

Research on Costumes and Expressions of Figures in Yongle Palace Murals

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Abstract: The murals of Yongle Palace, as an outstanding representative of the art of the Yuan Dynasty in China, possess extremely high artistic and cultural value in the portrayal of characters' costumes and expressions. This study, through a systematic analysis of the form features, pattern systems and color symbols of the characters' costumes in murals, explores the social hierarchy concepts and multicultural integration characteristics contained in them as cultural symbols. Meanwhile, starting from the expression of facial expressions, the article analyzes the artistic techniques of lines, brushstrokes and shapes in conveying the inner spirit of characters, as well as the narrative structure of group facial expressions and the transcendent expression of individual facial expressions. Research shows that there is a deep interactive relationship between clothing and expressions, jointly constructing the unique visual language and spiritual connotation of the murals in Yongle Palace. Ultimately, this paper proposes feasible paths for this traditional art resource in contemporary design innovation and cultural dissemination, providing theoretical basis and practical inspiration for the modern transformation of traditional culture.

Keywords: Yongle Palace Murals, Figures' Costumes, Figures' Expressions, Cultural Symbols, Contemporary Applications.

1. Introduction

The murals of Yongle Palace are the pinnacle of Taoist art in the Yuan Dynasty of China, renowned worldwide for their grand scale, exquisite craftsmanship and rich character depictions. Among them, the "Homage to the Primordial Heavenly Lord" in the Three Pure Ones Hall depicts a grand scene of nearly three hundred deities paying homage to the Primordial Heavenly Lord, forming an orderly and magnificent world of immortals. The characters in the murals are dressed in rich and colorful costumes and their expressions are vivid and lifelike. They not only represent the highest level of painting art in the Yuan Dynasty, but also serve as precious "non-textual" historical materials for studying the ritual system, clothing culture and social spirit of the Yuan Dynasty. However, the current academic research on the murals of Yongle Palace mostly focuses on their historical origin, painting techniques and religious thoughts. But from the perspective of combining design studies and imagology, there is still a lack of systematic analysis of the interactive relationship between the characters' clothing and expressions, and exploration of their contemporary value. This study aims to fill this gap. By deeply analyzing the forms, patterns of the costumes of the figures in the Yongle Palace murals and their organic connection with the expression of their expressions, it reveals their profound cultural connotations and artistic laws, and provides theoretical inspiration and innovative paths for related contemporary design practices.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Research on Artistic Essence and Historical Background of Murals in Yongle Palace

This kind of research is the cornerstone of the academic system of Yongle Palace murals. Scholars generally affirm its unparalleled artistic value, believing that it inherits and

develops the painting tradition since the Tang and Song Dynasties and is an outstanding representative of religious mural art in the Yuan Dynasty. Zhang Meibin (2025) clearly pointed out in his research that the murals of Yongle Palace have constructed a complete genealogy of Taoist immortals and formed a unique artistic language system in terms of spatial composition and visual communication[7], representing an important model in the field of traditional Chinese painting research. Most of the research approaches from a macro perspective, thoroughly verifying the creation background, era, subject matter and content of the murals, as well as their position in the history of Chinese art. Ye Huaxin (2020) further enriched his understanding of the historical background and current development status of the Yongle Palace murals through multiple on-site investigations[6]. These fundamental works provide an indispensable framework for us to understand the overall style and the context of The Times of the murals.

2.2. Research on Costumes of Figures in Ancient Chinese Murals

The costumes of figures, as an important visual element of ancient murals, serve as a window to glimpse the material culture and ritual systems of past dynasties. In this regard, scholars have conducted multi-angle discussions. For instance, Xu Kaiya's (2025) research on the murals and costumes of Li Xian's tomb in the Northern Zhou Dynasty revealed the specific manifestations of the integration of Hu and Han cultures in the costumes[5], emphasizing the function of costumes as cultural carriers. Wang Han's (2025) analysis of the costumes in the murals of Princess Zhenxiao's tomb in the Bohai Kingdom reveals the clothing trends under the interaction between local regimes and Central Plains culture[4]. These studies provide a cross-era and cross-regional comparative perspective for this topic, demonstrating the effectiveness of interpreting history and culture starting from clothing. Focusing on the Yongle Palace

itself, Jiao Yuanyuan (2024) conducted a preliminary analysis of the patterns on the characters' costumes, emphasizing its unique cultural attributes[1]. The research of Ye Huaxin (2020)[6] and Ren Chaojie (2023) attempted to apply the artistic elements in murals, including clothing patterns[2], to the design of modern silk scarves and decorative paintings, opening up a practical path from tradition to application.

2.3. Research on Expression of Character Demeanor and Spirituality in Ancient Chinese Art

The expressions of characters are the core for conveying the spiritual connotation of a work. In Chinese painting theory, "expressing the spirit through form" has always been one of the highest aesthetic pursuits. Song Yuxi et al. (2025) conducted a study on Tang Dynasty screen murals[3], analyzing how the characters' images and movements serve the cautionary function of the picture, and touching upon the relationship between expressions and narrative as well as education. Zhang Meibin's (2025) research has made further progress[7], proposing a theoretical framework of "imagery expression" for the visual elements of the Yongle Palace murals, attempting to interpret the process of "perception", "understanding", and "insight" from the surface to the core, providing a valuable theoretical tool for analyzing the spiritual aspect of the murals. This study points out that current practices mostly remain at the level of extracting surface visual elements, and there is a significant gap in the research on the modern expression of deep "images".

2.4. Summary of Literature Review

To sum up, the current research on Yongle Palace presents the following characteristics: Firstly, the artistic and historical research on the palace itself is relatively mature. Secondly, the research on costumes is mostly scattered case studies or focuses on the form analysis of patterns, lacking a deep interpretation of costumes as a complete symbol system integrating shape, pattern, color and ritual connotations. Thirdly, the research on expressions is often integrated into the overall artistic evaluation, and specialized, systematic research is relatively weak. The existing research has not fully analyzed the costumes and expressions as an organic whole, and the exploration of how costumes shape, enhance and even define the identity and expressions of characters through their shapes, patterns and colors, as well as how the inner spiritual temperament of characters is highlighted and strengthened through external costumes, is still insufficient. The excavation of the artistic laws and cultural codes behind this interactive relationship is still inadequate. Therefore, the innovation point (Research Gap) of this study lies in: breaking the barriers between costume research and expression research, adopting an interdisciplinary approach combining design studies, iconography and cultural semiotics, systematically analyzing the interactive symbiotic relationship between the costumes and expressions of characters in the Yongle Palace murals, deeply exploring the social culture, ritual system and aesthetic philosophy of the Yuan Dynasty they carry, and ultimately extending theoretical insights to contemporary cultural innovation and application fields to achieve the creative transformation of traditional culture..

3. Analysis of Costume Forms, Patterns and Cultural Symbols of the Figures in Yongle Palace Murals

3.1. Analysis of Clothing Styles

The clothing styles of the figures in the murals demonstrate a feature of diverse integration. The main types of clothing include traditional Han Chinese ceremonial attire and fashionable styles that blend elements of different eras. These garments retain the characteristics of wide robes and large sleeves from the Tang and Song dynasties, while incorporating certain elements of Yuan Dynasty clothing. The cutting and structure of the clothing combine practicality with aesthetics. The wide sleeves and flowing hemlines not only create a solemn atmosphere but also enhance the dynamic expression of the figures. This style not only meets the dress requirements for ceremonial occasions but also reflects the needs of artistic expression.

3.2. Pattern Themes and Decorative System

The patterns on clothing are rich and diverse, with distinct characteristics of the times. Plant patterns include patterns of peonies, lotuses, chrysanthemums, etc., which symbolize wealth, purity and noble character. Geometric patterns mainly consist of swirls, square motifs, and coils, reflecting the beauty of order and regularity. Cloud patterns are the most common natural imagery, presenting the dynamic beauty of clouds with smooth curves, symbolizing auspiciousness and transcendent realms. Water patterns, mountain rock patterns, and other natural elements also occasionally appear, jointly forming a complete system of natural imagery. Through meticulous drawing techniques, these patterns create a richly layered and clearly defined decorative effect.

3.3. Clothing as a Cultural Symbol

Clothing is an important symbol of one's identity and status. People of different social statuses wear different kinds of clothing, with differences in levels distinguished by materials, colors, and patterns. The main characters' clothing is more elaborate and complex, with richer accessories, while the clothing of secondary characters is relatively simpler. These differences reflect the strict hierarchical system and social norms. At the same time, clothing also reflects the characteristics of cultural integration. It incorporates elements of traditional Han clothing as well as influences from other ethnic cultures, and this fusion demonstrates the openness and inclusiveness of the culture of the Yuan Dynasty.

3.4. Sociological and Symbolic Interpretation of Color System

The use of colors has distinct symbolic meanings. The red color range represents nobility and festivity, and is mostly used for the clothing of the main characters. Green and blue represent life and eternity, and are often used for decorative details. Gold and yellow symbolize authority and sanctity, and are mostly used for pattern outlining and accessory presentation. The combination of colors follows certain rules, taking into account both visual effects and the expression of symbolic meanings. The harmonious use of warm and cool tones creates a rich and harmonious color atmosphere. The changes in color intensity also enhance the three-dimensionality and texture expression of the clothing.

4. Expression Techniques and Spiritual Connotations of Figures' Expressions in Yongle Palace Murals

The expression of the figures' expressions in the murals of Yongle Palace is an important aspect of its artistic achievements. The expressions of characters not only have vivid visual effects but also carry rich spiritual connotations. By analyzing the expression techniques and intrinsic characteristics of expressions, one can deeply understand the artistic charm of murals.

4.1. Model of Expressing Spirit Through Form

The application of lines is the key technique for expressing the expression of a character. The painter uses smooth and varied lines to outline the facial features and expression details of the character. The changes in the thickness, dryness and wetness of the ink effectively represent the texture of the character's skin and the subtle changes in their expressions. The accurate and vivid modeling, along with the harmonious proportions of the character and the natural dynamics, lay a good foundation for the expression of the character's expressions. The comprehensive application of these techniques enables the character's expressions to be both realistic and full of artistic appeal.

4.2. Narrative Nature of Group Postures

The mural meticulously organizes the group's expressions to create a solemn and orderly scene of the journey towards the heavens. Each character's expression has its own uniqueness and forms a corresponding relationship with other characters. The expressions of the main characters are solemn and dignified, demonstrating the leader's demeanor. The expressions of the attendants are respectful and solemn, reflecting the etiquette norms. This differentiated handling of expressions not only enriches the visual effect but also strengthens the expression of the hierarchical order. The overall atmosphere is harmonious and unified, while each individual expression has its own characteristics, jointly forming a complete narrative scene.

4.3. Presentation of Transcendent Expression

The expressions of the important figures reveal an extraordinary spiritual temperament. Their facial expressions are calm and peaceful, their gaze is profound and full of meaning, reflecting their inner spiritual cultivation. Their postures are dignified and graceful, their movements are elegant and natural, showcasing their noble personality charm. This kind of expression not only has an idealized characteristic but also is filled with humanistic care, evoking a dual feeling of awe and closeness in the viewers. Through the meticulous depiction of the expressions, the character images go beyond simple visual representation and acquire profound spiritual connotations.

4.4. Interaction Between Expression and Clothing

There is a close interactive relationship between clothing and demeanor. Gorgeous clothing highlights the solemn demeanor of the person, while simple clothing accentuates the humble expression. The patterns and colors of the clothing correspond with the characteristics of the demeanor, jointly

shaping a complete character image. The dynamic lines of the clothing enhance the liveliness of the demeanor, while the stability of the clothing strengthens the solemnity of the demeanor. This interactive relationship makes the character image more rich and three-dimensional, improving the overall effect of the artistic expression.

By analyzing the expressions, it can be seen that the murals of Yongle Palace have achieved remarkable accomplishments in the portrayal of characters' spirits. The painters, through their exquisite techniques and profound understanding, created characters with both visual beauty and rich spiritual connotations, making significant contributions to the development of traditional Chinese figure painting.

5. Conclusion

This study, through a systematic analysis of the costumes and expressions of the figures in the Yongle Palace murals, reveals the profound cultural connotations and artistic achievements behind them. In terms of clothing, the murals, through meticulous design in form, pattern and color, not only reflect the aesthetic features of The Times, but also demonstrate the hierarchical system and cultural integration trend of the Yuan Dynasty society. In terms of expression, the painter captures the spirit through form, depicting rich facial expressions and spiritual qualities of the characters with delicate lines and brushstrokes. The harmonious unity of individual and group expressions enhances the narrative and appeal of the picture. The organic combination of costumes and expressions further enhances the artistic expressiveness and symbolic meaning of the murals. The creative wisdom and aesthetic concepts contained in this traditional art resource provide important inspirations for modern design. Future research can further expand the interdisciplinary perspective, deepen the contemporary transformation and international dissemination of the artistic elements of the Yongle Palace murals, and promote the creative development of traditional Chinese culture.

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