Moderately withdrawing porcelain carving from the discussion of innovative results can help to re-examine its position in contemporary craft research. This understanding path does not negate the importance of innovation, but rather reflects on the logic of innovation, making it no longer a single and external evaluation criterion. Through a methodological perspective shift, contemporary research on porcelain carving and other traditional crafts may provide a more internal and extensible space for discussion.

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