

A Study on Honeysuckle Pattern in Yungang Grottoes From the Perspective of Semiotics

REN Nannan

Shanxi Datong University, Datong, China

Buddhism was introduced to China during the Han Dynasty and took root in China, integrating with local culture. The classic pattern of honeysuckle in Buddhism, as a type of border decoration, was also introduced to China with the eastward advancement of Buddhism. This article aims to conduct a semiotic study on the patterns of honeysuckle patterns in the Yungang Grottoes. Firstly, the concept of honeysuckle patterns was explained, and typical honeysuckle patterns that appeared in the Yungang Grottoes were systematically organized and classified. Then, with the help of semiotic principles, the production of symbols for honeysuckle patterns in the Yungang Grottoes was analyzed from a semiotic perspective. Based on this, the semiotic characteristics of honeysuckle patterns in the Yungang Grottoes and their signifier and referent systems were analyzed in depth. Finally, the shape and connotation of honeysuckle patterns in their evolution and development were summarized. The honeysuckle pattern occupies an important position in the history of traditional patterns in China, so the honeysuckle pattern in Yungang Grottoes, as a decorative theme, not only has important research significance, but its semiotic value is also worth exploring and studying.

Keywords: Yungang Grottoes, honeysuckle pattern, semiotics, Buddhism

Overview of Honeysuckle Pattern

Introduction to Honeysuckle Pattern

Lonicera japonica is a vine plant, also known as honeysuckle. Because it does not wither during winter, it is named “*Lonicera japonica*”. Honeysuckle pattern is a plant decorative pattern that evolved from the style of honeysuckle. It began to appear in the late Eastern Han Dynasty and was introduced to China through the West. It was popular during the Wei, Jin, Southern, and Northern Dynasties, and later evolved into complex rolled grass patterns during the Sui and Tang Dynasties. Most of the time, the honeysuckle pattern is used as a border decoration, often combined with lotus patterns, animal patterns, bead patterns, etc. It can be seen in large grottoes, temples, tombs, murals, as well as in small object decorations and knitted patterns. The emergence and evolution of honeysuckle patterns provide a new reference style for the application of curved structures, opening up the era of decorative themes centered around plant patterns.

As a foreign decorative pattern, the origin of honeysuckle patterns is still uncertain. Its evolution process is long, with various patterns and forms, but regardless of the style, it is related to Buddhism to a certain extent. The pattern of continuous rotation of honeysuckle patterns is consistent with the teachings of “reincarnation” and “eternal life” in Indian Buddhism, and its rise in China is closely related to the eastward spread of Indian

Buddhism. As an exotic decorative pattern, honeysuckle patterns were not simply imitated and copied after entering China. Instead, they integrated the essence of China's national culture and popular aesthetic ideals, developing into decorative patterns with Chinese charm, reflecting the localization and evolution of foreign patterns on the Silk Road.

The Pattern Characteristics of Honeysuckle Patterns in Yungang Grottoes

Introduction to Yungang Grottoes

The Southern and Northern Dynasties period was an era of social unrest and frequent wars. In such a special social environment, Buddhism spread from India to China and rapidly developed during this period. At that time, rulers intentionally advocated Buddhism in order to stabilize their rule and combined it with Confucianism, becoming the most influential religion at that time. Emperor Wencheng's restoration of the law prompted the excavation of the Yungang Grottoes.

The Yungang Grottoes, also known as Lingyan Yan Temple, were excavated over 400 years ago and are now located on Wuzhou Mountain, 15 kilometers west of the old city of Datong, Shanxi. The grottoes are built along the mountain, with 254 caves of various sizes and numbers. Nearly 6,000 Buddhist statues have been preserved, and countless patterns and patterns have been preserved. Buddhist culture is the main content of Yungang Grottoes culture, and Yungang Grottoes are also a national treasure of Chinese Buddhist art and culture.

The Pattern and Shape of Honeysuckle Patterns in Yungang Grottoes

During the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, honeysuckle patterns appeared in various handicrafts, Buddhist statues, and murals, and held an irreplaceable position in Buddhist decorative art. According to statistics, there are over 10 styles of honeysuckle patterns in the Yungang Grottoes. According to the different morphology and skeletal organization of honeysuckle patterns, they can be simply classified into four types: individual pattern honeysuckle patterns, suitable pattern honeysuckle patterns, continuous pattern honeysuckle patterns, and special pattern honeysuckle patterns.

Individual pattern honeysuckle pattern. A single pattern refers to a pattern that has no fixed outer contour, is not limited by the surrounding patterns or the skeleton, is an independent and complete pattern, and can be freely used. Based on the style of honeysuckle patterns in the Yungang Grottoes, individual honeysuckle patterns can be classified into two categories: A. symmetrical honeysuckle patterns, B. asymmetric honeysuckle patterns.

A. Symmetric honeysuckle pattern: Often with the vine of the honeysuckle pattern as the axis of symmetry, it mostly has three or five leaves, or more odd numbered honeysuckle pattern leaves. There is a smooth and stable visual effect, reflecting order.

B. Asymmetric honeysuckle pattern: The vines of the honeysuckle pattern show a winding and winding trend, with rich shapes. The screen is flexible, the composition is diverse, and there is no fixed form, and can better reflect the graceful posture of honeysuckle patterns.

Suitable pattern for honeysuckle patterns. The characteristic that is suitable for patterns is that they are limited by certain external shapes. Pattern decorations need to be organized within certain contour lines, such as circles, triangles, squares, etc., and specially designed according to the needs of the external shape. The shape suitable for patterns is regular, and common honeysuckle patterns are suitable for the following three main types of patterns: corners suitable for patterns, squares suitable for patterns, and rings suitable for patterns.

A. Corners are suitable for patterns: This type of honeysuckle pattern is usually located in the decorative corners of the pattern, often used as a secondary pattern, surrounding the main pattern, to make four corner decorations, and commonly used as decoration for corners.

B. Square suitable pattern: Due to the limitations of square shapes, honeysuckle patterns are generated using a square frame as a suitable pattern. The main vine is short, with thicker leaves, smooth curves, and diverse leaf forms.

C. Circular pattern: Circular pattern is commonly found in the head or backlight area of Buddha statues, as well as on the tiles of Yungang Grottoes. The main vine is often a closed ring, with leaf veins arranged radially on the outer side of the main vine, and narrow and curly leaf veins.

Continuous pattern honeysuckle pattern. Continuous pattern refers to the continuous continuation of a pattern on a unit basis, moving left, right, or up and down. Based on the style of honeysuckle patterns in the Yungang Grottoes, the continuous patterns of honeysuckle patterns can be roughly divided into three types: wavy honeysuckle patterns, peach shaped honeysuckle patterns, and tangled branch honeysuckle patterns.

A. Wave shaped honeysuckle pattern: This type of honeysuckle pattern is often like a ribbon, forming a strip. Within the wavy pattern, a single honeysuckle pattern is repeated in a loop to the left and right, continuously extending. The main feature is that the main vine is wavy in shape, with leaf veins growing on both sides of the vine or on one side, repeatedly arranged.

B. Peach shaped honeysuckle pattern: This honeysuckle pattern is based on a peach shaped basic unit and continues continuously in two directions on both sides. The space inside contains a front honeysuckle pattern, and there are four water droplet patterns around the peach shape, adding embellishments to the honeysuckle pattern.

C. Entangled honeysuckle pattern: Entangled honeysuckle pattern is a pattern decoration that combines honeysuckle patterns with other flowers. The main feature is that the vines intersect with each other in an S-shape, and are interspersed with other floral patterns.

Special pattern honeysuckle pattern. The special pattern of honeysuckle pattern mainly refers to making arbitrary changes according to the layout needs of the space in order to meet the content of space decoration. Due to their diverse types and styles, only turtle shell shaped honeysuckle patterns and Boshan furnace honeysuckle patterns are taken as examples here.

A. Turtle shaped honeysuckle pattern: Using the turtle back shape as the basic framework of the pattern, various honeysuckle patterns are carved inside the turtle back according to specific situations.

B. Boshan furnace with honeysuckle pattern: Boshan furnace, also known as Boshan incense burner, was a common tool used by the people to burn incense during the Han and Jin Dynasties in China. The Boshan furnace honeysuckle pattern is a combination of Boshan furnace and honeysuckle pattern, which is relatively rare in the Yungang Grottoes.

Semiotics Related Theories

Semiotics

Semiotics is a scientific theoretical discipline that studies symbols. It originated in ancient Greece and began to spread in France in the 20th century, becoming popular worldwide today. Saussure, the father of semiotics, proposed the basic theory of semiotics, laying the ideological foundation for the study of semiotics.

Symbolic Production of Honeysuckle Patterns in Yungang Grottoes

The honeysuckle pattern began to appear as a decorative pattern in Buddhist grottoes after Buddhism was introduced to China. It is not only a plant pattern, but also a carrier of Buddhist culture, with symbolic properties and meanings. The honeysuckle pattern is not only a pattern decoration derived from the transformation of honeysuckle, but in the symbol system of Buddhist culture, the meaning of “life and death cycle” and “eternal life” needs to be represented by the honeysuckle pattern, and the dissemination of Buddhist doctrine needs to be transmitted through symbols. When symbols are used as carriers of information for transmission, they need to be perceived first and then recognized. Due to the influence of knowledge background and life experience, different people inevitably have different understandings of symbols. But this symbol must be widely recognized and universally recognized, which is the prerequisite for the existence of the symbol itself. Therefore, the honeysuckle pattern, as a symbol and symbol of Buddhist doctrine, is understood by people and further transmitted. The audience undergoes a complete process of transmitting honeysuckle patterns as symbols, from the perception of symbolic appearances, to the reception of symbolic information, and finally, combines with experiential understanding.

Appearance perception. The perceptual representation of symbols is a perception of symbols through the interaction between consciousness and meaning. The perception of honeysuckle patterns is mainly visual. The honeysuckle pattern evolved from the form of honeysuckle, and it is a decorative pattern presented through conscious processing based on the image of honeysuckle, thus becoming a Buddhist symbol. When the viewer perceives and understands it, there is a difference from the perception before the honeysuckle pattern. The previous perception was only recognition of its external appearance and understanding of its objective existence. The latter’s perception is the perception of the symbol of honeysuckle pattern, which is the perception of the symbolic meaning of the symbol. Therefore, the cognition of symbols is the cognition of the meaning conveyed by the essence of symbols. In terms of perception of the symbols of honeysuckle patterns, people can quickly identify the symbolic elements of honeysuckle patterns.

Information reception. Symbol reception refers to the ability to perceive the existence of a symbol when felt or seen. Symbol reception is based on symbol perception, and each symbol carries the information it wants to convey. The audience can only accurately receive the information conveyed by symbols on the premise of understanding them. In a symbol system, it is necessary to receive symbol information in the corresponding symbol code. The information reception of honeysuckle pattern symbols needs to be carried out in Buddhist symbols in order to receive information more effectively.

Symbols are systematic and extensive in the transmission of information. The information that honeysuckle patterns can receive is presented visually by the audience, and then interpreted by the audience based on their own experience, under the premise of subjective and objective interaction, to receive and interpret the information of honeysuckle pattern symbols. The emergence and reception of symbolic information is a convention, that is, the honeysuckle pattern symbol is a symbol of reincarnation and eternal life. While decorating the Yungang Grottoes, it also spreads Buddhist teachings in the form of symbols.

Experience understanding. The transmission of symbols is a necessary process from symbol perception to information reception, and then to the experiential interpretation of information symbols, which is a cycle of symbols from perception to reception and then to interpretation. From perceiving the existence of a symbol, receiving it, to interpreting the symbol, this also requires the use of another symbol to convey, and the emergence

of this new symbol will bring another explanatory item, causing the explanation to enter a cycle. Therefore, the experiential understanding of symbols involves two phenomena: the cycle of pre understanding and interpretation. On the one hand, it is necessary for the viewer to have a knowledge reserve of pattern understanding before seeing the honeysuckle pattern, and to be able to reunderstand the honeysuckle pattern with understanding. When viewers gain an experiential understanding of the honeysuckle patterns in the Yungang Grottoes with their previous understanding, they will gain a more profound understanding than their previous understanding. Therefore, this more profound understanding will become the next previous understanding, forming a cycle of interpretation. The experiential understanding of symbols is a process of continuous accumulation of experiences. When experience is used as a prerequisite for understanding symbols, it will make the audience's perception of symbols more concrete and their reception of information faster.

The Signifier and Signified of Honeysuckle Patterns in the Yungang Grottoes in Semiotics

Saussure's Semiotic Theory of Signifier and Signified

The birth and development of modern semiotics cannot be separated from the important contributions made by Saussure. In Saussure's works, it is pointed out that a symbol is composed of two parts: the signifier and the signified, which are interdependent and have a relationship of opposition and unity. We often divide the signifier into the expressive level, while the signified belongs to the connotative level. This article uses the signifier and signified as research methods to explore the symbolic system of honeysuckle patterns in Yungang Grottoes.

The Signifier System of Honeysuckle Patterns in Yungang Grottoes

The so-called "signifier" refers to a medium used to refer to or represent something. The signifier belongs to the level of material expression, and symbols will convey a spiritual meaning higher than the material level through the signifier. Otherwise, the information transmitted by the sender will become meaningless.

As a decorative pattern related to Buddhism, the appearance and structure of honeysuckle patterns have been influenced by various aspects of Chinese and Western culture during the spread of Buddhism. When the symbol of honeysuckle patterns moved eastward with Buddhism and spread to China, the specific symbols referred to by honeysuckle patterns and their corresponding contexts also underwent specific changes. On the one hand, the honeysuckle pattern refers to a plant in the honeysuckle family, which originally represented the cold winter and eternal life, and then to the pharmacist's words, it represented "long-term consumption, longevity and longevity". On the other hand, in the formation and evolution of specific forms, the honeysuckle pattern initially evolved from a combination of palm leaves and sweet potato patterns into a palm shaped leaf pattern, and later incorporated the Han Dynasty's cloud pattern "cloud tail", forming the basic form of the three petal honeysuckle pattern. The honeysuckle patterns in the early Yungang Grottoes were relatively free and open, and their edges were also rough and irregular, giving people a feeling that form and spirit were not bound by objects. Its creative expression was outward. When the honeysuckle pattern is combined with the cloud pattern of the Han Dynasty and the "cloud tail" of the cloud pattern is added, it is as if a "flowing" object is added to a still image. When the honeysuckle pattern comes into view, the image has implicit direction guidance. The pattern of honeysuckle patterns is constantly changing with time, region, and specific decorations, and its external style is influenced by Chinese localization.

The Referential System of Honeysuckle Patterns in Yungang Grottoes

Refer to the spiritual aspect that constitutes the symbol, which can also be understood as the content aspect. The referent often refers to the thing being referred to or involved, at the level of its connotation. The signifier and signified in symbols coexist and cannot be separated separately. They have a symmetrical correspondence. The signifier and signified interact and transform with each other in different contexts, thus smoothly conveying the information contained in the symbol.

Eternal life and reincarnation. In the Wei, Jin, Southern, and Northern Dynasties, honeysuckle patterns were extensively used to decorate statues, murals, and arts and crafts related to Buddhist themes, and were given the name “honeysuckle” with a resilient connotation. This characteristic is similar to the Chinese honeysuckle that never withers in winter, so honeysuckle and honeysuckle patterns are combined. The meaning of the honeysuckle pattern is strong and persevering. Due to its unpredictability in winter, it is in line with the Buddhist doctrine of “eternal life” and is compared to the immortality of the human soul, reincarnation, and eternal life.

Prolonging life. The Compendium of Materia Medica states: “Honeysuckle, taken for a long time, lightens the body and prolongs life”. Therefore, the honeysuckle pattern is endowed with the auspicious meaning of longevity and longevity. The honeysuckle pattern has the effect of making people live longer through the honeysuckle itself, so this meaning is extracted to convey the meaning of the honeysuckle pattern, which is to prolong life. Therefore, the symbol of the honeysuckle pattern expresses a beautiful vision of auspiciousness for humans, conveys the teachings and ideas of Buddhism, and transforms these spiritual intentions into concrete forms of expression. The honeysuckle pattern, as a symbol of good fortune and longevity, conveys beautiful blessings to the world.

Conclusion

The evolution of honeysuckle patterns in China is directly related to the localization of Buddhism. In terms of design, honeysuckle patterns have evolved from vivid and simple natural images to combined patterns with Chinese cloud patterns and social styles. From honeysuckle patterns to rolled grass patterns, and then to stylized tangled branches, the symbolism of honeysuckle patterns has shifted from simple religious connotations to a transformation towards a vision of a better life. The honeysuckle pattern represents not only a simple pattern, but also contains different symbolic connotations given by people.

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