

Research on the Creative Transformation of Urban Handicrafts in the Context of Modern Design

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the modern transformation and creative development of urban handicrafts. Since handicrafts that reflect the style of different times and serve the human society, the development of handicrafts is regarded as a “historical intermediate.” The paper explores the nature of handicrafts and the possible combination with modern design from the historical comparison of rural handicrafts and urban industry. It firstly analyzes the important role of the media, techniques, and themes contained in the language of handicrafts. Then it interprets them from the three aspects of material basis, core skills, and identification models. It is clarified that the modern transformation of urban handicrafts needs to understand and follow the original language of traditional handicrafts as a prerequisite, and then realize the creative reconstruction of handicrafts language. The paper looks at the integration and development of urban handicrafts and modern design from an open perspective. Craftsmen are becoming an alliance of artists and designers in the creative community. They explore the development of urban handicrafts through composite media creation, handicraft improvement, and theme program innovation. The new aesthetic direction interprets the modern design concept of handicraft culture.

1. Introduction

William Morris (1834-1896), the representative of the British Arts and Crafts Movement in the 19th century, argued in the article “The Revival of Handicrafts” that handicrafts help maintain vivid memories of the past. This kind of memory is both indispensable for future life and an indispensable way of working in any society [1]. Traditional handicrafts originate from daily life and the needs of the people, and its practical character and aesthetic taste determine the inevitability of its connection with the current lifestyle. The handicrafts bred by urban life, under the fusion of heterogeneous culture and industrial and commercial culture, are not completely sticking to the rules, but have the courage to try and seek innovation and change. For a long time, due to the characteristics of “non-native”, fluidity, and commercialization of urban handicrafts, researchers have tended to overlook the inheritance advantages of urban cultural environment that is conducive to promoting handicraft innovation and transformation. In the context of revitalizing traditional crafts, the research and thinking of handicrafts has become an interdisciplinary and cross-field comprehensive subject. The material attributes and non-material connotations of urban handicrafts,

practical functions and aesthetic values, and its ever-evolving modernity characteristics with time change, make it also need the research perspective of design to explore the expression and transmission of handicraft culture in the context of modern design. The possibility of reconstruction is a necessary way to continue the vitality of urban handicrafts.

2. The Expression Context of Traditional Handicrafts

The unique dynamic nature of handicraft makes it a historical existence. Mr. Hua Jueming, an expert in the history of cultural relics and science and technology, summarized the characteristics of traditional handicrafts into “three qualities and four characteristics”: the three characteristics of practicality, rationality, and aesthetics, and the four characteristics of humanity, individuality, initiative and eternity, which are testimonies of human commonality and universal value and also a testimony to the continuity of human history [2]. The inheritance and development of handicrafts conform to the changes of the times and aesthetics, the advancement of technology and functions, and always serve the human society, and in the process obtain relatively constant internal quality and value. People should endow traditional handicrafts with modern value and make it a cultural resource. In the continuous integration and transformation of urban culture, the innovative development of modern design and handicrafts complement each other.

2.1 Rural Handicrafts and Urban Industry

The history of handicrafts not only reflects the progress of mankind in using materials and conquering the natural environment, but also provides a kind of evidence for the development of the times and society. The development of handicrafts around the world has gone through three stages: the first stage is the primary stage of the development of technology and tools, all items are handmade; the second stage is in the European Renaissance period, where handicrafts and art achieve each other; the third stage is influenced by the impact of the Industrial Revolution created a clear boundary between handicrafts and industry. For a long time, the Industrial Revolution has been regarded as the opposite of handicrafts. Quantitative and standardized machine production and personalized handicraft production cannot be integrated in form and goal. The efficiency and economy, division of labor and system pursued by industrial production are contrary to the handicraft concept that focuses on the inheritance of unique skills. This antagonism of values is further strengthened in the comparison between rural handicrafts and urban industry. Urban industry has become a territory of continuous innovation, while rural handicrafts assume the mission of protecting traditions.

From the late 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, in the social environment of rapid industrial development, the “Arts and Crafts” movement became the first large-scale style movement in history. A group of intellectuals, architects and artists believed that urban industry brought catastrophic destruction to traditional humanistic spirit and art aesthetics. Meanwhile, handicrafts became a weapon against inhuman industrialization [3]. Behind the “Arts and Crafts” movement was the confusion about the development of urbanization at that time. Modern industrial progress is an irreversible trend in the development of mankind. With the rapid development of industrial technology, where should the inheritance of traditional culture and skills go? How to adapt to the present and how to step into the future? Handicraft advocates with a sense of worry and humanism migrated to the countryside, trying to continue the ideals of the past in the peaceful pastoral society, and the handicrafts are therefore associated with a dying rural lifestyle [4]. Social changes have stimulated reflection. If people observe this handicraft movement happened a century ago from the perspective of today, it seems that the needs for the development of handicrafts itself have been neglected in the idealistic conception. Feeling the countryside away from the nostalgia

and poetry created by modern life does not mean that to protect traditional handicrafts, people must respond with perseverance and avoidance. The dissemination of handicrafts requires timely context and expression.

2.2 Handicrafts and Modern Design

The German Bauhaus Institute, established in 1919, was the first to associate handicrafts with modern design. The first principal, Walter Gropius, called in *Bauhaus Manifesto* that “there must be a shift to handicrafts”, thinking that handicrafts are the source of creative imagination. At the beginning of the establishment of the Bauhaus, various design-related handicraft workshops were set up, and the handicrafts were gradually transformed into professionals who make industrial samples. At that time, many German manufacturers, including the Berlin State Ceramic Factory founded in the 18th century, produced products designed by Bauhaus. Except for a part of the European and American traditional handicrafts that have been completely preserved as an eternal cultural memory and folk heritage, the production methods of most other handicrafts have been replaced by modern design and industrial production, which directly or indirectly contributed to the birth of similar product designs. It also has an impact on the manufacturing industry of modern luxury products. The Italian critic Renato De Fusco wrote in the article *The Fit Between History and New Handicrafts* [5]: “In the future, the combination of design and handicrafts we are talking about will be related to production. The process of operation is deeply connected, technological development and industrial production principles have played a positive role, and handicrafts-uniqueness, durability, and values-have become the key to the continuation of handicrafts and modern expression.”

Craftsmen convey the connotation of craftsmanship with skills passed down from generation to generation. Modern design draws inspiration from the inherent qualities of traditional craftsmanship. Today's values are the continuation and re-creation of the past. If modern design emphasizes rational, systematic and logical thinking mode, then the combination with handicraft is undoubtedly more emphasis on perceptual thinking and folklore memory, highlighting the humanistic value of cultural inheritance. The function, aesthetics, and commodity value that modern design attaches importance to are the common products of art, technology, and management. The handicrafts developed in the city not only produce practical products with both function and aesthetics, but also create purely appreciative artworks. To explore the new aesthetic direction of urban handicrafts in the context of modern design, it is essential to first understand the basis for transformation: the noumenon language of handicrafts.

3. The Noumenon Language of Traditional Handicrafts

Whether it is traditional handicrafts that is integrated into the daily life of the people through modern design, or product design uses traditional handicrafts to enhance cultural taste, understanding the language of traditional craftsmanship is the key to achieving both. The creation and inheritance of each handicraft has its own internal language. This language involves media, tools, techniques, themes, forms, etc. Among them, media, skills, and themes are the core elements for establishing and identifying handicrafts.

3.1 Media Material as a Material Basis

Handicrafts are the existence of material forms. The creation of handicrafts is inseparable from understanding and using material materials. Chinese Technology in the Seventeenth Century emphasizes the coordination between man and nature (natural world), and the coordination of

manpower (manpower) and nature (natural force). Handicrafts is the development and creation of useful things from nature through skills. As far as handicrafts are concerned, media materials are “humanized” nature, carrying emotional concepts and ideals of thinking [6]. The characteristics of the media determine the production tools and techniques of handicrafts, the form and touch of appearance, and the connotation and character of cultural heritage. Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein said: “The limit of language is the limit of thinking.” To a certain extent, the limit and breakthrough of material media is also the limit and breakthrough of handicrafts.

In the 15th and 16th centuries, Venice was the largest commercial center on the Mediterranean coast and the richest maritime “republic” in Italy. The aristocratic republic and the prosperous secular atmosphere provided the conditions for the innovation of glass craftsmanship in Venice at that time. The creation of handicrafts comes from the sensitivity of craftsmen to materials, and Venetian craftsmen try to mix and match various materials. Such as coating gold or glaze on the outside of glass products, inserting gold leaves in thick glass, mixed with yellow, blue, and green three-color twisted pattern imitating agate and so on. Among them, the innovative technology “wire glass”, “reticulated glass”, and “lace glass” (stripes and net-like fine stripes forming a spacing pattern) that embed opaque white glass filaments in transparent glass is particularly gorgeous and exquisite. Exquisite and luxurious handicrafts and unexpected artistic effects should be thankful to the innovative practice of traditional media. The development of media materials has contributed to new handicrafts.

3.2 Skills That Embody the Core Connotation of Inheritance

As the core connotation of handicraft inheritance, skills are also an important part of human intangible cultural heritage. China Traditional Handicrafts Studies Association divides traditional crafts into fifteen categories, such as tool making, agricultural and livestock products processing, weaving, dyeing and embroidery and clothing making, ceramic firing, metal mining and smelting processing, furniture making, paper making, printing, and special crafts. These categories are divided into sub-categories, which constitute a three-level classification system of traditional handicrafts [7]. The same technique can be used in different ways, express different cultural meanings, and be embedded in different folk cultural practices in different ways.

The uniqueness of handicraft skills not only refers to the exclusive creative skills of various handicraft projects, but also lies in the cultural “synchronicity” produced by the interaction of this skill with specific media and tools, which contains the traditional craftsman's experience in dealing with the relationship among man, nature and society for thousands of years [7]. Handicraft skills do not only belong to a certain craftsman or a certain era, but are universally recognized by all the inheritors of the skills. Because handicrafts are close to life and embody a way of life, with the migration of people and changes in daily life customs, the inheritance of handicrafts has correspondingly developed characteristics of “active”, which promotes handicrafts explore more kinds of unknown possibilities in the rational rules of modern design.

3.3 The Stylized Themes That Constitute the Identity Model

Handicrafts are the expression of the appearance of folk life. In the formation and dissemination, they have accumulated popular themes among the people. These stylized thematic expressions not only came from the folk, but also constituted the cultural identity of the masses. The stylized themes of handicrafts are the main basis for collective memory and identification patterns.

The stylized theme has reached a certain consensus and tacit agreement after the accumulation of time by the people, and finally formed a self-explanatory symbol of cultural communication. For example, the graphic patterns that symbolize auspiciousness in traditional Chinese folk patterns:

cranes and pine trees represent longevity; fish represent prosperity; the “four gentlemen” plum blossoms, orchids, bamboos and chrysanthemums are used to express the character of literati. The identification of the stylized themes of folk art ranges from local to universal. In the process of formation and evolution, the parts that are not suitable for the times and the environment are gradually eliminated, and the remaining themes are increasingly known through continuous repetition and widespread dissemination. The stylized themes of handicrafts are also closely related to the craft. For example, cloisonne starts from the perspective of the composite process of metal and enamel. The themes include brocade patterns, flower, bird, fish and insect patterns, mountains, rocks, clouds and water patterns, etc. The main patterns are mainly auspicious patterns, implying auspiciousness and joy, which are in line with traditional folk aesthetics. As the whole body does not allow a large area of white space, a large number of patterns are required to fill the space outside the main pattern. Therefore, the stylized theme patterns have become an indispensable part of the traditional cloisonne craft and the basic unit in its technical organization [8]. Generally speaking, the stylized themes are the standardized form of expression that has been tested by artistic treatment and aesthetic customs, and provide a universal recognition model for the construction and recognition of traditional handicraft language.

4. Creative Development of Urban Handicrafts

The formation and development of handicrafts is a manifestation of changes in lifestyle. The ever-changing modern lifestyle in the city has subtly changed the functionality and aesthetics of handicrafts. Media, techniques, and stylized themes representing the core keywords of the language of handicrafts are creatively developed in the urban cultural environment. Craftsmen are becoming allies of artists and designers, becoming important members of the creative community in the new era. Objectively understanding the development history of handicrafts, accepting the diversity and variability of urban handicrafts in modern society, and looking at the integration and innovation of current handicraft inheritance with an open vision will help enrich the imagination of handicraft language in the context of modern design.

4.1 The Combination of Handicraft Culture and Modern Design Concepts

The inheritance vitality of handicrafts lies in its connection with the time it is in. It must not only follow the language of handicrafts itself, but also pursue the aesthetic concept of the times, not to break away from tradition, and to integrate into the present. The integration of handicraft and modern design is based on the modern design context and the needs of the audience. The combination of the two is an effective way to promote the modern transformation of handicraft and enhance the confidence of design and culture.

During the Bauhaus time in Germany, people carried out a series of related explorations and experiments in the early days, and promoted the formation of modern design concepts through handicrafts. The form of cooperation between the two is obviously different from that of traditional handicrafts. Taking today’s jewelry manufacturing industry as an example. For most of the world’s well-known brands of jewelry, the designers and the producers are not the same. After the design of the work is finalized and before the finished product is completed, it requires multiple different processes and the hands of multiple workers. This is in sharp contrast with the traditional jewelry handicrafts where a craftsman undertakes all the work from design to production. In a broad sense, both forms belong to handicrafts, but their inheritance form, production division, target market, and even handicraft concepts have their own merits. The fusion of handicraft culture and modern design concepts in the urban context can be roughly divided into two forms in terms of form. First, the craftsmen, the artists and the designers jointly plan and complete schemes, and then the craftsmen

and other production teams assist in the realization of the work. Second, the craftsman independently completes the innovation and transformation of the craft through art and design methods. It is worth noting that no matter which way of cooperation, craftsmen play an active role in it. In addition, creative groups with both handicraft skills and artistic design creative ability are forming in the city, which have become a current trend that cannot be ignored when discussing the development of urban handicrafts. Traditional handicrafts have gradually formed rich cultural resources in the flowing urban culture. The modern development of urban handicrafts is a process of identification and re-identification.

4.2 Design Transformation and Innovative Development of Urban Handicrafts

The cross-field cooperation between urban handicrafts and design art aims to transform traditional crafts through modern media and multiple forms, and enhance the influence of handicraft culture. Focusing on the media, techniques, and themes involved in the language of traditional handicrafts, a series of improvements and innovations are carried out on the premise of inheriting and understanding the tradition.

4.2.1 Composite Media Materials, Creative Use

More than one hundred years ago, the woolen embroidery that was introduced to Shanghai from Europe via Catholicism. Soon, the Shanghai style woolen embroidery appeared in the process of combination and improvement with the local embroidery method. In 2011, the Shanghai style woolen embroidery was successfully included in the National Intangible Heritage List.

The medium materials of Shanghai style woolen embroidery mainly include base fabric and embroidery thread. The base fabric of woolen embroidery is called “steel cloth” in the industry. It is woven with tung oil-soaked yarn and is quite firm. With the tightly dotted embroidery method of woolen embroidery, the firmness of the embroidered surface is enhanced. The sturdy and durable woolen embroidery makes it naturally suitable for the creative development of daily necessities. In 2019, the woolen embroidery studio “Daxiang Study Community” led by Chen Wenkui and the local brand Fugex Design cross-border cooperated and made a speaker with the woolen embroidery concept (see Figure 1). They found a new form of transformation of traditional skills. This creative craft work combining a traditional handicraft with modern ideas is divided into two models: large fox hunting and small fox hunting. The delicate shadows cast by woolen embroidery pieces of the fox hunting on the speakers add a lifelike three-dimensional effect to the visual effect. The products also combined embroidery thread and speaker mesh. The speaker mesh actually replaces the medium function of the woolen embroidery base cloth. The same attempt to transform the medium is another innovation in the woolen embroidery clutch produced by “Daxiang Study Community”. The hand bag is made of washed-style plant tanned leather as the leather material, and the bag body is hand-made with the in-seam turn-over process. Chen Wenkui used hand-made woolen embroidery to complete the decorative pattern in the center of the bag body, and boldly borrowed the embossing techniques in the carving process during the embroidery process to make the slightly convex embroidered surface more three-dimensional and vivid. The embroidery thread in the work is made of raw wool thread, which takes the advantages of its fine hair and natural elastic material, so that the woolen embroidery bag can quickly return to its original shape after being pressed, without affecting the shape of the bag. The works are also unique in their creative themes. Various themes such as foxes, horse heads, queen bees, roses, etc., can show the coexistence of retro elegance and modern fashion. At present, these new woolen embroidery products with improved techniques and innovative styles have been produced in small batches and have entered the market, injecting fresh vitality into traditional techniques, and at the same time allowing more people to

understand the creative development of Shanghai style woolen embroidery.



Fig.1 A Speaker with the Shanghai Style Woolen Embroidery Concept

Designed and made by “Daxiang Study Community” and Fugex Design Studio

4.2.2 Urban Image, Modern Taste

Taking Shanghai style furniture as an example. The style of Shanghai style furniture embodies the Shanghai spirit of “inclusive of all rivers”, which is manifested in the tolerance of western home furnishing culture and the containment of traditional Chinese furniture making skills. Shanghai style furniture ingeniously integrates the style, function, structure, and craft of western style furniture into traditional furniture to make it more suitable for urban lifestyles and aesthetic trends. At the same time, it still uses traditional Chinese furniture materials, craft structures, and custom production techniques (such as mortise and tenon joints), which has maintained traditional characteristics. Therefore, Shanghai style furniture is a two-way expression of the localization of Western furniture and the internationalization of traditional furniture [9]. This characteristic of cultural collision and fusion has developed so far, laying the foundation for the development of the new style of new Shanghai style furniture.

Bao Tianwei, vice president of Shanghai Arts and Crafts Association and curator of Shanghai Redwood Art Museum, was born in a family of wood craftsmen. His father, Mr. Bao Huanwu, was once known as the “Southern First Axe” of woodcarving in Dongyang, Zhejiang. In 1998, Bao Tianwei, who followed the family heritage, came to Shanghai, felt the modern characteristics of Shanghai style furniture, and devoted himself to the creation of new Shanghai style furniture aesthetics. Bao Tianwei's Shanghai style furniture design introduced his earlier acquired Cantonese style furniture and Suzhou style furniture concepts, combined with an open and inclusive Shanghai style art vision, and used traditional production techniques to create a new Chinese modern style. For example, the seat design of “Dream Awakening Time” in the furniture of “Legend of Luban” is based on the high-back Nanguan cap chair of the late Ming Dynasty as the design prototype. The creativity subverts the original Ming-style furniture shape, especially the backrest design of breaking through the frame, is impressive. The whole work is quaint and dignified, but unexpectedly lively and fresh, as shown in Figure 2. Another example is the chair design “Modern

Wood” in the same series, which uses the modern style of Art Deco as the source of inspiration for the modern improvement of furniture. The decorative arts movement that emerged in Europe and the United States in the 1920s has had a profound impact on Shanghai's art, design, culture, and architecture since the Republic of China. The stepped façade structure is one of the typical representative features of Art Deco style. This design element inspired by primitive tribal culture and religious architecture in Africa and South America is used in Bao Tianwei’s new Shanghai style furniture seat. The innovative shape of the backrest, combined with the straight-line frame of the overall seat, presents the modern atmosphere of the modern city concretely, see Figure 3. New Shanghai style furniture is full of contemporary lines, while respecting traditional craftsmanship and modern taste, it also provides urbanites with a life aesthetic that is more in line with the aesthetic imagination.



Fig.2 Seat of “Dream Awakening Time” in the Furniture of “Legend of Luban” (Left); High-Back Nanguan Cap Chair of the Late Ming Dynasty (Right)



Fig.3 Seat of “Legend of Luban” Modern Wood (Left);

Art Deco style Rockefeller Center in New York-ancient pyramids in South America (Right)

4.2.3 Art Symbol, Concept Communication

There is another way of conceptual exploration in the modern transformation and creative development of urban handicrafts. Born in Shanghai, Xu Zhen graduated from the Shanghai Arts and Crafts School in 1996. In 2009, he founded his own production company “MadeIn Company”

and launched his personal name brand “Xu Zhen®”. Xu Zhen believes that Shanghai is a business city, so art creation also needs efficiency. In addition to using himself as a medium for brand promotion, traditional handicrafts have also become the artistic symbol of Xu Zhen's conceptual communication. The most typical case is the “MadeIn Crooked Neck Vase” launched by MadeIn Company. This series strictly follows the shape, size, pattern and materials of the original Chinese classic ceramic vases to produce 1:1 imitation, such as the famille rose peach pattern vases, the famille rose flower and butterfly pattern vases, the turquoise green glazed plum vases, and the famille rose nine-peach celestial sphere vases from the Yongzheng and Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty. They have become the creative prototypes in the series. The shocking structural breakthrough of “MadeIn Crooked Neck Vase” series is that the original vase mouth is turned down at 90 degrees to form a modern handicraft with a strong visual impact and a slightly humorous shape. As shown in Figure 4, it is one of Xu Zhen's imitating Qianlong famille rose nine-peach celestial sphere vase in the Qing Dynasty to create one of the series of crooked neck vases. Famille rose porcelain is a new variety of overglaze color created on the basis of multicolored porcelain in the late Kangxi period of the Qing Dynasty and influenced by the production process of enamel porcelain. It has been popular since the late Kangxi period when it was created. Another crooked neck vase imitating the Qing Dynasty Qianlong turquoise green-glazed plum vase is vividly similar to the original in details such as the shape and pattern, and also sets off the creative imagination of the sky, as shown in Figure 5. The classic handed down porcelain vase has become the conceptual language for the dissemination and output of handicraft culture. The Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, has two collections of Xu Zhen’s MadeIn Crooked Neck vases. They are the famille rose peach pattern olive vase of Yongzheng in the Qing Dynasty collected in 2013 and the blue and white character cylinder vase in the Ming and Qing Dynasty collected in 2014. the original famille rose peach pattern olive vase of the Yongzheng period of the Qing Dynasty is now in the collection of the Shanghai Museum. Whether Xu Zhen’s handicraft concept innovation has created a new ceramic bottle style is not yet known. However, these stunning works have taken away the use value and classic aesthetic procedures of the original works. Borrowing from Xu Zhen’s MadeIn Company’s introduction, the birth of the crooked neck vases exhibits a “history that may happen” parallel to the generally recognized history. The inheritance and development of urban handicrafts, from handicraft skills to handicraft culture, to the concept of handicrafts, still has a long way to explore and think about.



Fig.4 Qianlong Famille Rose Nine-Peach Celestial Sphere Vase in the Qing Dynasty (Left);

MadeIn Crooked Neck Vase- Qianlong Famille Rose Nine-peach Celestial Sphere Vase in the Qing Dynasty (2003) (Right)



Fig.5 The Turquoise Green Glazed Plum Vase in Qianlong Period of the Qing Dynasty (Upper Left);

MadeIn Crooked Neck Vase- The Turquoise Green Glazed Plum Vase in Qianlong Period of the Qing Dynasty (2013) (Upper right)

5. Conclusion

The history of handicrafts is not only the history of creating things with various media materials in nature by means of creative thinking and practical ability, but also the history of responding to different ideas and concepts in different eras. Urban handicrafts are transformed and reconstructed in the context of modern design, exploring the commonalities and balance between traditional handicraft concepts and creativity and production, thereby creating new aesthetic concepts and historical standards. The transformation of handicraft language requires the integration of the common wisdom of craftsmen and designers. It is the continuation and inheritance of ancient techniques and the guidance of the new aesthetic direction of modern urban life. In the process of interpreting the art of life and oriental aesthetics, a brand-new modern handicraft concept that integrates ancient and modern China and foreign countries is taking shape. Nobel Prize winner American physicist Feynman once said:” What I cannot create, I do not understand.” It can be seen that how people view the modern transformation and creative development of handicraft language depends on our true understanding of the handicraft heritage and its historical significance.

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