

# THE HANDS OF TIME

Editor's note: Traditional arts and crafts are supreme examples of Chinese cultural heritage. China Daily is publishing this series to show how master artisans are using dedication and innovation to inject new life into heritage. In this installment, we explore the long-lasting luster of lacquer.

# Lacquer masters apply historic touch

Art form utilizes nature's resilient sap and evolves with the accumulation of time, patience and artistry, **Lin Qi** reports.



A lacquer deer on display at the Beijing exhibition *Phoenix Kingdoms*.  
JIANG DONG / CHINA DAILY



Cai Shuikuang (1939-2021), a master artisan in Fujian province.  
MO FENG / FOR CHINA DAILY



Li Xiangqun, 63, a sculptor who integrates lacquer art into his work.  
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Yang Peizhang, 47, an artist and associate professor of Tsinghua University.  
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Yuwen Renjie, 27, applies the traditional art in her installation work.  
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**Above:** A replica of a lacquer drum dating back more than 2,300 years ago is one of the highlights of the exhibition *Phoenix Kingdoms* at the National Museum of China in Beijing. **Below:** A lacquer box in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York features the motif of dragons and dates to the mid-18th century.

At first, it appears to just be a piece of decayed wood. No one would bother giving it a second glimpse. Not unless one is told that this object, standing no more than 6 centimeters with some red stains, is of great historical significance. Belonging along the Yangtze River between 6 and 7 millennia ago had soured sap from lacquer trees and used it to facilitate their daily lives.

This wooden piece, later identified as a bowl coated with a thin layer of lacquer, was excavated from the relic site of Hemudu Culture in Yuyao, Zhejiang province, in 1977. The Neolithic culture once thrived along the Yangtze's lower reaches and, according to archaeological findings, has produced jade objects, lacquerware and other relics.

When the people of Hemudu applied lacquer to the bowl, it is believed that they also mixed the varnish with vermilion to beautify the piece, explaining the red stains. The bowl is now part of a collection at the Zhejiang Provincial Museum in the provincial capital of Hangzhou.

The chemistry between a man's hands and raw lacquer evolved in this land for millennia. The advances of human intelligence to utilize the juice of nature, manual dexterity and creativity have dramatically changed the appearance of lacquerwork. It is vividly evident if the Hemudu bowl is juxtaposed with another bowl, made by prominent living artists in the field, such as Gan Erke, 69, from Anhui province, who is reputed for his lacquerwork featuring distinctive marbled patterns.

No one could better summarize the evolution of the techniques and artistic styles than Yang Ming, a celebrated lacquerer of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), who wrote in the preface for *Xiushi Lu*, a publication on Chinese lacquerwork written by fellow artisan Huang Cheng in the 16th century, which stated that the techniques and types "have been so well-developed and diverse, one would find it an extravagant feast for the eyes."

### Depth of layers

Archaeological work has revealed that people began to use the fluid from lacquer trees as early as 8,000 years ago. "Because of its fine physical and chemical properties, natural lacquer as a coating material played a vital role in ancient times," says Yang Peizhang, 47, a lacquer artist and associate professor at the Academy of Arts and Design, Tsinghua University, in Beijing.

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He is referring to a lacquer bowl found at a grave site of the Neolithic Kuaahuqiao Culture in Hangzhou, which is over 1,000 years older than the Hemudu bowl, and therefore considered the earliest lacquer object found in the country.

Lacquer sap was one of the early gifts people received from nature. It is milky and grayish when collected, and as it is exposed to the air, it turns a dark brown color.

After being purified, the lacquer is ready for use. It protects objects from water, humidity and insect infestation so they are more durable. It can also be mixed with color pigments for decorative purposes.

Layering lacquer onto the surfaces of objects multiple times for better protection requires patience; each layer must dry before the next is added. The process results in a distinguished depth, which is smooth, shiny and mysterious, leaving the object in a state of stability — achieving aesthetic heights that Yang Peizhang describes as "an essential part of the Eastern cultural tradition".

This was grounded on a system of sophisticated workmanship gradually formed in practice by craftsmen throughout several millennia, he says.

At *Phoenix Kingdoms*, an ongoing exhibition at the National Museum of China in Beijing, one will feel the splendor of lacquerwork in the late stage of the Bronze Age, proceeding people's initial exploration with the material and craft in the Neolithic period.

From the collections of five museums in Hubei province, a production hub of lacquer trees, a wide variety of objects on show stand as witness to the flourishing of

several states between the 11th and 3rd centuries BC. "Lacquer, lightweight and accessible, was used in many aspects of life at the time," says Chen Keshuang, the exhibition's curator.

"It was applied, mostly on a wooden core, to make armors, vessels, plucked zithers, wine cups, ornamental objects and drums."

These pieces are testimony to the height of lacquerware that would run through the 3rd century. Striking visual effects were created on an opaque lacquer-coated surface on a wooden, metal, cotton or other type of core, such as outlined patterns with other pigments, inlaid fine shells to generate light contrasts, and carved relief patterns — and sometimes gold leaf filling — to exhibit a three-dimensional effect.

Popular decorative motifs included animals, clouds and geometrical shapes. This was just the beginning of ancient Chinese utilizing lacquer and other materials to make wares that define timeless beauty in their living spaces. By the time lacquerers Yang Ming and Huang worked on *Xiushi Lu*, there had been 14 primary crafts and over 300 varieties of lacquerware.

In the book, Huang mentions one such sophisticated technique called *xipi qi*, in which the time-consuming process of coloring, layering and polishing ultimately assumes a dazzling pattern — multiple interlaced colors, predominantly red, yellow and black, sometimes added with other hues to present "a harmonious feeling, and with a clear look, changeable details, a sense of fluidity and splendid luster", as the late scholar Yuan Quanyou once described.

### Diverse styles

Gan, an esteemed artist committed to carrying on this unique lacquer style into modern times, says there is a debate over how the term *xipi qi* originated — it could be inspired by a torn leather saddle or the texture of rhinoceros hide — while "it is agreed that lacquerers discovered the color patterns in nature and managed to replicate them on lacquer".

He says the encyclopedic view of Chinese lacquerwork shows varying features from different regions to reflect local history and cultures, as "some developed a neat, majestic style to fulfill royal requests while others addressed the aesthetic preference of intellectuals to be poetic and aloof".

In the mid-17th century, artisans in southern Fujian province developed a new technique to decorate Buddhist statues with lacquer threads, which further evolved into a homegrown form of lacquered sculpture. When Cai Shuikuang (1939-2021), a lacquerer in Xiamen, Fujian, inherited this family undertaking in the 1950s, it had become a delicate job that Cai later named *qi xian diao* (lacquer thread sculpture).

The style requires piling and accumulating various diameters of lacquer threads on a lacquer-coated ware to form repeated patterns and complicated motifs of several levels. It can be done on a small porcelain vase or on large temple statues.

Both Gan and Cai have endeavored to keep the craft alive in modern life. Gan has collaborated with luxury brands to integrate lacquerwork with new materials and designs. For example, he applied the *xipi qi* coating to part of a chair made of carbon fiber and a rosewood table to render "both classical and modern feelings".

In the twilight of his life, Cai was devoted to cultivating the younger generation of lacquerers in his family while holding workshops and lectures at schools to popularize the craft. "It is my mission to inherit (the craft). It is my job to pass it on to the next generation, which is far more important than making money," he once said.

Yang Peizhang from Tsinghua University says that aesthetics have evolved and will continue to transform, and however artistry is defined, the life of lacquerwork is first grounded on the well-preserved techniques passed down and based on artists developing new techniques to carry the tradition forward.

Contact the writer at [linqi@chinadaily.com.cn](mailto:linqi@chinadaily.com.cn)



Lacquer art is widely applied in the making of various items, such as ornamental boxes, vases, plates and bowls. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



*Hui-Style Residence*, a signature work by Qiao Shiguang (1937-2022), is a prime example of the artist's efforts to modernize traditional lacquer art. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

# Finished product gets modern luster

By LIN QI

Comparing the lacquer works she made years ago to the ones she's making now, the progress is apparent in Yuwen Renjie's experiment.

The lacquer paintings she created when she was pursuing a bachelor's degree at the College of Art and Design of the Beijing University of Technology show the initial stages of a young artist passionate to understand the characteristic of this hard-to-handle material.

While judging her latest installation series X, Yuwen, now studying for her master's degree at Western Carolina University, North Carolina, the United States, shows more ease with lacquer, which, she says, has been her co-worker in creating vanguard art.

She has deviated from the highly decorative painting patterns of lacquer art and ventured into an experimental, conceptual way of expression.

For the X works, for example, she coated a dozen fresh apples with cotton strips soaked in lacquer and left them to mature and decay. The works show the lacquered apples in different states of ripeness and dryness, and how the lacquer coating creates changes.

Yuwen employed *jiashu* treatment to the traditional lacquer technique — coating the core with one or more layers of lacquer-soaked cotton — while her finished works are pieces of contemporary art, either in appearance or the information conveyed.

"I feel that lacquer is the true creator of this. I've only built a stage for it to do the rest of the job," says the 27-year-old artist. "My intention is not for people to pay attention to the intricate techniques but the material itself — how it interacts with apples and evolves in time and to think about how times shapes us into who we are."

These works are currently on show at the Karamay Science and Technology Museum in Karamay, Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region.

Running until Dec 10, the exhibition is organized by the Academy of Arts and Design of Tsinghua University, to inspire the creation of art that explores the possibilities of different materials as the center of an artist's work.

For Yuwen and the generation of artists who work with lacquer, the material is no longer something used to render a sheen, to decorate or to be used for other applied purposes. Rather, it is something they use to explore the forefront of artistic expression and new aesthetics.

The endeavors to modernize lacquer art date back several decades to the early 1960s, when Qiao Shiguang (1937-2022), then a young teacher at the Central Academy of Arts & Design — now the Academy of Arts and Design of Tsinghua University — researched lacquer to see if it could be used in the wall paintings, which he specialized in.

His interest intensified as he studied, and Qiao invested his heart and mind in a lifelong endeavor to usher traditional lacquer art into modern techniques, attesting to people's varied cultural needs. Leaving behind an oeuvre of mesmerizing paintings, he is recognized as "the father of modern lacquer art".

His pieces show the unique beauty and shimmer of lacquer and the artistry that can be achieved on a painting's flat surface, unlike that of three-dimensional objects.

One example is *Water Splashing Festival*, which

he created in 1978, depicting an animated scene of the Dai ethnic group celebrating one of their much-cherished folk events.

Now a collection of the National Art Museum of China, his works employ the *sanyuan* (three distances) method of Chinese landscape painting — the long, middle and close-up views — and his treatment to arrange the dressed-up women apart in the foreground exhibits the influence of court ladies paintings of the Tang Dynasty (618-907).

The minimalist style of Chinese painting also inspired Qiao when creating another signature work, *Hui-Style Residence*, in which he focused on the simple beauty of the whitewashed walls and obsidian roofs of the civil dwellings in Anhui province, as well as the tranquil atmosphere. However, he didn't forget the traditional techniques; in painting walls and streets, he embedded eggshells to add dimension.

Qiao once said it took great difficulty, even though he juggled lacquer and painting for over four decades, to find the right spot where the brush strokes are well-matched with the distinctive merits of lacquer.

"Neither side should be comprised in the creative process. I never want to 'disappoint' lacquer, nor dare to 'fail' painting. It is hard," he said.

Decades later, after Wang Ziting began her doctoral studies at the same academy where Qiao studied and taught, she felt that same pressure. Her mentors include Li Xiangqun, 63, an influential sculptor who has also been integrating lacquer into his work.

Not only has Wang inherited the techniques but also inherited the spirit to walk the modern path of lacquer art.

Her works are also exhibited at *Material Thinking*. The series, called *The Woman Beheld*, reflects a diverse exploration of lacquer — paintings, sculptures and installations. The idea behind her work dwells on the situation of a woman in society being watched, gazed upon and talked about.

She describes building the relationship with lacquer as a "happy and painful" process, as she tries to pull lacquer out of its "comfort zone" — as a decorative coating — to discover more expressions.

She says her efforts and those of other lacquer artists deserve to be shown to the public as an updated rendition of lacquer art.

This is the idea behind *The New Crafts*, an exhibition that Wang's academy has held every year since 2015. Its sixth installment is held at the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Beijing. The lacquer section is curated by Yang Peizhang.

"We show how technological progress has benefited artists, motivating them to develop new techniques and present boundless imagination. We also show the works of artists from Japan, South Korea and Europe to introduce novel ways of presenting lacquer," he says.

"Lacquer art should not only be preserved as handicraft but should also be integrated into the context of modern industries. That would allow artists better career prospects and people with more chances to use lacquer items in their daily lives."

*Spiritual Wonder*, by Yang Peizhang.

### From top:

*Pioneer* by sculptor Li Xiangqun; a *guan* zither by Yang Peizhang; and a part of *The Woman Beheld* series, by Wang Ziting.

