

# A Study of the Lacquer Trousseau with Travelling Figures from the Warring States Period in China

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**Abstract:** *The objective of this paper is to study the scroll composition in early China, taking the Travelling Lacquer Trousseau as the main entry point to explore its compositional characteristics and historical significance. As a representative lacquer artefact of the early Warring States period, the Trousseau of Travelling Pictures displays the grandiose scenes of aristocratic travelling and adopts a scroll-like continuous composition, which is not only imposing and noble in style, but also has a collector's function and a narrative function. The article further analyses the lacquer craftsmanship, painting techniques and structural features of the Traveling Picture Lacquer Trousseau. Through the research methods of archaeological discovery and documentary records, the article reveals the important position of the scroll composition in the history of Chinese painting, and explores its contribution to formal aesthetics, practical function and narrative expression. The study shows that the scroll composition enriched the means of expression of Chinese painting and became an important tool for recording and transmitting Chinese culture.*

**Keywords:** *Trousseau with Travelling Pictures; Scroll Composition; Painting; Lacquer Craftsmanship*

## 1. Introduction

The scroll composition is not only an innovation in artistic expression, but also an important tool for cultural expression and an important text for understanding ancient social life and cultural landscape. Its artistic value and cultural connotation together constitute the tradition and essence of Chinese painting, and have become an indispensable and important part of history. Through the study of the Travelling Lacquer Trousseau, we can not only enrich our understanding of ancient art, but also discover the continuity and innovation of traditional culture in the modern context, thus providing new perspectives and insights for the historical study of Chinese painting.

The scroll-like composition in Chinese painting originated from the trousseau object as an art form for displaying vast scenes and complex narratives. The Lacquer Trousseau with Travelling Figures is an early masterpiece, showing the travelling style of the nobility during the Warring States period, and is of unique significance in art history. The scroll-like composition reflects the high aesthetic and narrative demands of the Warring States period (circa 475 BC to 221 BC), while the function of the trousseau as a box for storing toiletries was clarified with the times. Excavated artefacts attest to the importance of the trousseau in aristocratic life and its craftsmanship. The scroll-like composition not only revolutionised artistic expression, but also served as an important text for understanding ancient society and culture, and its artistic value and cultural connotations are an important part of the Chinese painting tradition. The study of the Lacquer Trousseau with Travelling Figures will help enrich the understanding of ancient art and provide new perspectives for the study of the history of Chinese painting.

## 2. The Transformation of Visual Art from Everyday Objects to Paper Carriers

The trousseau (lián) was an ancient Chinese box for men and women to store their toiletries, popular from the Warring States period to the Tang and Song dynasties, similar to the modern jewellery box and ornament box. The appearance of trousseau can be traced back to the Western Zhou Dynasty, at the beginning of the emergence is not only put makeup utensils, but a box containing a variety of items. In ancient China, men and women kept their hair and trousseau to store their make-up and personal belongings.

Ban Gu 'after the Han book - the chronicle - the Empress on the Chronicle' in the Emperor Ming of Han 'will be finished, the emperor from the seat in front of the ambulance Royal bed, see the Queen Mother mirror trousseau in the goods, moved by sadness and tears, so that easy to grease and zephyr equipment' <sup>[1]</sup>. Numerous trousseaus containing make-up and household items have been unearthed from the Mawangdui Han Tombs in Changsha, demonstrating their popularity in ancient times. Trousseau were made in a variety of shapes, from single to multi-layered, reflecting the aesthetics and techniques of different periods. The Dongjing Dreaming Book mentions that trousseau was a common daily necessity in the Song Dynasty, with shapes ranging from square and round to special shapes such as the horseshoe.

The evolution of the Chinese visual arts from everyday objects to paper carriers reflects a profound convergence of technological advances and cultural demands. The trousseau, a multifunctional storage box in ancient China, was widely used to store toiletries and ornaments, and its surface decoration, often carved and painted, demonstrates the level of craftsmanship and aesthetic concepts of early art. The trousseau's long, scroll-like compositions display fluid lines and continuous scenes, a form that provided an important model for the creation of later scroll paintings.

With the gradual invention and application of paper in the mid-to-late Han Dynasty, a new medium was ushered in for the visual arts. Compared with traditional bamboo slips, wooden documents and silk, paper was lighter and easier to store, greatly enhancing the creative flexibility of painters and calligraphers. In the Eastern Jin Dynasty, Gu Kaizhi's Luoshen Fu made full use of the extensibility of paper carriers, opening up the application of scroll-like compositions on paper carriers, which led to a better combination of narrative and visual expression. During the Tang and Song dynasties, paper carriers were further popularised, with Yan Lipen's The Steps of the Emperor's Bicycle in the Tang Dynasty and Wang Ximeng's A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains in the Song Dynasty demonstrating paper's excellent ability to express details and colours.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the application of paper carriers in the field of art had reached a high degree of maturity. Paper not only met the needs of daily writing and drawing, but was also widely used for printing and publishing, providing a solid foundation for the spread of culture and the diversification of art. The artworks of this period display delicate brushwork and complex narrative scenes, fully demonstrating the unique advantages of paper carriers in the visual arts.

### 3. The Significance of the Lacquer Trousseau Painting 'Travelling Picture'

In the academic world, there is widespread controversy and many different speculations about the content of this ancient scroll. At present, scholars have put forward five main interpretations: it depicts a picnic scene in autumn; it may be a picture depicting a spring outing; some people believe that the painting shows the welcome link in the bride-price ceremony; another point of view is that it is a travelling scene in which the king, grandchildren, and nobles personally welcome guests; and there are also people who speculate that it is a picture showing the travelling of a car or horse. Despite the existence of these different interpretations, but there is no doubt that this painting is undoubtedly a depiction of the aristocracy travelling scrolls.

The popularity of the subject of 'travelling' during the Warring States period is relatively poorly documented, so it is difficult to accurately judge its popularity in society at that time. However, judging from the existing archaeological findings and documentary evidence, 'travelling' may have become a fashion among the aristocracy at that time. In other words, 'travelling' had already become an important and indispensable part of the life of the nobles during the Warring States period. This kind of travelling activity was not only a simple movement, but also a way to display one's identity, status and wealth.

With the passage of time, until the Han Dynasty, the 'travelling' theme of works gradually flourished. Especially in the Han Dynasty to the Wei, Jin and North and South Dynasties this period, tomb murals appeared in a large number of car riding travelling scenes. These murals not only show the spectacular scenes of the aristocrats travelling at that time, but also reflect the importance and respect of the society for travelling activities at that time. Through these exquisite tomb murals, we can get a glimpse of all aspects of the life of the ancient nobles, as well as their travelling in the process of showing the majesty and grandeur <sup>[2]</sup>.

In ancient China, the term 'travelling' referred specifically to the huge ceremonial procession of the emperor when he went on a tour, which was called the 'halogen book'. It was an escort procession,

which symbolised the emperor's authority and nobility<sup>[3]</sup>. It consists of ceremonial guards, guards, attendants, bands, forming a spectacular scenery. The size and form of the halogen book changed with the dynasty, but the core function was to show the majesty of the emperor. The brigandine protected the emperor and also demonstrated majesty to consolidate the rule. Details such as costumes, flags, and musical instruments reflected feudal hierarchy and etiquette. The halogen book was an important part of the imperial system, symbolising power and a political tool. Through the halogen book, the emperor proclaimed his status and conveyed the message that his authority could not be challenged. The halogen book was crucial in ancient political life and was a means of maintaining feudal order.

In the Han Dynasty has appeared, Cai Yong 'Dictum' in the account: 'the son of heaven out, car and car in order, called the halogen book.' The Han Dynasty should be Shao 'Han Official Instruments' explains: 'the son of heaven out of the car and the driving order is called halogen, soldiers and guards with armour and shields outside the guide, are called the book, so it is called halogen book.' After the Han Dynasty, the consort, the crown prince, princes and ministers, etc. have halogen book, each custom. Those even car line ride, the front guide from the travelling team, the main car and 'the king car' or 'this king car and horse' of the list title. On the drawing of the halogen book map of the view may not be comprehensive, but at least reflects one of the aspects, namely, the ruler of their own identity, a show of status.

#### 4. Early Chinese Long Scroll Composition - Lacquer Trousseau with Travelling Figures

##### 4.1. Overview of the excavation of the Lacquer Trousseau with Travelling Diagrams

In 1987, the Lacquer Trousseau with Travelling Figures from the Warring States Period was unearthed. The height of the trousseau is 10.4 cm, the calibre is 28 cm, the thickness of the lacquer is 0.3 cm, and the circumference is 87.9 cm. This lacquer trousseau, painted on the outer wall with scenes of carriages and horses travelling in the Warring States period, is from the No. 2 Warring States Chu Tomb in Baoshan, the owner of which was Zhaotuo, a descendant of King Zhaowang of Chu, with the official position of Zuoyin of the State of Chu (as shown in Figure 1). When unearthed, it contained one square and one round bronze mirror, one piece of powdered decoration, two pieces of pepper (used as a spice in the pre-Qin and Qin-Han periods) and bone maturity (gǔ jī) (hairpin). After unearthed, the outer wall is separated from the lacquer tyre, if the outer wall is unfolded, it will be found that it is a long-scroll through painting with a length of 87.4 cm and a width of 5.2 cm, which is the pre-Qin painting with the most colours found in archaeology so far.



Figure 1: 'Lacquer Trousseau with Travelling Figures' Hubei Jingmen Baoshan No. 2 Warring States Chu Tomb Hubei Provincial Museum, China.

No. 2 Chu Tomb in Baoshan, Jingmen, is a tomb in the middle and late Warring States period, and the owners of the excavated Lacquer Trousseau with Travelling Diagrams, and No. 3 Tomb in Mawangdui, Lacquer Round Trousseau with Double Lacquer in Oil Colour, are male. Apart from that, trousseaus of different styles have been unearthed in Han Dynasty tombs such as the Tomb of Marquis Haihun in Nanchang, Jiangxi Province, the Tomb of King Liu Sheng of Zhongshan Jing in Manchuria, Hebei Province, and the Tomb of Marquis Ruyang in Shuanggudui, Fuyang, Anhui Province. A large number of trousseaux have also been unearthed in the tombs of some small and medium-sized officials

excavated throughout the country, indicating that the use of trousseaux by men of the ancient aristocracy was a common phenomenon.

In ancient China, make-up was not only reserved for women, but men also wore simple make-up. A man would have a crown ceremony at the age of twenty to symbolise adulthood. In the Crowning Ceremony, a man would bind his hair with a crown ring and fasten it to his head with a band. Since the ancients wore their hair long, cutting it was considered unfilial, thus giving rise to the ‘scalping’ of criminals by shaving their hair. In the Book of Filial Piety, it is mentioned that the body, hair and skin of the body are received by the parents and should not be damaged, emphasising the respect for the body, including the hair.

#### ***4.2. The Long Scroll Composition of the Travelling Lacquer Trousseau***

In Chinese painting, the scroll composition is an influential art form whose origins can be traced back to the Lacquer Trousseau with Travelling Figure from the early Warring States period. This form of composition is mostly found in famous Chinese paintings of the later period, such as Gu Kaizhi's *The Fugue of the Luo God in the Eastern Jin Dynasty*, Yan Liben's *The Steps of the Emperor's Chariot in the Tang Dynasty*, and Wang Ximeng's *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains in the Song Dynasty*. The scroll composition, with its smooth lines and continuous scenes, expresses the grandeur of travelling in procession, highlighting its aesthetic and functional qualities.

The long scroll-like composition presents a grand scene, which is imposing and noble. The Lacquer Trousseau with Travelling Scrolls has a visual impact through the vivid presentation of figures and objects in this form. Long scrolls are easy to store and protect paintings from damage, as in the case of the Lacquer Trousseau with Travelling Scrolls, which owes its preservation to the manner in which it was stored. In addition, long scrolls lend themselves to continuous storytelling, as in the case of the Lacquer Trousseau with Travelling Scrolls, which shows the details of ancient travels through a succession of images. Painting materials such as lacquer and silk, as well as the use of brushes and ink colours, enhance the detail of scroll paintings.

Such long-scroll compositions were more common in Chinese long-scroll figure paintings in later periods, especially during the Wei and Jin dynasties, and were usually designed to represent certain storylines, i.e., serial paintings capable of telling a complete story. For example, the Eastern Jin Dynasty Gu Kaizhi ‘*Luoshen Fu Figure*’, ‘*Women's History*’, up to the Fifth Generation Gu Ma-zhong ‘*Han Xizai Night Banquet*’, etc., but in the Warring States Chu lacquerware decorations, but not much, only ‘travelling picture lacquer trousseau’ has a long-scroll composition of the painting method. The appearance of ‘travelling picture lacquer trousseau’ is at least 500 years earlier than those scrolls above, which can be said to ‘create the precedent of long scroll composition’. The ‘long scroll’ not only focuses on the characteristics of Chinese painting, but is also a unique form of Chinese painting. Almost all of the ten most famous Chinese paintings are long scrolls. For example, Huang Gongwang's *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*, Wang Ximeng's *Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains*, and so on, even the shortest horizontal format among the ten most famous heirloom paintings, Tang Han Hwang's *Five Oxen Figure*, has a horizontal size of 139.8 centimetres and a vertical size of 20.8 centimetres [4].

#### ***4.3. Illustration of the Lacquer Trousseau with Travelling Scrolls***



*Figure 2: Unfolding of the Lacquer Trousseau with Travelling Figures.*

The Lacquer Trousseau with Travelling Picture is a representative lacquer artefact from the early Warring States period, which adopts a long-scroll composition and delicately depicts the scenes of aristocrats travelling (as shown in Figure 2). This article analyses the five sections of the scroll in detail and explores its cultural significance. This scroll of aristocratic life, consisting of 26 figures, 10 horses, 4 vehicles, 9 geese, 2 dogs, 1 pig and 5 trees, is the earliest masterpiece of Chinese genre painting ever discovered. In terms of art form, the scatter perspective method of horizontal panning is adopted, and the whole picture is divided into five sections by willow trees swaying in the wind, with each section differing in the content of the scene either long or short.

The scroll depicts a travelling scene, with the first part showing a horse-drawn carriage speeding along and geese flying in the sky to symbolise freedom. The second section shows the hierarchy of the procession through the different modes of travelling, with attendants saluting to suggest a formal occasion. The core section presents key figures, with women's backs turned and men's faces exposed, possibly symbolising social etiquette. The fourth part shows the interaction between the aristocratic men and women, adding to the social atmosphere. The last part of the painting is a small dog and pig, which adds a sense of life and balances the picture. The overall composition is ingenious, demonstrating the ancient artist's mastery of the overall sense of the image.

In conclusion, the Travelling Lacquer Trousseau not only demonstrates the high skill of lacquer craftsmanship during the Warring States period in form, but its illustrations also reflect the ritual norms and lifestyle of the society at that time. This work expresses the rich connotation of the theme of travelling through the continuous composition of long scrolls, enabling the viewer to deeply feel the grandeur and orderliness of the travelling scenes of the nobles.

## 5. Lacquerware Craftsmanship of the Travelling Lacquer Trousseau

Lacquerware was an important vehicle for the manufacture of everyday objects in China from the pre-Qin to the two Han dynasties, and its unique waterproofing properties make it similar in function to modern plastic products, but its production process is much more complex and highly sophisticated [5]. One of the most widely used techniques is the 'zhù' technique, which demonstrates the mastery of ancient China in the selection of materials and processing techniques. The 'zhù tyre' technique was achieved by using natural ramie to weave a prototype of the object as a 'tyre' and then repeatedly applying lacquer to the outside of the tyre. Compared to existing excavated artifacts, ramie was less common during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods, and more often than not, it was used. The process uses thin slices of wood that are curled and dovetailed into the shape of the object, which is then mounted on linen cloth soaked in lacquer, and shaped by scraping blood, grey material and several lacquering processes. This process was widely used in the Spring and Autumn period due to the early maturity of the technology, while *Boehmeria nivea* (*Boehmeria nivea*) was gradually perfected in the Western Han period.

Lacquerware carcasses can be divided into three main methods: spinning wood, rolling wood, and hacking wood. Spinning wood is generally used for heavy objects such as tripods, boxes, bells, pots, and plates. Rolled wood is mainly used for straight-walled wares, including goblets and trousseaux. Hacking wood tires, on the other hand, are made by planing, chipping, plucking, and chiseling, and are used for ear cups, ear cup boxes, washbasins, franciums, daggers, cases, and so on, which are usually thicker and heavier as well [6].

The exterior of the Lacquer Trousseau with Travelling Figures is decorated in four colours: red, yellow, blue and orange. Due to the characteristics of raw lacquer, black and red were the most common colours in ancient lacquerware. The yellow, blue, and orange colours on this trousseau demonstrate the advancement of lacquer processing in the Chu region at the time, where different colours were added to the transparent lacquer to produce a wide range of colours - although the so-called 'transparent lacquer' is in fact semi-transparent, like the colour of soy sauce soup. The so-called 'transparent lacquer' is in fact translucent, like the colour of soy sauce soup. As a result, cold coloured lacquers such as pure blue and green rarely appear in traditional Chinese lacquer art, with red and black predominating, as in the case of the Zenghouyi Inner Coffin and Line Drawing from the Warring States period, and the painted lacquer coffins of the Chu Di excavated at Mawangdui in the Han dynasty.

Painted lacquer is the most important decorative process of Chu ground lacquerware, no matter black or red background. Other unearthed lacquerware from Chu, such as the tomb beasts and the lacquer screen with translucent carved seats unearthed in Jiangling, Hubei, have a large number of

multi-coloured paintings on these lacquerware, which further proves that the processing technology of raw lacquer in Chu at that time had already reached a fairly high level. In the specific painting process, lacquer decoration can be achieved through a variety of methods.

### **5.1. Lacquer Painting**

Using raw lacquer to make translucent lacquer liquid, adding various pigments and then depicting them on the lacquered objects, so that the colour and lustre are bright and not easy to come off. This is the method adopted by most of the lacquerware patterns.

### **5.2. Oil Painting**

Use oil (probably tung oil) to mix pigments and paint on lacquered objects. Due to the aging of oil, this kind of decoration is easier to fall off, but it is still a commonly used method.

### **5.3. Needle Carving Decoration**

In the lacquered objects on the carving pattern, known as 'cone painting'; some in the carving out of the lines filled with gold colours, similar to the bronze on the gold and silver wrong pattern effect.

### **5.4. Gold and Silver Foil Paste**

Made of gold or silver foil, various patterns, pasted on the lacquer surface of the objects, showing a similar effect of 'gold and silver flat off', showing the detailed and fluent patterns.

### **5.5. Pile Lacquer Decoration**

Through the thick thick pigment pile up the pattern, produce relief effect. This technique has been applied in the early Western Han Dynasty, and its prototype can be seen in the later lacquer piling process. This technique was called 'Yangshi' or 'Piling Up' in the Ming Dynasty's 'Painting and Decorating Record'. The patterns on the lacquer coffins in the Western Han Dynasty tombs found in Changsha were piled up with thick pigment, and the edges of the swirls and patterns on the jade walls were made by extruding thick pigment with special tools as hooks for the edges and swirls, which were one layer higher to show the effect of relief, and the 'knowledge of the patterns is hidden' ('knowledge' means to rise high). ('Knowledge' has the meaning of rising high) is one of the techniques of lacquer piling. This lacquer technique appeared at least in the early Western Han Dynasty, and later the prototype of lacquer piling<sup>[7]</sup>.

The cloudy air pattern is representative of this technique. Trousseau body full of raised clouds for decoration, the method is the first white leaching powder outlines the outline of the line, and then with Zhu, green, yellow lacquer hook filled with colourful clouds, its Sang decorative techniques and styles and the same period of Mawangdui No. 1 Han Tomb unearthed on the painted black lacquer coffins on the clouds of the same technique, are three-dimensional effect, rich in rich decorative wind enemy.

## **6. Conclusion**

As one of the representative artefacts of the Warring States period, the Lacquer Trousseau with Travelling Figures, with its scroll composition, is of great historical and artistic value. Through the study of this lacquer vessel, we can clarify the pioneering role of the scroll composition in the history of Chinese painting and its long-lasting influence on later generations. The compositional features of the Lacquer Trousseau with Travelling Figures demonstrate the spirit of exploration in spatial treatment and visual expression in early Chinese painting. Its scroll-like composition breaks away from the traditional single-perspective view and presents a complex narrative structure through the continuous presentation of scenes, which laid the theoretical foundation for later scroll paintings, such as *The Fugitive of the Luo God*, *The Emperor's Chariot*, and *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains*. At the same time, the use of this compositional form demonstrates the early painters' mastery of dynamic narrative and spatial expression. The Lacquer Trousseau with Travelling Figures demonstrates the mastery of lacquerware craftsmanship during the Warring States period, including its aftermath, in terms of both material and craftsmanship. Lacquerware made using the 'ramie' technique is not only superior to other materials in terms of waterproofing and durability, but also offers the possibility of a

more delicate painting surface. The combination of lacquer craftsmanship and scroll composition not only highlights the practical function of the artwork, but also ensures its long-term preservation and inheritance. In addition, the scrolling composition of the Lacquer Trousseau not only achieves visual coherence and narrative integrity, but also highlights the important role of painting as a medium for recording and conveying cultural information. Through this composition, the work is able to better express the lifestyle and cultural practices of ancient societies, and is of great historical and cultural value.

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