

# The Influence of Imperial Painting in Song Dynasty on Chinese Ceramic Art

Qingping Yang

Huanghe Science and Technology University, Zhengzhou, Henan

Email: 764606769@qq.com

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## Abstract

This article uses historical analysis, comparative research and case studies to explore the relationship between the imperial painting in the Song Dynasty and Chinese ceramic art. It argues that imperial painting of the Song Dynasty guided ceramic art towards the realm of “blue and white” with its implicit beauty, while positively influencing the development of ceramic art in terms of painting and decoration and the modelling of objects, thus presenting us with a realm of refined, sublime and beautiful ceramic art.

## Keywords

The Imperial Painting in the Song Dynasty, Chinese Ceramic Art, Influence

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## 1. Introduction

During the Five Dynasties, the political situation was turbulent and there was no end of fighting. However, the Song Dynasty emperors learned from the lessons of the past, and advocated the state policy of promoting literature and suppressing martial arts, and emphasized education. The national quality was constantly improved, the social economy was highly developed, and agriculture, handicrafts, commerce and trade far exceeded those of the previous generation. For a long period of time, the Song Dynasty regime occupied the most developed areas in China in politics, economy and culture, and its superior historical status, strong economic power and profound cultural heritage were regarded as “authentic” by the ruling classes of later generations and became the mainstream of China’s feudal cultural development. Stimulated by society’s growing demand for ceramics, there were many kilns and factories in the north and south of the country, with official kilns and private kilns everywhere showing their talents. Due to the influence of political economy, social conduct and aesthetic trends,

coupled with the emergence of market towns, the flow of artisans, exchange of skills and market competition were objectively promoted, which laid a good foundation for the rapid development of ceramic production. The art of ceramics in the Song Dynasty had distinctive artistic characteristics from those of the previous generation.

Another important factor that contributed to the development of Chinese ceramic art was the influence of royal painting in Song Dynasty. Just as Zhang Yan argued: “The imperial painting in the Song Dynasty not only occupied a very important place in the history of Chinese painting, but it has also deeply influenced the development of Chinese ceramic art in terms of decorative painting and the modelling of objects” (Zhang, 2013). Imperial painting was highly valued by the emperors of Song Dynasty, and Zhao Ji, Emperor Huizong of the Song Dynasty, even took great pains to devote himself to painting. He was the representative figure in the history of Chinese art for the emperor’s involvement in painting. With his strong support, imperial painting developed rapidly and became the most influential art form at that time. Under the subtle influence of the “great art” of the imperial painting, ceramic art changed in both aesthetic mood and in the shape of objects and decorative painting, showing many new features of the times, becoming more mature and perfect than before. “Starting from real life, ceramic artisans deeply observe and capture the most dramatic materials in life, and through artistic processing, they become vivid pictures on porcelain” (Chen, 2006).

## **2. The Influence of the Song Dynasty’s Imperial Painting on Chinese Ceramics has the Following Aspects.**

1) The implicit beauty of the Imperial painting in the Song Dynasty on Chinese ceramics

Ceramics in the Tang Dynasty are full of tension, because the government attached importance to culture, military affairs and personalities. At abroad, it expanded its territory, at home, it developed its economy and kept making progress. Tang people have a profound cultural heritage and love the beauty of fullness and masculinity. In the Song Dynasty, ceramics were light and elegant, with an ancient and introverted style, which was rooted in the political and economic changes of the time and caused changes in people’s spiritual interests. Popular aesthetics tended to be a kind of implicit beauty.

The implicit beauty is a broader and far-reaching aesthetic realm beyond the artistic image itself. It produces a kind of mood through the full play of metaphor, symbolism and implication of artistic images, creating a realm outside the image, combining the real and imaginary realms, turning scenery into emotions and thoughts, and transcending imagery.

In order to meet the aesthetic requirements of the nobilities and emperors, the Song royal painters selected plants and animals that symbolized richness and dignity, used brilliant and soft colors, captured the forms of flowers and birds,

and injected spiritual divinity and warm humanity into the plants and animals with divine brushwork, giving pure poetry to the images. In the artistic realm of harmony and sublimity, elegance and beauty, it set a shining example for other artistic images. It gradually formed a social and cultural ethos as a cultural phenomenon with the participation and advocacy of the royal family, and greatly promoted the development of art, which made people's aesthetic ability generally improved.

The richness, nobility and elegance, exquisite and beautiful style formed by the imperial painting radiated to all corners of the art by implication, and Chinese ceramics were also influenced by it. For example, the bluish white porcelain of Jingdezhen in the Song Dynasty, cyan and white reflecting and blending with each other, which was called "shadow blue" in the late Qing Dynasty. The delicate and clean porcelain body and the elegant color of the blue and white porcelain give people not only the enjoyment of elegant beauty, but also the beauty of its artistic conception. Su Shi, the great poet of Song Dynasty wrote in his lyrics *Song of Water Tunes*: "Dancing and enjoying the clear shadow under the moon, is it like being on the earth?" which endows people with beautiful divinity that floating outside things. Does it not coincide with the artistic conception conveyed by bluish white porcelain? Yu Qian, a great hero of the Ming Dynasty once said in his poem: "to leave a blue and white reputation after death", using the image of blue and white as a metaphor to express the poet's inner purity, noble spirit, which means to be a clean and innocent man. If this noble and valuable character is described by the cleanness, softness and nobility of bluish white porcelain, it can be said that it echoes each other from afar and shines correspondingly (Liu, 2001). The direct source of this artistic conception lies in the influence of courtyard paintings on the whole art at that time. The imperial paintings in the Song Dynasty lit up the art sky at that time. Apart from the beauty of things, imperial paintings have an inner beauty, which not only depicts the spiritual realm of things themselves, but also contains a kind of perfection and nobleness of human nature, holiness and greatness of the country, and profoundness of culture. The implicit beauty contained in it guides the development of ceramics to the realm of "green and white", just like the beauty of poetry and pictures, the state of a drunk, the elegance of jade and gracefulness of fair lady.

The light greenish blue and sky blue of Ru kiln, and the sky blue and moon white of Jun kiln are all unparalleled porcelain colors (Shen, 2003). They also conveys the pulchritude of implicit beauty, which is similar to that of imperial painting, and inherits the sublime and beautiful mood of imperial painting. They enchant and purify the human soul with beauty, which improves human character and feelings, and it also contains profound social and historical cultural connotations, and has made a great splash in the history of Chinese ceramics.

2) The influence of the Imperial painting in the Song Dynasty on painting decoration

The art of Chinese ceramic painting has a long history, with great achieve-

ments made as early as the Neolithic Age, the source of the development of ceramic history (Feng, 1994). Although it experienced the silence of Xia Dynasty, with the continuous improvement of firing technology, the color material technology of porcelain firing at high temperature gradually matured and bloomed brilliantly. For example, in the Tang Dynasty, the underglaze color of Changsha kiln matured and solved the problem of the combination of blank, color and glaze, creating an eye-catching ceramic painting world, with different styles. Among them, the flower-and-bird paintings, which are characterized by thick brush freehand brushwork with different lines, shapes and rhymes, are more interesting than the exquisite palace flower-and-bird paintings, such as foreign business and unique charm. It embodies the highest legal principle of Chinese painting, that is, “vivid charm”, “external teacher’s creation, and the source of heart”.

By the Song Dynasty, imperial painting greatly influenced the direction of ceramic painting. Under the constraints of the aesthetic will of the imperial aristocracy, especially after the production center of Chinese ceramics was transferred to Jingdezhen, the development of ceramic painting was very closely related to the aesthetic tendencies of the emperor. Ceramic painting was deeply influenced by the imperial painting. And the selected subjects are mostly rare birds and exotic animals with graceful and elegant images, and rigor ornamentation and clear structures. For instance, in the late Northern Song Dynasty, peony, lotus, dragon, phoenix, peacock, mandarin duck and other rare birds and animals were depicted on the white porcelain of Ding Kiln, which symbolize nobility and elegance. At that time, auspicious patterns were specially used to cater to the noble’s aesthetic. Auspicious patterns express the expectation of human beings for a better life, therefore, it is widely used in daily life, especially in ceramics (Chen, 2006). As a result, in ceramic decoration, no matter official kiln or folk kiln, patterns symbolizing auspiciousness by moral and homophonic are widely used. Another example is the green glazed Peacock Lotus Bowl in Yaozhou Kiln of Northern Song Dynasty. The bowl is painted with three string pattern on the outer wall, a picture of a peacock holding lotus flowers on the inner wall. The two peacocks in the picture are standing symmetrically in the center, while the direction is opposite. One neck back, feathered crown slightly cocked, mouth with a bunch of flowers and plants, including a lotus, a lotus, two pieces of clover. The tail feathers are thick and large, naturally drooping, so it must be a male. The other peacock, with a curved neck, also has a bunch of flowers in its mouth, including two lotus flowers and one leafy grass. However, the tail feathers are relatively few, and the body is light and thin, which is assumed to be female. The composition is tight and compact, and the lines are freely rolled, which reminds people of the famous painting “Lotus Pheasant” by Emperor Huizong of the Song Dynasty and the famous painting depicting peacock in the imperial paintings. The flowers, plants and trees are either curved or straight, and the phoenix feathers and cranes are interesting, sparse, dense and uncluttered, giving a sense

of pleasure. This kind of ceramic works using the painting technique of courtyard painting which is unique in China's brilliant ceramic history (Kong, 2005). In addition, the porcelain painting in Jizhou Kiln also combines the traditional characteristics of courtyard painting with folk pattern decoration just right. Some scholars once said, "Ceramic language and Chinese meticulous flower-and-bird painting language have similar cultural background and language characteristics (Yang, 2021)." According to the above mentioned cases, it is easy to see the impact of Imperial painting on the ceramic decoration.

As it is said, "the imperial paintings in the Song Dynasty placed special emphasis on the artistic spirit of 'materialism', requiring the academy painters to make detailed and vivid portrayals of natural objects and figures, and to strive to express the true form of natural objects" (Yang, 2021). The imperial painting in the Song Dynasty also influenced the rendering techniques used in ceramic decorative pictures. The painted figures, flowers, birds and landscapes all have light and shade and yin and yang, which increase the levels and make the pictures appear softer and full of three-dimensional sense. Their realistic style, meticulous description techniques and delicate and elegant meaning reflected the artistic style of the imperial paintings (Cheng, 2001).

3) The influence of the Imperial painting in the Song Dynasty on the shape of the implements

Imperial paintings pay attention to the elegance and tranquility of composition, and each appearance gives people a light and playful feeling. With the extensive application of courtyard painting style in ceramic art, most of the ceramics are elegant and beautiful decorative paintings. In the Song Dynasty, the decoration style of ceramics changed, and the shape of implements changed more or less. In order to meet the needs of the composition, there should be slender and elegant shape to go with it, the performance of these on ceramic shapes are characterized by plump shoulders and slender bottle body, such as the plum bottle in Song Dynasty, which is round and slender, delicate and dignified but not frivolous.

The imperial paintings in the Song Dynasty pay attention to line modeling, the lines are round, smooth, vigorous and straight. The beautiful lines are used to express artistic images such as structural transition and vibrant flowers, birds and trees. Later on, the fine pastels of ceramic art also pursued the "firm and straight brushwork", and many successful works were created by using the technique of imperial painting in pastels, such as the *Emperor Yongzheng Pastel Vase with Nine Peaches in the Qing Dynasty*. The bottle is painted with nine huge birthday peaches, whose branches and leaves stretch rhythmically, and the means of image expression still adopts the hook line like meticulous painting. Peaches, peach leaves, peach branches and peach blossoms are all carefully hooked with meticulous fine lines, and their realistic techniques are delicate and soft. The spot dyeing of peaches and peach blossoms is similar to the washing and dyeing effect in courtyard paintings, and peaches also have shades, positive and negative shades, which not only reflects the unique art of famille rose porce-

lain, but also fully reflects the technical effect of imperial paintings.

In a nutshell, the imperial painting in the Song Dynasty is a brilliant and wonderful work in the history of Chinese painting, which has made a great contribution in the history of Chinese art development (Liu, 2003). It pays attention to realism, emphasizes the constant pursuit of the artistic quality of painting itself, and forms a kind of courtyard painting style with both refined and popular tastes, which represents the mainstream direction of painting development at that time and gradually become a model of artistic style under the background of social culture. Under the light of this “great art” style, Chinese ceramic art shines brilliantly, unprecedented progress and classic works have been made ever since.

### 3. Conclusion

In a nutshell, the imperial painting in Song Dynasty is a splendid flower in the history of Chinese painting, which has made a great contribution to the development of Chinese art. With its emphasis on realism and the constant pursuit of the artistic nature of painting, it formed a style of palace painting that was appreciated by both the elegant and the vulgar, representing the mainstream direction of painting development at the time; and gradually became a model of artistic style in the context of the larger social and cultural gathering. Under the illumination of this “great art” style, Chinese ceramic art either pursued courtly courtyard-style brush painting of flowers and woos, or pursued courtly Chinese ink and bamboo painting, or incorporated flower and bird painting into the principles of pattern variation, making unprecedented progress in many areas and producing many classical works.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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