

Polychrome Lacquer Painting with Gold Tracing and Inlay Techniques of Qing Dynasty Case Research

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The art of polychrome lacquer painting with gold tracing and inlay represents the culmination of traditional Chinese lacquer craftsmanship. It integrates four core techniques—lacquer application, polychrome painting, gold tracing, and inlay—embodying the pinnacle of ancient artisan ingenuity. This paper begins by outlining the historical origins, technical characteristics, and cultural significance of this art form. Subsequently, using a Qing Dynasty “Hanging Screen Inlaid with Boxwood and Coral Depicting the Scene of Sudhana Paying Homage to Guanyin, with Polychrome Lacquer Painting and Gold Tracing” as a case study, it offers an in-depth analysis of its craftsmanship, visual elements, thematic narrative, and cultural connotations. The study aims to unveil its artistic value and contemporary relevance as a form of “living cultural heritage.”

Keywords: lacquer, polychrome painting, gold tracing, inlay, *Baibao Qian* (Hundred-Treasure Inlay), arts and crafts

I. Introduction

The art of polychrome lacquer painting with gold tracing and inlay is the crystallization of millennia of development in Chinese lacquerware. Its exquisite techniques, complex procedures, and profound symbolism render it a dazzling gem within the treasury of Eastern art.

(A) The Epitome of Chinese Lacquer Art

This art form represents a time-honored synthesis of techniques, integrating four core practices: lacquer application (with a 7,000-year history), polychrome painting (matured during the Warring States period), gold tracing (evolved from the gold and silver *pingtuo* technique of the Tang Dynasty), and inlay (from the mother-of-pearl inlay of the Shang and Zhou Dynasties to the *Baibao Qian* or ‘Hundred-Treasure Inlay’ of the Ming and Qing Dynasties). By the Ming and Qing periods, this craftsmanship reached its zenith, becoming a core technique of the imperial workshops, reserved exclusively for the nobility. For instance, a Qianlong-era Zitan wood screen inlaid with various treasures, featuring landscapes and figures depicted using

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mother-of-pearl, jade, and agate, accentuated with gold lacquer outlines, exemplifies this supreme standard and embodies imperial grandeur.

(B) A World-Class Technical and Artistic Marvel

This craft signifies composite technical expertise that was ahead of its time. It required precise mastery over materials: controlling the drying time of raw lacquer (highly sensitive to humidity and temperature), blending pigments with lacquer to prevent oxidation and discoloration, gauging the exact ‘touch-dry’ stage of the gold-sized adhesive crucial for successful gold leaf application, and fitting heterogenous materials (such as mother-of-pearl sheets as thin as 0.1mm) for inlay. The process is remarkably labor-intensive; a single piece typically undergoes over a hundred steps—including body-making, cloth backing, applying mortar paste, lacquer application, design, painting, gold tracing, inlaying, final lacquer coating, polishing, and burnishing—often taking months or even years to complete.

(C) A Living Vessel of Cultural DNA

Simultaneously, this art form serves as a material expression of ritual systems and philosophical ideas. Its function as ritual ware is consistent, from Warring States painted lacquer *dou* pedestals with gold-traced cloud patterns reflecting “revering heaven and emulating ancestors,” to Qing Dynasty thrones inlaid with lapis lazuli dragon motifs symbolizing the divine mandate of imperial authority. Furthermore, the warm, subtle texture of lacquer and the restrained use of gold align with Daoist aesthetic principles of “tranquility” and “following the way of nature.” Its repertoire of patterns constitutes an encyclopedia of folk auspicious symbols, bearing rich cultural codes (see Table 1).

Table 1

Common Motifs in Polychrome Lacquer Painting with Gold Tracing and Inlay and Their Symbolic Meanings

Motif Theme	Inlay Materials	Symbolic Meaning
Dragon and Phoenix	Gold leaf, mother-of-pearl scales	Power and Auspiciousness
Five Bats Around Longevity	White jade bats surrounding red agate longevity character	Blessings, Longevity, and Peace
Lotus and Fish (Annual Abundance)	Lapis lazuli lotus, mother-of-pearl fish	Prosperity and Proliferation

(D) An Icon of Eastern Civilization in Cross-Cultural Dialogue

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, such lacquerware was extensively exported to Europe via maritime trade routes, acting as a medium for cultural exchange. For example, the black lacquer cabinets with gold tracing and inlay housed in the Palace of Versailles significantly influenced the Rococo style’s imitation of Oriental designs. Similarly, a Qianlong *Baibao Qian* screen in the British Museum is acclaimed by scholars as a “textbook example of Eastern inlay art.”

To concretely demonstrate the essence of this craft, the following section provides a detailed case study of a Qing Dynasty “Hanging Screen Inlaid with Boxwood and Coral Depicting the Scene of Sudhana Paying Homage to Guanyin, with Polychrome Lacquer Painting and Gold Tracing” (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Hanging Screen Inlaid with Boxwood and Coral Depicting Sudhana Paying Homage to Guanyin, with Polychrome Lacquer Painting and Gold Tracing Note: Author Collection.

II. Case Study: Craftsmanship and Aesthetics of the Sudhana Paying Homage to Guanyin Hanging Screen

This hanging screen is a quintessential example of the Ming-Qing *Baibao Qian* technique, integrating lacquer application, polychrome painting, gold tracing, and hard inlay, making it a living specimen of traditional craftsmanship.

(A) Technical Craftsmanship: Composite Application of the Lacquer System

- **Lacquer Base: The Serene ‘Black Ground’** The artwork employs a profound, dark black background, a classic hue in lacquerware where ‘mysterious black’ (*xuan*) symbolizes the colors of heaven and earth, representing solemnity and eternity. Its preparation is meticulous:

Body Construction: Presumably using a wooden core (favored for its lightness and workability), the surface is backed with cloth (grass linen), coated with mortar paste (raw lacquer mixed with tile ash), and repeatedly polished to achieve extreme smoothness.

Lacquer Application: Multiple layers of processed and formulated ripe lacquer are applied. Each layer must dry under specific conditions (approx. 25 °C, 80% humidity) to ensure a tough, glossy film. The mirror-like reflection is characteristic of a high-quality lacquer finish.

Surface Refinement: The final layer uses a ‘burnishing lacquer’ mixed with tung oil. After wet sanding with fine grit, the surface is burnished by hand or with deer skin to achieve a jade-like luster.

- **Polychrome Painting: The ‘Living Color’ Expression of Mineral Pigments** Colored elements like landscapes, lotuses, and cloud patterns are painted using natural mineral or plant pigments (e.g., azurite, malachite, cinnabar, gamboge) mixed into the lacquer, ensuring color stability and durability.

Landscapes: Azurite and malachite are used for layered washes to create spatial depth via the “receding perspective” method. Mountain contours are outlined with gold powder (gold tracing), enhancing three-dimensionality and a sacred aura.

Lotus Flowers: Petals are painted with cinnabar and titanium white, edged with light pink washes; the pistils are dotted with gamboge, mimicking natural gradients. Lotus leaves use malachite mixed with ink, with veins delicately outlined in gold powder.

Figural Attire: The robes of Guanyin and Sudhana appear orange (possibly from cinnabar and orpiment). Faces are primed with shell white, and features are painted using a ‘gradient wash’ technique, rendering soft and benevolent expressions.

- **Inlay: The ‘Finishing Touch’ of Three-Dimensional Decoration** The main figures and some elements employ ‘raised inlay’ (hard inlay). Grooves matching the shape of the inlay pieces are carved into the lacquer surface. Pre-fashioned components are then embedded, seams filled with lacquer paste, and the area polished flush or slightly raised relative to the ground.

Figural Materials: The bodies of Guanyin and Sudhana are carved from boxwood (valued for its fine grain suitable for carving), surfaced with a lacquer coating to enhance texture.

Lotus Materials: The petals’ edges shimmer with iridescent colors, suggesting inlaid thin mother-of-pearl flakes, utilizing their property of ‘changing color with light.’

Other Embellishments: The flying crane in the upper left likely uses coral or agate inlay, with wing feathers bordered in gold powder, creating a dynamic effect.

(B) Visual Elements: Symbolic Composition of Traditional Narrative

The screen’s composition adheres to the traditional principle of ‘central focus with layered extension,’ forming a triple narrative space: sacred-natural-humanistic.

- **Central Subject: Guanyin and Sudhana** Guanyin stands centrally on a lotus throne symbolizing ‘emerging unstained from the mud.’ Dressed in celestial robes with a dignified posture, she is flanked by the reverently bowing Sudhana and Dragon Maiden, vividly portraying a ‘pilgrimage’ scene. Guanyin’s crown is outlined in gold and inlaid with coral; Sudhana’s necklace is depicted with silver powder; and the drapery carving exhibits clear, finely executed layers.

- **Natural Elements: Landscape and Creatures** The background features layered mountains and misty clouds (outlined with white powder and gold), evoking an ethereal, ‘cloud-shrouded’ immortal realm. Water ripples at the mountain base are rendered with silver powder, echoing the lotus throne. Bamboo on the right

(painted with malachite base and gold-veining) symbolizes the literati ideals of ‘resilience’ and ‘purity.’ The crane flying towards Guanyin on the left implies ‘longevity’ and ‘immortal connection.’

- **Textual Elements: The Literati Touch of ‘Inscription’** The upper left corner bears an inscription in regular script with gold tracing: “雲深不知處，妙相觀世音” (“In clouds deep, unknown place; Miraculous Aspect Guanyin”).

“In clouds deep, unknown place” alludes to a Tang Dynasty poem by Jia Dao, suggesting Guanyin’s dwelling in a transcendent realm, adding a mystical flavor.

“Miraculous Aspect Guanyin” clarifies the theme, merging natural scenery with religious belief, reflecting the traditional aesthetic pursuit of ‘integrating poetry and painting.’

(C) Thematic Narrative: The Triple Connotation of ‘Compassion–Purity–Auspiciousness’

Through the interplay of figures, nature, and text, the screen conveys core aspects of traditional Chinese spiritual pursuit.

- **Religious Connotation: Guanyin’s ‘Compassion’** Guanyin’s dignified posture, serene expression, and lotus throne visually represent ‘great mercy and compassion.’ Sudhana’s devout homage reflects the common folk psychology of ‘seeking blessings and praying for safety.’

- **Natural Connotation: The Purity of ‘In Clouds Deep, Unknown Place’** The celestial imagery composed of landscape and mist integrates the Daoist ideal of ‘tranquility and non-action.’ Elements like bamboo and lotus further reinforce the pristine, detached natural 意境, aligning with the literati’s taste for ‘expressing emotions through landscape.’

- **Auspicious Connotation: Symbolic Overlay of Multiple Elements** The lotus signifies ‘purity’ and ‘annual surplus,’ the crane symbolizes ‘longevity,’ bamboo represents ‘bamboo reports peace,’ while the gold powder conveys both ‘prosperity’ and ‘sacredness,’ collectively constructing an auspicious world filled with positive symbolism.

(D) Cultural Connotations: ‘Living Heritage’ of Traditional Craft

This screen embodies the materialization of the creative philosophies of ‘beauty in materials and excellence in craftsmanship’ and the aesthetic tradition of ‘integrating poetry and painting.’

- **Beauty in Materials and Excellence in Craftsmanship:** The use of natural materials like lacquer, boxwood, and mother-of-pearl reflects the concept of ‘harmony between human and nature.’ The graded washes of painting, precise gold tracing, and seamless inlay all manifest the artisan spirit of ‘skill approaching the Dao.’

- **Integration of Poetry and Painting:** The inscribed poem complements the image, continuing the tradition of literati painting.

- **Fusion of Religion and Folklore:** The coexistence of the Guanyin image with folk auspicious symbols (lotus, crane, bamboo) reflects the sinicization and secularization of Buddhism in China, catering to the populace’s spiritual needs for peace and good fortune.

III. Conclusion: The Screen's Artistic Value and Implications

This hanging screen epitomizes the Lacquerware, Polychrome painting with Gold tracing, and Inlay techniques. Through its symbolic visual language, hierarchical spatial composition, and harmonious color scheme (black, polychrome, gold), it successfully interprets the themes of ‘compassion, purity, and auspiciousness.’ It not only faithfully inherits the Ming-Qing *Baibao Qian* craft but also demonstrates contemporary innovation in its color and composition.

From a collection perspective, its technical complexity, material rarity (boxwood, mother-of-pearl, coral), and profound cultural connotations endow it with significant artistic and collector's value. Viewed through the lens of cultural heritage, it serves as both a carrier of traditional ‘creation philosophy’ and a three-dimensional representation of the Chinese nation's aesthetic tastes and spiritual pursuits.

Concluding Remarks: A Three-Dimensional Poem of Eastern Aesthetics

This screen can be regarded as a paragon where the depth of lacquer, the brilliance of gold tracing, and the spirit of wood and stone converge—a model fusion of ‘technique, art, and philosophy.’ Within the modern context, only by striking a balance between adhering to the core principles of ancient methods (e.g., natural materials, handcrafting) and encouraging contemporary expression (e.g., thematic innovation, sustainable material use) can this ‘faith hanging on the wall’ continue to radiate its timeless artistic charm.

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