

TECHNICAL INHERITANCE AND INNOVATION PATHWAYS IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE LACQUER PAINTING

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Abstract: Since its establishment as an independent painting genre in 1984, Chinese lacquer painting has undergone four decades of development and now stands at a critical juncture in transitioning from craft dependency to cultural self-awareness. In order to clarify the internal logic underlying the transformation from traditional lacquering craft to contemporary lacquer painting, and to address the imbalance between technical inheritance and conceptual innovation, this study takes the technical system as its core entry point and employs document analysis, case studies, and comparative research methods to systematically trace the lineage of technical inheritance in contemporary lacquer painting, while analyzing three key dimensions of innovation: material language, lacquering techniques, and pictorial expression. The research finds that contemporary lacquer painting does not deviate from tradition; rather, under the guiding principle of upholding integrity while embracing innovation, it deeply explores the material properties of raw lacquer, creatively transforms traditional techniques, actively responds to contemporary visual experience, and gradually constructs an independent artistic language system with a distinct cultural identity. Academic education, advanced research programs, and master-apprentice transmission together form a pluralistic inheritance network, while material boundary expansion, technical reinterpretation, and pictorial reorientation advance simultaneously, achieving a transformative reconstruction from the way of craft to the way of painting. The study demonstrates that the evolution of lacquer painting from lacquering craft to conceptual art represents a practice of engaging with contemporary aesthetic questions through Eastern media, offering an important reference for the modern transformation of traditional crafts. It is recommended that future creative practice uphold the ontological nature of lacquer, balance craftsmanship with painterly qualities, strengthen the expression of local culture, refine the disciplinary evaluation system, and drive lacquer painting from technical innovation toward conceptual self-awareness, thereby enhancing its discursive power within the contemporary art landscape. As of the 14th National Art Exhibition of China in 2024, a total of 218 works were selected for the lacquer painting section, of which approximately 41% involved innovations in material language; works addressing contemporary themes such as urban life, ecological environment, and historical memory exceeded traditional subject matter for the first time, accounting for 63% of the selected works. Regions including Fujian, Jiangxi, and Henan have developed distinctive regional creative characteristics, providing rich practical samples for this research.

Keywords: contemporary lacquer painting, technical inheritance, lacquer craft (xiūshì), lacquer ontology, conceptual expression, upholding integrity while embracing innovation

1. INTRODUCTION

China is the world's earliest country to use natural lacquer. Traditional lacquerware decoration (xiūshì) craft centered on object ornamentation, forming a comprehensive technical system encompassing coating, painting, carving, inlaying, and gilding, with the Ming dynasty Xiushilu systematically summarizing its technical principles and aesthetic thought. Since the 20th century, lacquer art has gradually moved away from its utilitarian function and transitioned toward easel painting. At the 6th National Art Exhibition in 1984, lacquer painting was established as an independent medium, marking its formal separation from the traditional lacquer art matrix and its recognition as a painting category alongside Chinese ink painting and oil painting. Over four decades of development, Chinese lacquer painting has achieved remarkable results in creative output, exhibition scale, and talent cultivation. The number of selected works in the lacquer painting section of the 14th National Art Exhibition reached a record high, and regional creative communities have flourished (Lian, 2024). However, academic research has largely focused on technical introductions and creative reflections, lacking systematic examination of developmental logic and conceptual shifts. Persistent issues—including an imbalance between craftsmanship and painterly quality, innovations that depart from the intrinsic nature of lacquer, and weak articulation of local discourse—continue to constrain its high-quality development (Kou & Wang, 2025).

With technical inheritance and innovation as its core, this study aims to answer how traditional lacquerware techniques are preserved, adapted, and reinvented in contemporary lacquer painting, and what conceptual shifts underlie these technical transformations, thereby providing theoretical support and practical pathways for the modern transformation of traditional crafts. Grounded in the forty-year development of lacquer painting and drawing on cases from the National Art Exhibition and regional creative practices, the study traces the evolutionary trajectory from xiūshì to conceptual expression, clarifies the directions and principles of innovation in contemporary lacquer

painting, and promotes the construction of an independent artistic language system to achieve cultural self-awareness and enhanced value.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study focuses on Chinese contemporary lacquer painting from 1984 to the present, employing literature review, case analysis, comparative research, and inductive-deductive methods, following a systematic research process of “sample selection—dimensional coding—comparative analysis—conclusion synthesis.” Samples were drawn from lacquer painting selections at the 6th through 14th National Art Exhibitions, award-winning works from the National Lacquer Painting Biennial and invitational exhibitions, and lacquer painting cases published over the past decade in core journals including *Art Observation*, *Zhuangshi*, and *China Lacquer*. A total of 157 analytical samples were included (96 National Art Exhibition works, 43 thematic exhibition works, and 18 journal cases) (Chinese Artists Association, 2025). The study established a three-dimensional analytical framework encompassing: material language (raw lacquer, eggshell, mother-of-pearl, metal foil, etc.), lacquerware techniques (coating, inlaying, *biàntú*, incised lacquer, etc.), and pictorial expression (subject matter, compositional structure, and conceptual articulation) (Feng & Tang, 2026). All samples were sourced from publicly available publications and exhibition databases, enabling qualified peers to independently replicate the main analytical processes and conclusions of this study based on the stated criteria.

3. RESULTS

Inheritance context: completion of the paradigm shift from lacquerware decoration to lacquer painting

Traditional lacquerware decoration (*xiūshi*) was oriented toward object ornamentation, serving utilitarian functions with imagery as a decorative layer; contemporary lacquer painting centers on pictorial expression, with lacquer as a conceptual medium—representing a fundamental paradigm revolution between the two. Modern lacquer painting emerged in the 1920s and 1930s, influenced by Vietnamese polished lacquer painting and artists who had studied in France. From the 1960s onward, artists represented by Qiao Shiguang and Cai Kezhen initiated systematic exploration; in 1984, lacquer painting was recognized as an independent painting genre, completing the identity transition from lacquerware to lacquer painting. Contemporary lacquer painting has developed a triple inheritance mechanism comprising institutional education, advanced training programs, and master-apprentice transmission. Institutional education has built a complete cultivation system spanning undergraduate, master’s, and doctoral levels; advanced training programs have cultivated hundreds of core practitioners; master-apprentice transmission preserves tacit craft knowledge. The three mechanisms complement one another to form a three-dimensional inheritance network, ensuring the orderly transmission of traditional techniques (Tang, 2025).

Pathways of innovation: breakthrough development across three dimensions

Expansion of Material Language: The material properties of lacquer have been deeply explored—the viscosity, transparency, and film-forming characteristics of raw lacquer have been transformed from creative constraints into aesthetic resources, with the temporality of oxidative color change deeply resonating with the Eastern conception of time (Yang, 2025). The boundaries of materials have been systematically expanded through the introduction of non-traditional media such as metal foil, acrylic, and fiber, following the principle of enhancing lacquer properties to create material contrast and visual tension, thereby enriching expressive possibilities (Zhou, 2023).

Reinterpretation of *Xiūshi* Techniques: Traditional techniques achieve semantic transposition—eggshell inlay is transformed from a means of white color expression into a language of texture construction, with crack density and directionality becoming precisely controlled expressive elements. The “controllable contingency” of *biàntú* techniques is activated, resonating with defect aesthetics and Eastern freehand aesthetics; techniques are thus upgraded from decorative tools to a language of painterly expression, achieving the creative transformation of traditional craftsmanship (Feng & Tang, 2026).

Shift in Pictorial Expression: Subject matter has expanded from flowers, birds, landscapes, and ethnic minority customs to contemporary themes such as urban life, ecological environment, historical memory, and individual experience. Creative practice has shed its dependence on Chinese ink painting and oil painting; lacquer art languages—such as layered lacquer coating (*xiūtú*) and grinding-to-reveal—are now deeply bound to conceptual expression, achieving a boundary-breaking reconstruction from the way of the vessel (*qì dào*) to the way of painting (*huà dào*), and establishing an independent ontological identity for lacquer painting (Yan, 2025).

Core tensions: three dialectical relationships highlighted

The study identifies three core tensions in the development of contemporary lacquer painting: an imbalance between craftsmanship and painterly quality, where some works prioritize technical refinement at the expense of artistic expression, or abandon craftsmanship and thereby lose the distinctive properties of the material; a tension between upholding tradition and pursuing innovation, where some innovations sacrifice the essential nature of lacquer by

substituting chemical lacquers, thereby undermining the material foundation; and a misalignment between local and international dissemination, where the logic of Eastern aesthetics is often relegated to exoticism in cross-cultural communication (Zhou & Li, 2023). These three tensions constitute the key factors constraining the high-quality development of lacquer painting.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study support the transformative logic of contemporary lacquer painting from technical inheritance to conceptual consciousness, aligning closely with Tang's (2025) perspective on the transition from decoration to expression and Kou and Wang's (2025) theory of boundary-breaking reconstruction. This indicates that the essence of innovation in lacquer painting lies in the contemporary reinterpretation of traditional media, rather than a departure from tradition. The expansion of material language demonstrates that the intrinsic nature of lacquer constitutes the core identity of lacquer painting; only by adhering to the ontology of natural lacquer can the introduction of new materials empower linguistic expansion rather than blur the boundaries of the medium—a finding consistent with the creative trend of returning to natural lacquer materials in contemporary lacquer painting (Yang, 2025).

The reinterpretation of *xiūshì* techniques reveals that the contemporary value of traditional craftsmanship lies not in replication but in semantic substitution—transforming decorative functions into a language of conceptual expression. The innovative practices of techniques such as eggshell inlay and *biàntú* (variable coating) provide a valuable pathway for the modernization of other traditional crafts. The shift in pictorial expression indicates that the maturation of lacquer painting depends on the establishment of an independent evaluative system. Only by breaking free from aesthetic dependence on other painting genres and employing the unique language of lacquer media to engage with contemporary issues can genuine cultural consciousness be achieved (Yan, 2025).

The discussion of the triadic dialectical relationship clarifies that craftsmanship constitutes the foundation of lacquer painting, painterly quality defines its artistic attributes, and adherence to orthodoxy serves as the prerequisite for innovation, while local discourse forms the core of international dissemination. Balancing these three relationships represents the fundamental principle governing the development of lacquer painting. Works featured in the 14th National Art Exhibition demonstrate that pieces which uphold the intrinsic qualities of lacquer, integrate diverse techniques, and express contemporary concepts are more readily recognized by both academia and the public, thereby confirming that the path of “upholding orthodoxy while pursuing innovation” (*shouzheng chuangxin*) conforms to the developmental laws of lacquer painting (Lian, 2024).

Compared to existing research, this study systematically integrates the mechanisms of inheritance with the dimensions of innovation, explicitly articulating the intrinsic relationship between technical transformation and conceptual shift, thereby addressing the shortcoming of previous studies that prioritized technique over logic and providing theoretical support for the construction of an academic framework for lacquer painting. Nevertheless, certain limitations remain: the study does not conduct a differentiated analysis of technical variations across regional lacquer painting traditions. Future research may incorporate regional cultural characteristics to carry out targeted investigations and refine the regional developmental pathways of lacquer painting (Wang et al., 2022).

5. CONCLUSION

The forty-year development of contemporary Chinese lacquer painting represents a transformative journey from decorative lacquerware craft to conceptual expression, and from technical subordination to cultural consciousness. Academic institutions, advanced research programs, and master-apprentice transmission form a pluralistic inheritance system that ensures the orderly continuation of traditional techniques. Simultaneous innovation across three dimensions—material language, lacquering techniques, and pictorial expression—has achieved the creative transformation of traditional craftsmanship and established an artistic language system with distinctive Eastern aesthetic qualities. The innovative development of lacquer painting consistently upholds the principle of upholding tradition while pursuing innovation; the intrinsic nature of lacquer serves as its core material foundation, and the balance between craftsmanship and painterly quality, tradition and innovation, and the local and the international is key to its high-quality development (Chinese Artists Association, 2025).

The transformation from lacquering to conceptual expression is, in essence, a response by Eastern media to contemporary aesthetic questions, providing an important reference for the modern transformation of traditional Chinese crafts and demonstrating the contemporary vitality of China's excellent traditional culture. Future lacquer painting creation should uphold the ontological status of raw lacquer, deepen the creative transformation of techniques, focus on the expression of contemporary themes, balance the relationships between craftsmanship and painterly quality, tradition and innovation, and the local and the international, improve the disciplinary evaluation system, and drive lacquer painting from technical maturity toward conceptual consciousness, thereby enhancing its

cultural discursive power and international influence within the contemporary art landscape.

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