

Contemplation on History with Lacquer

Zhang Songren

The Arthur M. Sackler Museum of Art and Archaeology at Peking University does a great job of celebrating lacquer art and contemporary art at large. This exhibition tears down the barrier between the category of art and that of craft. It makes ancient artifacts the objects of contemporary aesthetic and responds to the long-lasting argument that whether lacquer work is merely a craftsmanship or a serious art form. This exhibition demonstrates a brilliant collaboration between a lacquer artist and an archaeologist, and it also witnesses a dialogue between art and history.

She-Shi(contemplation on history) is a special event other than an exhibition of lacquer painting. This event has two key figures: Shen Kelong, the lacquer artist, and Xu Tianjin, the archaeologist. I heard that they were planning this event back in 2008, trying to reveal the meaning of lacquer art from an archaeological point of view in the museum. Shen Kelong's works were rather different three years ago. We can see the influence of academic interaction on the artist. This project is a testament to their undeniable effort. Professor Xu selected all the artifacts for the exhibition based on historical thread, shape, taste and historical reflection, corresponding to Shen's lacquer works. Both sides of the exhibition interact with each other, from which academic interests and issues are derived.

Two propositions in particular demand our attention when we talk about "art" today: the first one is the relation between art and craft, i.e. the divergence and convergence between functional object and work of art; the second one is how "contemporariness" treats cultural tradition. It is very hard to get rid of the Western categories when considering these two questions under historical context. In modern society, the superiority of art over craft has long been institutionalized in the West and been fortified by museum system. Under this system, traditional Chinese calligraphy, painting and seal cutting are naturally categorized as "art", but one should always keep in mind that there has been a conceptual conversion. After all, this system is borrowed from the West. It is a mechanism taken by art museums and independent art exhibitions. On the other hand, in those anthropology-oriented museums and craft museums, objects are telling the stories of time, they are imbedded in the social function. Craft museums, even with their exquisite collections, focus on the material and functionality side of objects during particular times, and have nothing to do with art. Similarly, art museums are strictly defined by art narrative. The idea of time-changing (or the misleading idea of progress) lies under the so-called "vintage" work. As a result, the difference between the new work and the old ones becomes a signature. The value of "innovation" is mechanized in art museums. The definition of "art" made by art museums has been universally acknowledged as authoritative. For an artist, it is impossible to ignore art museums (or art history) anymore. In an era of globalization, the influence of modern art discourse dominated by the West continues to increase because it is a history that any new art logic around the world cannot evade. We can see that the nature of art and the mechanism of art museum are closely bound up. Furthermore, since art works do not have practical function like crafts, the place where art takes effect must instruct people to appreciate them from an artistic perspective. Thus the form of "exhibition" becomes the first scene where art (especially modern and contemporary art) presents itself. Here, the visitors already know they are watching art works so they have to adjust their attitudes.

Half of this exhibition consists of ancient artifacts selected by Professor Xu Tianjin. From the category of archaeology, these artifacts (most of them were usable utensils) are led into interplay with lacquer art. The field becomes a scene of contemporary art where lacquer work, mechanism of archaeology museum, artifacts from different periods of time, distinctions between art and craft, and art metaphors contribute together to a multi-layered exploration. The so-called "contemporariness" aims at rethinking modernity and questioning the barriers among different academic subjects. In a specific field of art, the interplay between recognized "craft" and acknowledged "art" reveals a struggle of everyday life against social politics; the various characters of materials and their manifestations provide a buffer zone in our mechanism of social life. Meanwhile, archaeology shows nostalgia for lost times and memories and it is revitalized in the dialogue with lacquer art. The energy comes from the essence of lacquer work whose basic conduct is painting with lacquer. This conduct is repeated day after day to counterbalance the lapse of time. As a time-honored craft, lacquer work cherishes the outworn. It goes hand in hand with contemporary art criticism to fight against the modernist commitment to "progress". Archaeological objects thus provide a possibility of escaping from "art museum narrative" and reveal the spirit of time hidden in craft. We must open the gate of art museum in order to liberate and redefine art. The "contemporariness" of "She-Shi"(contemplation on history) lies in the fact that it releases the ghost who was previously confined to archaeology museum and that it shouts out for historical memories once kidnapped by time.

In recent years Shen Kelong has indulged in the dialogue with tradition, thus bringing about a paradigm shift. In addition to adopting standard cultural images, he revitalizes the metaphor of renovation and restoration implied by the labor of lacquer-painting. He presents to us a series of new works, a small part of which are utensils that reveal the origin of lacquer work. But most of his new works are still lacquer paintings, reflecting his effort to carry forward the contribution of lacquer paintings in the field of "art".

Lacquer painting has established itself as a genre on the foundation of unique aesthetic appeal of traditional lacquer, thus other coating materials must be excluded. As a traditional Chinese painting genre, lacquer painting must take the aesthetic value of mainstream ink wash painting as reference, and try to break new ground from there.

Mr. Shen's new works such as *Awaken from Dream*, *The Yard* directly adopt the composition of engraving of the Ming Dynasty. This method not only rhymes with characteristic styles of traditional Chinese calligraphy and painting, but it also displays unique taste of lacquer. Let's take the idea of "You" ("seclusion", "serenity", "darkness", etc.) for instance.

The ideal of seclusion had to do with the life philosophy of ancient Chinese literati; it was an alternative to officialdom. The major image in literary work and art that reflect this seclusion is "You". As an artistic conception, "You" is generally associated with something quiet or elegant, thus producing visual perceptions of grace, elegance and delicacy. For those who are familiar with traditional calligraphy and painting, these perceptions can be found on the paper, as well as in poetry and prose.

But above all, “You” has the most essential meaning that combine "dimness", "remoteness" and "seclusion". Shuo Wen Jie Zi (The Origin of Chinese Characters) explains that “You” means something shadowed by mountain. Ci Lin Zheng Yun (The Standard Rhymes of Chinese Words) says that “You” means something or somewhere dark, and it also means being secluded. “You” produces a cluster of expressions referring to a state of tranquility, darkness, remoteness or seclusion. This type of state is unsuitable for ink wash painting, but an ideal subject for lacquer painting.

Shen Kelong’s new works that depict traditional gardens, such as *Awaken From Dream*, *The Yard*, 《*In the Garden*》 are exactly aim at achieving the aesthetic taste of “You”. He mainly uses black lacquer and employs a concave-convex technique, which means he does not directly depict the scene but leave a large expanse of black lacquer. The beauty of lacquer thus jumps out at the viewers. It is deep, profound, rich and luxuriant. Its beauty rivals white space technique employed in ink wash painting. In contrast to ink wash painting, whose appeal rests in the elegance and grace of its image, lacquer painting is deep and rich. Both reach the same aesthetic goal by different expressions.

Since the unique aesthetic taste of lacquer has been validated, the artistic identity of lacquer painting is unquestionable. How does an art form identified with traditional aesthetic taste make sense under contemporary circumstances? How should contemporary art view an art form cultivated by traditional culture? “She-Shi” (contemplation on history) reveals much to us. It breaks through the boundaries between different subjects, bringing forward contemporary thesis through non-mainstream aesthetic and brilliant works that defy the art-craft divide. Thus, it is necessary to view this exhibition from a cultural-political perspective. “She-Shi” (contemplation on history) involves great cultural issues of time at large and trivial daily life alike. Which part is more important depends on the artist’s willingness and social current.