

Examination of “Three Conjoined Brozne Wares of Fuhao” Design Concepts

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Abstract: The Shang Dynasty “Three Conjoined Brozne Wares of Fuhao” is one of the bronze masterpieces of the middle of the Shang Dynasty, and the design of objects of the Shang Dynasty was the first peak in Chinese history and culture. This paper takes this artifact as an example, firstly analyzes the design characteristics of this artifact, then analyzes the scene of use, the group of use and the purpose of use of this artifact by combining with the corresponding literature, and accordingly analyzes the background of the era in which this artifact is located. On this basis, the design concepts and origins of the “Three Conjoined Brozne Wares of Fuhao” are explored based on the context of the era, combining the theories and methods of design, sociology and history.

Keywords: Design culture; Bronzes; Historical research

1. Introduction

The use scene, the use group, the use purpose are three key angles in the research of design evidence, taking the above angles as the starting point to analyze the cultural relics, we can clearly sort out the internal mechanism and the creation logic of the cultural relics, and then we can analyze the social background and design concepts in the era to which the cultural relics belong to. In this paper, we take the example of “Three Conjoined Brozne Wares of Fuhao” (hereinafter referred to as “Three Conjoined Brozne Wares”) unearthed in the tomb of Fuhao’s tomb in North Yinxu, Anyang City, Henan Province, China, and try to discuss the above issues.

2. Overview of Shang Dynasty Bronzes

In ancient China, bronzes were mostly used for rituals or ceremonial activities, and the development of bronzes in the Shang Dynasty reached a peak. At this time, bronzes not only had specific functions, but were also full of gorgeous decorations, the combination of which further enhanced the cultural connotation and social attributes of Shang Dynasty bronzes.

2.1. Analysis of the characteristics of Shang Dynasty bronzes

China was an early entrant into the Bronze Age, which began around 2000 BC. And during the Shang Dynasty, the Shang aristocracy was further developed due to the further strengthening of the feudal system centered on the power of the King. Due to the exceptionally expensive characteristics of bronze, it was used as a symbol of aristocratic status; and due to the further strengthening of the feudal system, the production process and decorative motifs of bronzes have also been greatly developed, and formed a more perfect system and unique style. At this time, bronzes were not only the symbol of power of social nobles, but also the representative of art and culture of the Shang Dynasty. From the aspect of material life, bronzes were not only the daily life tools of the Shang nobles, but also the ritual tools for religious ceremonies. Therefore, the design of the bronzes can give a glimpse of the social landscape of the period and the spiritual and material pursuits of the Shang aristocracy.

2.2. Shang Dynasty Bronze Design Style

According to “The Book of Rites” “The Yin people honored the gods and led the people to serve the

gods, first the ghosts and then the rituals.” Zheng's note: “It means the inner temple and the outer court.”^[1] “The Yin people” were the people who lived in the Shang dynasty; since the Shang tribe, the predecessor of the Shang dynasty, once had a prominent chief named Yin Qi, their descendants were called the Yin people. And this discourse also clarifies the focus of the Shang dynasty's rule, i.e., to bind the king's power to the will of the heavens, and to emphasize that the power of the ruling class comes from the heavens through rituals involving the nobles.

In order to reflect the spiritual symbols of kingship and divine power, Shang Dynasty bronzes mostly used exaggerated, solemn animal or human face motifs to present a mysterious and majestic caracal beauty^[2]. Therefore, its design style can be summarized as a sense of solemnity and intimidation coexist.

3. Design Analysis of Three Conjoined Brozne Wares

Brozne Wares is a large bronze cooking vessel from the Shang Dynasty of China, often used for steaming food. Its structure consists of two parts, the upper part is used to hold food, and the lower part is used to hold water for heating. It is similar to the modern steamer.

3.1. Overview of Three Conjoined Brozne Wares

The Three Conjoined Brozne Wares was unearthed in the tomb of Fuhao in Northern Yinxu, with a height of 68 centimeters, a length of 103.7 centimeters, and a total weight of 138.2 kilograms, as shown in Figure 1. It is characterized by three bronze steaming vessels placed together on top of a bronze stand, forming a one-piece structure. The surface of the artifact is beautifully decorated, including a variety of loong and geometric patterns. This artifact is also a rare composite bronze cooking vessel of the Shang Dynasty in China's current excavations^[3].



Figure 1: Three Conjoined Brozne Wares

3.2. Analysis of the scene of use

As a stove, the structure of Three Conjoined Brozne Wares allows for the simultaneous steaming of several foods. When this vessel was unearthed, there were traces of silk fabric on the surface of the case, and on the bottom there were burn marks made by smoke, so it can be seen that it was a utility vessel. In addition, there are special features in the shape and decoration of this vessel. In terms of shape, this vessel is larger than the average size of bronze, heavy, symmetrical and dignified. In terms of motifs, the three main motifs used are the Kui, Loong and zigzag motifs. Kui pattern is a kind of monster pattern similar to the Loong pattern, this monster is characterized by the body such as cattle and roar sound loud, the application of this pattern helps to set off the solemn deterrent power of the artifacts; Loong pattern was

born out of totem worship and symbolizes the mysterious power of nature, thus helping to establish a channel of communication between the priests and the gods; the zigzag pattern is a regular geometric pattern used as an auxiliary pattern to embellish the theme pattern. Combining these three main decorations, it can be analyzed that in addition to decorating the object, the decorations on the object also create a secretive, solemn and solemn atmosphere, which makes it have a shocking deterrent power and reflects the power and will of the ruler. Combined with the previous discussion of kingship and divine power in the Shang Dynasty, it can be analyzed that this artifact should be used for large-scale sacrificial activities.

3.3. Analysis of the group of use

In Chinese funeral culture, burial objects are mostly objects that were commonly used by the owner of the tomb during his or her lifetime, and these objects are buried together with the body of the tomb owner in the hope that the deceased will still be able to use them in the other world, i.e., the funeral concept of “treating the dead as one would treat the living”. Therefore, the identity of the tomb owner is closely related to the significance of the burial objects.

Three Conjoined Bronze Wares unearthed in the tomb of Fuhao in North Yinxu is the only well-preserved royal tomb of the Shang Dynasty excavated in China so far, and the tomb owner is Fuhao, she was wife of King Wuding of the Shang Dynasty. Women's Hao was the first historically documented female statesman and militarist in Chinese history, living around the middle of the Shang Dynasty in the late 13th century BCE^[4]. During the Shang dynasty, important politicians were often also priests, whose duty was to worship the heavens or ancestors by organizing sacrificial ceremonies^[1].

As a user of Three Conjoined Bronze Wares, that is, a group of aristocrats who held the ruling power in the Shang dynasty, the artifacts used by Fuhao, in addition to their practical value, should also have the function of concretizing and presenting the king's power and divine power, and the use of such artifacts further strengthened the self-identity of the rulers of the Shang dynasty.

3.4. Analysis of the purpose of use

Existing Shang dynasty literature, the record of sacrifices accounted for a large part of it, which shows the importance it attached to sacrifices^[5]. And this idea is also present in the canon: “The major events of the country lie in War and Military service.” So, Three Conjoined Bronze Wares as a utility vessel for the Shang nobility, assumed both the duties of a cooking vessel and a sacrificial vessel. As a cooking vessel, its high cost and exquisite craftsmanship highlight the power of the Shang nobles as the ruling class; while as a sacrificial vessel, it emphasizes the ability of the nobles to interpret the will of the heavens, i.e., the power of the ruling class was granted by the heavens. Therefore, the purpose of the use of this artifact is to maintain and strengthen the foundation of the Shang aristocracy's royal rule.

4. Examination of the Design Ideas for Three Conjoined Bronze Wares

As a combination of material life and spiritual pursuit, the design of artifacts reflects the social background and design concepts of the era in which they were created. Therefore, the design of artifacts from the two perspectives mentioned above can clearly sort out the design concepts and sources of Three Conjoined Bronze Wares.

4.1. Analysis of the social context

The low level of productivity in Shang society led to a relative lack of dietary resources, and the acquisition of food was a priority for individual survival. Therefore, the state of food became a yardstick for measuring the stability of the country in this era. In the literature of the Shang Dynasty, there are also many records on agricultural production, such as “Book of Documents” recorded in the ruling attitude of one of the kings of the Shang dynasty, Pangan, who attached importance to agricultural production; and a large number of unearthed oracle bones of the Shang Dynasty on the record of agriculture also corroborate this viewpoint^[6]. The occurrence of natural disasters often causes famine, and the turmoil caused by famine affects the stability of kingship. It can be seen that in the Shang Dynasty, there was a clear causal link between natural disasters and the stability of kingship, and the pivot of which was diet.

On the other hand, the Shang people's knowledge of natural disasters was still in a relatively shallow state, and their ability to transform nature due to their poor productivity level was also quite limited, so

their agricultural production would be affected by the natural environment to a large extent, which led the Shang people to associate natural disasters with the anger of the gods. For example, the oracle bone inscriptions of the Shang Dynasty record “Emperor descending drought” and so on ^[1]. The word “Emperor” here refers to the god who has power over nature. Therefore, whenever a natural disaster occurred, the Shang people would think that they had offended the gods, so they sought to eliminate the disaster by offering sacrifices, which usually consisted of food such as grains, livestock, and wine, and the way these foods were handled was also the key to the ritual. It is documented that the scent and odor of the sacrifices are more important than any other element in the rituals, and that the participants in the rituals use the smell of food offered to attract the gods and communicate with them through the scents ^[5].

In summary, it can be seen that the food and politics of the Shang Dynasty were also causally linked, and the politics of the Shang Dynasty were closely linked to sacrificial activities, so Three Conjoined Bronze Wares as a steaming vessel, also assumed the role of a sacrificial vessel, because compared to other cooking vessels, the steaming vessel could produce more odors, so that it could better fulfill the core of the ritual, that is, to communicate with the gods through the odors and express the prayer of the participants in the ritual. So, by organizing rituals, the rulers not only expected to be blessed by the gods, but also took advantage of the people's worship and reverence for ghosts and gods to integrate the divine power into the king's power, so as to safeguard their own authority and dominance. Therefore, the sacrifices offered to the gods in the rituals actually became a kind of “medium” for the Shang rulers to maintain the rule of the king, and Three Conjoined Bronze Wares used to process the sacrifices was also given a special meaning, that is, a common symbol of the rule of power and the power of the gods.

4.2. Design Concept Analysis

In summary, it can be seen that in the Shang Dynasty people's ideology, the occurrence of calamities was the intention of the gods to send calamities to the earth, but this kind of calamities can be eliminated through sacrifices. Then, as an important part of the sacrificial vessels, Three Conjoined Bronze Wares it also assumed extraordinary significance, and these meanings are mainly reflected in three aspects, namely, the symbol of the real world's kingship, the efficacy of communicating with the gods, and the rendering of the unity of gods and kingship.

First of all, it is a symbol of royal power. Compared with simple and cheap pottery, the high price of bronze ware can only be owned by a few people who own most of the resources, that is, scarcity makes things valuable, so it can be used as a symbol of the special status of the nobility. The larger size of the triptych bronze ware compared to ordinary bronze ware highlights this point. That is to say, compared with the bronze ware used by ordinary nobles, the utensils used by the royal family are more expensive and rare. The size of the triptych bronze ware is much larger than the ordinary bronze ware of the nobles, which emphasizes the fact that the utensils used by royal members are much more expensive and rare.

In terms of the efficacy of communicating with gods, the merchants believed that Loong and other legendary creatures have the role of helping people communicate with gods, so their forms into decorative inscriptions and bronzes on top of the decorative role at the same time also to achieve the role of the sacrificial vessels in the minds of the Shang Dynasty, that is, to assist mankind in communicating with the gods. Three Conjoined Bronze Wares is decorated with Loong and Kui, which confirms this idea of the people lived in Shang Dynasty.

After accomplishing the presentation of the king's power and the achievement of “practical efficacy,” the Shang people hoped to use this object to link the actual material life with the elusive power of the gods, thus establishing a channel between the king's power and the gods' power. Therefore, Three Conjoined Bronze Wares is designed as a combination of sacrificial vessels and cooking vessels, which on the one hand is the ruler's daily food utensils, and on the other hand is the sacred sacrificial vessels communicating with the gods, and the combination of these two characteristics gives a special meaning to this kind of utensils, and it also lends sanctity to the groups that use it.

In conclusion, the design concept of Three Conjoined Bronze Wares is to give special meaning to the vessel by combining its practicality with people's spiritual needs, so that it can be used as a tool for reinforcing the user's special status symbols, thus establishing and stabilizing the dominance of the user of this kind of artifacts in the Shang society.

5. Conclusion

The role of Three Conjoined Bronze Wares in the Shang Dynasty is mainly reflected in the ritual

activities, that is, as a tool in the ritual activities to achieve the purpose of sacrifice, that is, in exchange for the protection of the gods, so its design focus also centered on this. Whether it is the structural shape of the artifacts, or the surface patterns and ornaments, they all focus on reflecting the design idea of the artifacts, i.e., to strengthen the identity and social class attributes of the users of the artifacts through the expression of the mysterious, majestic, and solemn style of the overall style. Therefore, the formation of this kind of design concepts, is in the social and political system, religious spirit, production life and other obvious and hidden factors under the combined effect of derivation. Therefore, the design evidence of the artifacts can not be limited to the craft and art perspective, but need to expand the field of research, from the artifacts belong to the era of the social background and the production of life and other perspectives of the design evidence analysis, in order to more clearly sort out the artifacts of the design concepts and their development of the source.

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