

A Interventional Study of the Carving Art of the Hitching Post Head in Modern Sculpture

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Abstract: Chinese folk art is the embodiment of folkways in China. With the further deepening of people's ideology, the academic study of folk culture gradually gets away from the previous concept in recent decades, while folk culture has been included in the academic discussion and studied by scholars in depth. The hitching post art carving on the north of Wei River Basin is a representative of folk art. Through in-depth digging and organizing of a large number of documentary materials and historical relics, the hitching post head carving art has become one of the northern folk carving art forms that cannot be ignored in the history of ancient Chinese sculpture. From the study of the artistic expression form of the hitching post head, we see the charm of such folk art form, of which academic value does not only stay in the digging of cultural relics and history, but also has a profound influence on the modern folk carving art.

Keywords: Hitching post; Folk art; On the north of Wei River Basin; Stone carving art; Modern sculpture; Sculpture

1. Definition and Origin of Hitching Post

1.1 Definition of hitching post

The hitching post is a folk carving art unique to the ancient northern China, which is used for hitching horses outside buildings. According to the statistics of the existing hitching posts, most of them are made of "stone", and only a few are wood, metal, etc. Most of the existing hitching posts belong to the folk carving art to some extent, but their function extends to a symbol of stabilizing the household and praying for good fortune other than hitching horses. In June 1982, during a survey of folk art history, the staff of the Shaanxi Provincial Art Museum discovered a large number of stone posts in front of many shops, villages and houses on the south of Wei River Basin. These peculiarly shaped and richly carved stone posts with unique artistic charm are generally between 1.8 and 2.5 meters in height and 0.25 meters in width, with round carved statues at their heads and hollow stone holes for tying draught animals, combining practical and decorative functions, which are called "hitching posts".

1.2 Origins

From historical pictorial records, the artistic history of the hitching posts and post heads have artistic expression forms of different periods in the artistic history development. From the available pictorial materials, it is found that the earliest record of a hitching post is Han Gan's "A picture of Night-Shining White" from the Tang Dynasty, which depicts the image of Emperor Xuanzong's beloved horse struggling to free itself from the hitching post. This is the first record of a hitching post in history. Judging from the height of the horse, it can be presumed that the hitching post should be about 3 meters in height. This post does not have the head carving, so instead of calling it a "post", it's more like a hitching column



Fig. 1 Tang - Han Gan's "A Picture of Night-Shining White" Fig.

2 Song - "A Scroll of a Hundred Horses"

The next record of hitching posts is the Song Dynasty's "A Scroll of a Hundred Horses", which depicts 13 vertical posts about two meters in height, with cylindrical post bodies, tied to horses hitched by cross-shaped wooden posts punched in the hitching post. The post heads are in the shape of wooden clubs and the posts are wooden. The hitching posts of the period have changed slightly

compared to those of the Tang dynasty: those of the Tang dynasty were made of square stone with a height of about three meters and a flat top, while those of the Song dynasty were mostly cylindrical. Compared to the art form of the later hitching post, their lines are simpler and more concise, and there is barely ornamentation or post head carving, which is also the only formal feature of the hitching post in the Tang and Song dynasties that can be derived from the available documentary sources. In the Yuan dynasty later, the hitching post depicted in Ren Renfa's "Feeding Horses" became complex, with a six-pronged post body with a slotted head, and the post head was decorated with a combined figure of upturned lotus and mallet-shaped clouds. The material was determined to be stone, with a column body of about 2.5 meters in height, and the initial ornamental carving on the hitching post head. However, functionality was not the first to be considered on the hitching posts of this period, because no holes were punched on the posts. However, the artistic characteristics of the hitching post head carving have already appeared in this period, because the hitching post in Yuan Dynasty has generally begun to consider the artistry of hitching post head carving, where most of the post heads were of simple auspicious patterns, mainly auspicious clouds and plants, and also a very few of animals and figures. The hitching post of this period not only maintained the simple outline of that in the Tang and Song dynasties, but also gradually developed and transformed into the form of carving of characters, animals and other ornaments at the post head, which laid a solid foundation for the development of the art of hitching post head carving in the Ming and Qing dynasties, and also played a role in carrying on the development of the art of hitching post head carving in general afterwards. The Ming and Qing dynasties were the peak of the development of the hitching post, when pedestals and some decorative patterns were added to the post body, and the post head part had formed the features we see now, such as figures, animals, and the combination of figures and animals, as well as some geometric and plant images. In the late Qing Dynasty, the tradition was continued in the image, but also with innovations. The hitching posts of this period combined with images of unique species to create new forms, such as the hitching posts in the form of ancient coins, with a simple integral shape tactfully combined with the shape of ancient coins. Nowadays, horses have gradually lost their importance in people's lives, which has led to the gradual



fading of hitching post in the later period. Therefore, the hitching posts we can still see now are the wealth left to us by the ancients

Fig. 3 Hitching post heads of the Ming and Qing dynasties Fig. 4 Hitching post head of the late Qing dynasty Fig. 5 Collection of Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts

2. The Art of Hitching Post Head Carving

2.1 Structural characteristics of the hitching post shape

The hitching posts in the area on the north of Wei River Basin were generally carved from a single piece of stone and was mostly a square column with the lower end buried in the soil. The post is divided into four parts from top to bottom, that are, the post head, the post neck, the post body and the post root. The post head is generally a round carved statue, with rich shapes and contents. The post neck is the connecting part between the post head and the post body, and is also the pedestal to support the statue of the post head. The pedestals are usually round on the top and square on the bottom, and have corresponding patterns carved into the surface, such as lotus petals, deer, horses, ancient stories, clouds and water and other auspicious patterns. The post is mostly in the shape of a tetragonal post, with a few in the shape of an octagon post, which is basically symmetrical and regular in shape. The tetragonal post is carved with banded relief patterns, and very few are carved with words. See Fig. 5 below.

2.2 Artistic Expression Form of Post Head Carving

2.2.1 Artistic features of animal patterns in post head carving

The animal patterns are mainly lions, monkeys, horses and oxen. Animal patterns are the most on hitching posts found so far, with the lion being the most commonly seen. The stone lion occupies an important part in the hitching post sculpture. The stone lions were placed in palaces, temples and folk houses, or on the sides of gates, representing majesty and solemnity in Chinese cultural history. The stone lion is a representative symbol of ancient Chinese history and culture, as well as a representative of the good fortune and blessings prayed for by numerous Chinese people.

2.2.2 Artistic features of figure patterns in post head carving

The figure patterns are the most spectacular and most valuable to study among the hitching post carvings. The figures of warriors, musicians, shepherds, children, and mythological figures in different ages, occupations, and expressions are presented. Among the many figures, it is possible to identify minority such as the Manchu nationality, the Hui nationality and the Mongolian minority by their facial features, by judging from faces, costumes and hand-held tools, and a large number of ethnic figures that look like those of Central and West Asia are also found. Among the figures, some Buddha statues, mythological figures and heroic figures are symbols of civil society praying for happiness and well-being, as well as for good fortune. These figures often hold Ruyi, fairy peaches, gourds

or treasure vases. As in Fig. 7, A Maid Holding a Vase by a Pitching Post, is a Qing Dynasty bluestone carving in which the author depicts a maid figure with a high bun, long hair on the shoulders, smiling and blinking, wearing earrings, holding a vase with both hands and sitting cross-legged with her head slightly tilted. In terms of artistic expression, the figure is dynamic and stretched with rich facial expressions, and we can sense the maid's posture of quietly waiting with a smile. The space between the vase and the figure is just the hole used for tying the horse's reins, which exists in the whole stature without a sense of rigidity. The vase is pronounced as the same as "Safe" in Chinese, so holding the bottle means checking in with families for safety, implying people's prayers for happiness and a better life.



Fig. 6 Post head - stone lion Collection of Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts



Fig. 7 Post head - figure Collection of Guanzhong Folk Art Museum

2.2.3 Artistic features of the combined forms of figures and animals in post head carvings

Among the combined forms of figures and animals, there are human and lion, horse, kylin, elephant, etc., among which the combination of human and lion is the most commonly seen, usually with the human harnessing the lion or standing next to the lion. Because of the limited area of the post head, the human figure is generally dominated, while the lion shows only the head and upper body. The two front feet and chest of the lion are hollowed out into holes for hitching. The stone lion's twisted body is highlighted, while the rider is bent over, looking like rushing forward. The facial expressions of the figures and their clothes are carved in great detail, and so are the objects held in hands. The stone carving as a whole makes comprehensive use of circular carving, relief carving and line carving techniques, which have strong local characteristics. The human-harnessing-lion figures can be traced back to ancient Chinese paintings, and there is an inherent relationship in appearance between the human-harnessing-lion figures in the hitching post and the human-harnessing-animal graphics in early Liangzhu culture. It is likely that the prevalence of this style of stone carving in the Guanzhong region was related to the heyday of the Qing dynasty.

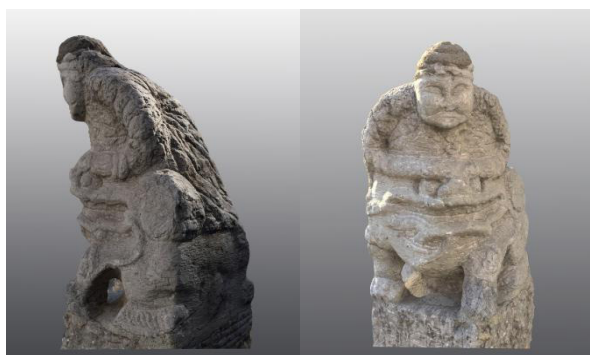


Fig. 8 Post head - figures and animals Collection of Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts

As shown in the right side of Fig. 8, the front of the lion is finely carved, and the two front legs of the lion are parallel to the front of the stone post. The figure at the post head is just in the right size, without exceeding the scope of the hitching post. The back of the lion is shown on the left in Fig. 8. The specific form is shaped without breaking the square orientation of the post itself, and the simplified treatment does not destroy the overall trend. Moreover, from some angle of views, the central axis is diagonal, with the entire body expanding to the sides, while from others angle of views, the stature takes the diagonal as the front side and expanding backwards in the form of a cube. The space between the legs of the lion is cleverly used as a place for the hitching rope.

2.2.4 Artistic features of other forms in post head carving

In addition to these three common forms, there are also images of plants, geometric images, pavilions and ancient coins. The plants are mainly peaches and lotus buds, and the geometric images are mainly ellipsoidal, spherical and polyhedral. The pavilion and ancient coins are scaled down and generalized according to the original images, which are new shapes that appeared after the late Qing Dynasty. The peach is an important image of folk auspicious culture and a symbol of longevity, such as the immortal peach and the longevity peach. Given longevity peaches to the elderly means to wish them a long and healthy life. As shown in Figure 9, the ancient money hitching post is carved in bluestone into a rectangular body. The overall shape is simple, and is not divided into post head, post neck, post body, etc., but there is only an ancient coin stature carved on the post head without any decoration. The coin is engraved

with “Xianfeng Ninth Years” with a square hole chiseled in the center for hitching, implying rich and complete and also meaning that people should be sophisticated in the outside and Integrity in the inside at the same time.

3. Influence of Sculptural Manifestation Pattern of the Post Head on Modern Sculpture

3.1 Influence of the pitching post head art on modern carving art

The sculpture of the hitching post head focuses on the overall images and tends to simplify it, highlighting the thoughts and feelings that need to be expressed, while deleting unnecessary details, which is an indispensable creation technique in modern sculptural creation. From the existing sculptures of the hitching post head, it can be seen that they are vivid in shape and refined in carving, and all of them are in the form of columns. Some of the post head carvings even show the unity of nature and human, not leaving too many traces of artificial carving but more of works by the nature. The expressions of the figures in the post head carvings are vivid, and the line carving are influenced by Chinese painting, with smooth lines and a sense of reality. Although the sculptures at the post head are also circular carving on posts, they attach great importance to the carving of the front, and the back is outlined with simple lines, which seem to be impalpable but meaningful. The animals on the post head carvings are all spiritual beasts from folklore, and the folk artisans gave these animals an implied meaning of kindness as well as some kind of divine position. All the animals represented in the hitching post art are known as divine creatures in folklore, and their postures are mostly depicted in anthropomorphic and exaggerated means.

(1) Beauty in proportional structure. Song Yu from the Warring States period once said, “It will be too long if increase a little, and too short if decrease a little.” The hitching post head is presented in circular carving, except for some round and oval post heads. The animals and figures are created on the basis of the square stone column, focusing on the front and sides, while the back keeps the original overall shape. The overall body of the post highlights the post head, maintaining the integrity of the sculpture. The proportional structure of the hitching post generally has four parts, that are, the post head, the post neck, the post body, and the post root, which are arranged in natural and reasonable proportions. The relief carving works on the post body are often in the form of lotus-scrolled-with-grass patterns, giving people a comfortable and relaxed feeling. The post neck is also decorated with drum stools and lotus petals, presented in a flat and round shape. The layout of the proportional structure of hitching post on the north of Wei River Basin is as perfect and natural as the that of the Ionic columns of the ancient Roman period. In the creation of today’s sculpture, the traditional design language forms are still valued.

(2) Beauty of symmetry. Everything in the world basically follows the principle of symmetry. Most of the hitching posts are square stone columns, which, when viewed from a distance, are basically symmetrical from top to bottom and left to right. The circular carvings carved at the post head are also carved on the diagonal of a square, the relief carvings on the post neck are symmetrically presented, and the post body is even more symmetrically for being a column. The beauty of symmetry is also one of the aesthetic rules in modern artistic creation.

(3) Beauty of contrast. The beauty of contrast between the real and the imaginary is a distinctive feature of the hitching post, mainly in the contrast between the meticulous carving of the post head and the sketchy treatment of the post body, which gives a sense of relaxation in terms of aesthetics. Most of the sculptures on the post head and post neck are presented in the form of relief carving, and the contrast between the real and the imaginary is basically used in the treatment of lines, which is beautiful. The beauty of contrast is also a more important part of modern art creation.

(4) Beauty of the nature. The art of hitching post head carving is folkloric, without too many constraints, so it is free in carving creation and pursues natural unity in the carving technique. Auguste Rodin once said, “When sculpting, do not think in terms of the plane surface, but in terms of the high convex surface”, which is especially important for every sculptor. Sculpture is a three-dimensional existence, if our eyes do not find its sense of space, then the sculpture we create will be flat. The drawing of the work, on the other hand, is about using lines to reflect the presence of contours and using surfaces to present the stereoscopic appearance. In the carving of the post head, the artisans simply highlighted the volume of space in the overall sculpture and did not go overboard with the treatment of lines, focusing on the beauty of nature. The beauty of nature is also what many sculptors pursued throughout their lives.

4. Conclusions

Art is a way to express a state of mind. When expressing such a state of mind, we must have the most basic knowledge system and practice our hands in order to make our artwork “alive”. Be patient and never aspire to “inspiration”, because without the accumulation of quantity, there will be no leap in quality. Artists with techniques do not necessarily create good works without having ideas. Whoever just imitate nature and copy nature is only craftsman, but not qualified to be called an artist. We shall not pursue “like” or “exactly is” when presenting every piece of work, for such works will only be copies of nature and lifeless.

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