

Exploring the depths- an evaluation of the Chinese Lacquer arts of Shen Kelong Zhu Qingsheng

Among the most difficult of abstract expressions of Lacquer arts, the works of Shen Kelong very much remind their admirers of authentic traditional craftsmanship, whilst for me personally as a critic and collector, the works seem to be somewhat ahead of the prevalent artistic sensibilities, so I appear to have abandoned mere admiration, resulting in an overreaching and even blinded sense for Shen's repertoire of works, such that it is not impossible, for one to momentarily feel abandoned to both their status and position, with a truly original inspiration found lacking as one affixes their attention to a profoundly silent engagement.

The traditional aphorism "wan-wu-sang-zhi" "He who pays the piper calls the tune", also applies to the arts, as an expression of aesthetics and praise, while in terms of human character development and morality, the price one must "pay" to the piper, is often reposed in an authoritarian structure and sentiment, which overly focuses on the "piper", or their calling of "the tune", either of which rightly represent natural moral responses of civic engagement within a society, such that from the Han dynasty, the art of collecting began to serve this abstract cognitive metaphorical purpose of clarifying and inculcating, and art critique thus became an integral part of society's moral expression as if among the recluses, monks or hermits "hidden among the caves" of our social landscape.

But what do we mean by the reclusivity of being "shan-zhong", "hidden among the mountain caves"? The artistic innovation of Master Shen involves two primary directions. The first focuses on emphasizing the classical approach, with the practitioner being among the traditional Confucian mandarin literati, with all the customary apparel, a deep sense of mission, a strong devotion to collection, a profound appreciation for the arts, and a reification of the lacquerware arts, as the embodiment of human spirit in material form, so I have long been connected to the classical beauty of these works, even when it has only been possible to appreciate them at some distance, rather than to explicate all their complex characteristics with precision, leaving one at a loss of words with which to critically review, and able only to express one's genuine respect from afar. The second perspective revolves around my predilection for abstract art critique, examining the purposes underlying the artistic expression, such as with the acclaimed piece "Rhymeprose of Han Dynasty" which I have pursued individually, both appreciating the work from afar and up-close, leaving me with very deep impressions. Amidst the midnight noir and crimson rouge, the black is written nearer to the edges, with spontaneity, and may reflect the robust grounds of a mortar and pestle applied to the longings of the heart, while the rhythmic milieu, spreads her melody across the reflected shadows of the sunlight at dusk, describing quite eloquently the pulse of one's soul, with her deepest impressions, and as one's thoughts return to those memories and escape from them, they indeed may become inescapably immortal. I cannot predict the use to which these lacquer prints will be put to use, as they leave truly indelible imprints on others, displaying utility even amidst apparent lack of functionality, in what indeed may be termed grandeur. Even if I look at this exquisite piece every day, I find that my imagination continues unabated to pursuit of its newness. Thus it is that we speak of being "shan-zhong", "hidden among the mountain caves", "bai-yun", "amidst the white clouds", which may be quite comforting individually, and yet which cannot be shared with others in society.

Lacquerware can be said to have reached its apogee during the Han Dynasty. Such lacquerware was primarily classified by a taxonomy of color, either as red, or black. The black lacquerware originated in the Qin Dynasty, while the rest find their beginnings in the Han dynasty. During the early Han period, many of the lacquerware works were denominated by the expression yellow lacquer, while the Qin were referred to as black lacquered. Ultimately after two evolutions in nomenclature, Han Gao Zu after a specially fortunate event, declared that as the blood the snake he had fortunately killed, was thoroughly red, and thus completely Han, so it is that, when we speak today of the Midnight Noir and Crimson Rouge, we are referring also to the Rhymeprose of Han Dynasty, which may be deemed an accurate account of this unique history.

Dynastic changes in political power, affecting the public art semiotics and dress, were unable to effectively eliminate emotional affects of reminiscence. The early Han period remained subject to religious influences from earlier eras, and the desire for immortality. The Qin Emperor was desirous of obtaining some elixir of immortality to preserve his courage and youthful ambitions. After Wudi was dealt with, all that required addressing were the Penglai religious influences. Thus nearby the ancient capitol of Chang'an, the Streams Palace observation tower was built, with martial arts experts performing particular rites, such that long-sought dreams could be realized, as the arts served as an imaginative substitution. Although the exact timing is unclear, Han dynasty dress and color semiotics underwent changes, and the religious influences also began to arise from the East and set in the West, such as the Kunlun mountain range, whilst the quest for a long life became an aspiration toward the Xi-Wang-Mu-Guo-Yu, and a new religious influence arose in the Han Dynasty, which did not aspire to blessings related to obtaining from the sea, but rather embraced reliance and solitary trust in "shan-zhong", being "hidden among the mountain caves", thus the decorative styling and coloration of the lacquerware began to manifest the dream of such reclusivity. Shan, or mountain, was the earliest semiotic in the Han period lacquerware for expressing cloud pattern or social hints, reflected through their subtle use of repetition as if moirés. And, among the intelligentsia, such expressions were largely deemed to constitute a Chinese form of zoosemy, with the most dangerous of beasts inferred to be tigers or pumas. In the tomes of the Sui-Shu, cloud pattern are deemed to consist in the hundreds, and thus one can appreciate that cloud pattern were not taxonomically reposed in the hundred beasts ontology. So careful observation of Han dynasty pieces, may reflect on the experience of Chinese geography, and the presence amidst the cloud pattern social hints of innumerable beasts, reveals that there are indeed possibilities for liberty atop those mounts, as such freedom reflects overcoming the merely earthly ambitions, as the experience of the Bo-shan religious incense censer has long proven. Recently the British Sinologist Rosen discussed the influences of the West on China's Han Dynasty, mentioning that in Persian censers there were mountainous cloud patterns, indicative of the possible origins of the Chinese Bo-shan, whilst the Persian religious censer forms, were not densely proximate, so perhaps it may be that reconciliation is possible of the idea of origins of the Dong Hai Peng Lai to the Xi Tian (western skies) Kun-Lun? As China looked to the West, Kun-Lun obstructed her view, abandoning global harmonization, and only pursuing such engagement through literary pursuits. While from the Orientalist perspective on the West, the Persian plains are centered amidst Asia, home to the famed Garden of "Eden", and source of the Eastern Sumerian desire for immortality. The Han dynastic period, as with Rome of the same era, placed their ideals above the practical environment and existing system, as if mere messages or

imagination, whether at sea, or atop the mountains, could somehow exercise any affects. Thus, in the September meeting immediately preceding this essay, I proposed that we should no longer discuss these matters in terms of native or Western Orientalist Sinologists, but rather to include also intermediaries, including Chinese and Persian, so that those who had previously lived in China, or in Eastern Europe, or the Chinese west, and the ineffably misty Chinese, could somehow, just as an idea for reflection, work on these matters from both ends of the spectrum, to establish a common end, which is the “shan-zhong”, being “hidden among the mountain caves”.

So the works of Shen Kelong, precisely express this abstraction, congealing the Rhymeprose of Han Dynasty sense in the lacquer arts traditions, which the West deem to represent abstractionism, and which the East views as the highest quality status gift, so that the very notion of abstraction, would not require precise interpretation, as one could enjoy the calligraphy of the piece as the scope of one’s criticism, or the language especially the religious sensibilities, of the “shan-zhong”, being “hidden among the mountain caves”, which are ever difficult to articulate effectively, like the deep veins of cultural inspiration, whose very existence may be wholly ethereal, or in flights of fancy east to west, which in the East are seen as the very highest semiotic representation of the Sovereign Emperor, whilst in the West they remain mere symbols of the beasts which religious missionaries seek to replace, how could there be any greater zoosemiotic contest: wild beast, or Imperial dragon. It is all the more remarkable then that as the Dragon seeks its unity, amidst a disunity discussed at length, in a place akin to an eastern purgatory, Shen Kelong has conceived with each stroke of lacquer atop the underlying, a deep sense of the Han or Chinese spirit, and the “shan-zhong”, “hidden among the mountain caves”, thus has revealed his Rhymeprose of Han Dynasty.

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