

# *Analysis on the Art of Architectural Color Painting in Summer Palace*

**Zhou Guanzhong**

*Beijing Union University, Beijing, 100101, China*

**Keywords:** Summer Palace; Architectural color painting; Function; Classification

**Abstract:** The Summer Palace is the last large-scale royal landscape garden built by feudal society in China, and its architectural color painting art is world-famous. At present, the academic circles focus on protection and restoration, painting materials, techniques and case studies, but there is not much analysis on the artistic level. Based on the field investigation and literature review of the Summer Palace, this paper analyzes the style of the architectural color paintings in the garden, sums up the themes and functions of the architectural color paintings, and then digs up the artistic value of the architectural color paintings in the Summer Palace and promotes the spread of traditional culture in China.

## **1. Introduction**

Formerly known as Qingyi Garden, the Summer Palace was founded in Qianlong 15th year (1750), and it is one of the "Three Mountains and Five Gardens" in the Qing Dynasty. Its architectural color painting art is a great wealth in the treasure house of landscape architecture color painting in China. Architectural color painting, a decorative art of ancient wooden structures in China, has a history of more than two thousand years. When it comes to the magnificence of ancient architecture in China, we often praise it with the rhetoric of "carved beams and painted pillars" and "resplendent and magnificent". In ancient palaces, temples, gardens, ancestral halls, tombs and mansions, we can all see architectural color paintings. As we all known, Wooden building components are easy to be damaged. In order to prolong the service life, ancient craftsmen painted oil varnish on the surface layer, and then combined it with painting to form a unique color painting art. This technique on the one hand brings strong appreciation, on the other hand, it has both functions, so that the wooden structure can be protected from wind and rain erosion and insects.

## **2. The style of architectural color painting in the Summer Palace**

Regarding the classification of architectural color painting styles, the Summer Palace mainly includes Hexi color painting, Rotary color painting, Su-style color painting and Haiman color painting.

He Xi color painting is the highest-ranking type of color painting in Chinese traditional architecture, which is generally used in the main halls of palaces, altars and temples, and mansions<sup>[1]</sup>. The contents of the pictures are mainly patterns such as golden dragon (Figure 1), golden phoenix, dragon and phoenix, dragon grass, etc., which symbolize the supreme imperial power. The Hexi color paintings of the Summer Palace are mainly distributed on the axis buildings represented

by Renshou Hall Scenic Spot in the East Palace Gate, Foxiang Pavilion Scenic Spot in Paiyun Hall and the Four Major Continents Scenic Spots.



Figure 1 Golden dragon Hexi color painting in Paiyun Hall

Rotary color painting is slightly lower than Hexi color painting. It gets its name from the extensive use of rotating patterns. Common themes include dragons, passionflowers, three Cintamani Stones, ice-cracked plums, Song brocade, etc., which are mostly used in palaces, temples, memorial arches and other buildings. In the Summer Palace, the Leshou Hall, Wufang Tower, Nanhu Island, and Five Sacred Temples are painted with Rotary color paintings.

Su-style color painting can be seen everywhere in the garden, and it is named for its origin in Suzhou. The contents of the picture are mainly character stories, four seasons scenery, and auspicious patterns. The key difference between it and the first two color painting forms lies in the centre of rafters. From the 1950s to the 1970s, the buildings of the Summer Palace underwent extensive renovation and reconstruction[2]. The most preserved architectural paintings of the highest artistic value in the garden are mainly from this period, among which the Su-style color paintings are the most famous. The Long Corridor of the Summer Palace, with its famous architectural color paintings, runs through Wanshou Mountain and Kunming Lake, with a total length of 728 meters and 273 verandahs, starting from the Yaoyue Gate in the east and stopping at Shizhang Pavilion in the west. This is a unique art gallery, with architectural color paintings on every wooden building component, especially the Su-style color paintings on the rafters, with more than 14,000 works of various themes.

Haiman color painting refers to the whole building covering the eaves, rafters, the upper and lower frame of the wooden structure, the whole body painted with decorative patterns, this kind of color painting form is very rare. In the middle of Jiqingxuan courtyard in the northern part of the garden, the main building with three rooms in width used the technique of Haiman color painting, which was covered with vines.

### 3. The theme of the architectural color painting in Summer Palace

#### 3.1 Royal Art

Royal art reflects the ancient imperial power thought and royal aesthetics. Hexi color painting and Rotary color painting are called "court style" color painting, and the "court style" is used in the noble royal architecture. There is no doubt that dragon and Phoenix are the most common images in this type of color painting. The image of dragon can be divided into walking dragon, coiled dragon, sitting dragon with its head facing the front, and dragon surrounded by auspicious clouds. It is a totem of

ancient Chinese ancestors, diving in the water and flying in the sky. Since ancient times, emperors have regarded themselves as "the real son of the dragon", symbolizing their supreme power. Phoenix is the queen of birds. The ancients called Phoenix the benevolent bird of auspiciousness. Seeing it, the world will be peaceful. In the architectural color paintings of Ming and Qing Dynasties, the image of Phoenix is the representative of empress.

The painters and craftsmen who created royal art naturally came from the court. During the period of Qingyi Garden, Emperor Qianlong ordered court painters to participate in the creation of architectural color paintings. Xu Yang, Zhang Zongchang, Wang Bing and other famous painters were listed. Western painters such as Italian painter Giuseppe Castiglione and French painter Jean-Denis Attiret also made great achievements.

### 3.2 Folk Art

Folk art is the basis of the Summer Palace color painting, mainly from the Su-style color painting. Su-style color painting originated from the folk, entered the Royal Garden in Qianlong period, and gradually developed into an important category of official color painting, forming a certain composition style<sup>[1]</sup>. However, it still left enough space for craftsmen to create. The painters of color painting originates from the folk and has been infiltrated in the folk soil for a long time, so their works have strong folk characteristics. For example, auspicious patterns are common themes. In terms of auspicious patterns, we can see swastika pattern, Fangsheng pattern, auspicious clouds pattern, persimmon stem pattern, rolling grass pattern, brocade pattern and so on. In terms of auspicious paintings, there are "five blessings and longevity", "Longevity Crane" and "Immortal Wishing a Birthday", etc. These patterns show people's pursuit of more happiness and longevity.

The 36th room in the Long Corridor of the Summer Palace is painted with the painting of "pulsatilla and wealth". There is a pair of pulsatilla in the beautiful peony flower cluster. Peonies have the meaning of wealth and honor, just as the Chinese people often say, "Blossom to riches and honor." The flower of pulsatilla is white, and the hair of an old person is white too, so it symbolizes longevity in China. The whole work means that a married couple reaching old age together. Another example is the painting of longevity painted in the 63rd room of the Long Corridor. In the picture, an ancient pine is facing the red sun, and two egrets are perched on it. The heron and the crane are the same, implying a long life and happiness. The ancient pine has survived a hundred years of age, but also has the meaning of longevity. The whole work conveys the theme of health and longevity.

### 3.3 Literati Art

The definition of the subject matter of literati art is mainly derived from the concept of "literati painting" in ancient times of China. "Literati painting" is a unique style system in Chinese painting system<sup>[3]</sup>. It originated in the Northern Song Dynasty, matured in the Yuan Dynasty, and flourished in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. It pursues the charm of ink painting, and advocates the beauty of plain and innocent art. According to this, the theme of the Summer Palace can be further divided into character stories, flowers and birds, landscape scenery and architectural drawings.

The theme of character story occupies an absolute space advantage in the architectural color painting of the Summer Palace. Many characters are derived from Chinese novels of past dynasties, such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Journey to the West*, *Outlaws of the Marsh*, *Dream of Red Mansions*, *Fairy Ghost Vixen*, and *Creation of the Gods*. Among them, there are many classic stories that we are familiar with, such as the painting "Monkey Subdues White-Skeleton Demon" in the 10th room of the Long Corridor. The 13th room painted "Xu Shu recommended Zhuge", the 76th room painted "Wusong fighting tiger". There are also many characters derived from the real celebrities in Chinese history, such as the painting "Mr. Dongpo's night tour of Chengen Temple" in the 44th room

of the Long Corridor, and "suwu shepherd" in room 181.

The theme of flower-and-bird painting is birds and flowers as the main character, with rocks and grass as the supporting role<sup>[4]</sup>. Birds refer to red crowned cranes, peacocks, parrots, mandarin ducks, pigeons, etc., while flowers refer to all kinds of seasonal flowers, such as peony, lotus, magnolia, plum blossom, begonia, etc. The 17th room of the Long Corridor is painted with a picture of Five Cardinal Relationships (Figure 2). The "Five Cardinal Relationships" was first proposed by Mencius, a thinker in the Warring States period. The so-called "father and son have relatives, monarchs and ministers have righteousness, husband and wife are different, parents and children are orderly, friends trust each other". Five kinds of birds, Phoenix, crane, mandarin duck, wagtail and warbler, are depicted in the painting of Five Cardinal Relationships, which shows the relationship of ethics in feudal society.



Figure 2 Five Cardinal Relationships

Landscape theme, referring to the theory of "literati painting", is mainly depicted by the mountains and rivers in the south of the Yangtze River. In ancient times, northern painters depicted mountains such as Taihang Mountain, and the pictures were mostly vertical compositions. Southern painters mostly depict the gentle hills in the south of the Yangtze River, and most of the pictures are horizontal composition. The composition of Su-style color paintings just meets the painting needs of horizontal composition. For example, "Landscape Painting" painted in Room 83 of the Long Corridor, with numerous mountains, misty clouds and pavilions hidden in it, shows the deep artistic conception that China's landscape painting is feasible, promising, tourable and habitable.

The theme of architectural drawing originates from the boundary paintings in ancient China. Because it uses the ruler lead in painting, it is named boundary painting, which is mainly used to depict buildings. The architectural drawing is very common in the architectural color painting of the Summer Palace. Most of the ancient celebrities and elegant people have built their own study rooms, and named them "Zhai, Wu, Ju, Shi, Tang, Guan, Xuan, Yuan, Ting and Lu". These buildings constitute an important part of the architectural drawing of the architectural color painting of the Summer Palace. For example, the painting of "Scholar's study" in Room 22 of the Long Corridor shows the leisurely living environment of ancient literati.

### 3.4 Religious art

The themes of Religious art include Buddhist art and Taoist art. In order not to conflict with the theme of the imperial garden, the religious elements in the architectural color paintings of the Summer Palace are mostly relatively obscure. The content of Buddhism and Taoism is often conveyed in symbolic patterns. For example, there are Buddhist eight treasures and Taoist eight treasures in Jingfuge's architectural color paintings. Swastika pattern widely appearing in the architectural color painting patterns of the Summer Palace, also originated from Buddhist art. Originating from Sanskrit, the swastika pattern is the auspicious sign on the chest of the Tathagata, which means auspiciousness,

luck and longevity. The pattern of rotation in the Rotary color painting is created by using the principle of splitting and reorganizing the Taoist Taiji diagram. Taoism believes that Taiji is the origin of everything in heaven and earth, and Taiji gives birth to Yin and Yang, and Yin and Yang give birth to everything.

In the Su-style color paintings at the Summer Palace, religious themes are common, but also obscure expressions. The paintings on the east and west sides of Qingyao Pavilion depict the images of the dragon-descending arhat and the tiger-crouching arhat among the Eighteen Arhats. The Yaoyue Gate is painted with a colorful painting of the Immortal Wishing a Birthday. The picture is composed of cranes, daffodils, lucid ganoderma, peach blossoms and bamboo patterns. The first three words refer to "immortal", bamboo is homophonic with "wish" in Chinese, which means wish, peach blossom means longevity, and together, it means Immortal Wishing a Birthday. This is one of the palace plays of the Qing Dynasty, which tells the story of the eight immortals congratulating the Lord on his longevity.

#### **4. The Function of Architectural Color Painting in Summer Palace**

As a valuable cultural heritage, the color painting of the Summer Palace has extremely high historical value, cultural value and artistic value. Undoubtedly, it also carries many cultural functions.

##### **4.1 Publicity and enlightenment**

As a royal garden, the Summer Palace reflects the hierarchical concept of ritual architecture in traditional culture. Hierarchy was heavily fortified in the royal buildings. In the Qing Dynasty, engineering regulations were formulated to ensure that all structures were governed by legal rules. The architectural color paintings of the Summer Palace conveyed the feudal concept of orderly hierarchy. As mentioned above, there are three color painting styles: Hexi color painting belong to the first, the Rotary color painting belong to second, and Su-style color painting belong to third. Among the Hexi color paintings, golden dragon has the highest rank, followed by other series such as dragon and phoenix, golden phoenix, and dragon grass. Empress Dowager Cixi lives in Leshou Hall, Emperor Guangxu lives in Yulan Hall, and Queen Longyu lives in Yiyun Hall. From the architectural form and architectural color painting style, it can be seen that the three men are humble and orderly.

Architectural color painting is a special category of ancient painting art in China. In fact, the main function of early painting in China was propaganda and education. As early as the Han Dynasty, ancient sages, loyal ministers and righteous men, dutiful sons and daughters were painted on murals, stone reliefs and brick reliefs of ancestral halls in burial rooms. This was a means for rulers to use paintings to publicize official ideology, commend meritorious officials, advocate filial piety culture and promote Confucian ethics. "During the reign of Emperor Xuan of the Han Dynasty, paintings were used to honor the meritorious officials of the Han Dynasty. If the officials were not in the paintings, the descendants would be ashamed of them." Said Wang Chong, a philosopher in the Eastern Han Dynasty. There are also a lot of propaganda and enlightenment contents in Su-style color paintings in the Summer Palace, the Five Cardinal Relationships Picture mentioned earlier is an example. Room 39 of the Long Corridor painted "Husband and wife treating each other with courtesy", which tells the love story of hermit Liang Hong and his wife Meng Guang during the Eastern Han Dynasty <sup>[5]</sup>. Room 106 of the Long Corridor painted "Zhuan Zhu's Assassination of the king", showing the wonderful scene where an assassin named Zhuan Zhu helps the prince of Wu assassinate the king. "Yue Fei's mother tattooed her son" (Figure 3) is painted in Room 203 of the Long Corridor. Mrs Yao, the mother of the famous general Yue Fei, as a model of mother education and a model of women, encouraged her son to join the army and faithfully serve the country when the country was in danger. From the above works, it can be seen that the educational function of the architectural color

painting of the Summer Palace punishes evil and promotes good.



Figure 3 Yue Fei's mother tattooed her son

#### 4.2 Be good to hear or see

The architectural color paintings in the Summer Palace are beautiful, which bring pleasant aesthetic experience to the viewers. As a matter of fact, the traditional architectural color paintings in Beijing are mainly applied to the wooden structures under the eaves hidden by shadows, and the lightness and purity of the colors are very high. The hues are mainly cyan, blue, green, yellow, black, gold, red, white, etc., with strong color matching and contrast. In addition, warm colors are used in the bright areas, and cool colors are used in dark areas, which makes the contrast between light and dark of the buildings more intense. Due to the coverage of colorful paintings, the shadow does not appear gloomy due to the lack of sunlight, thus ensuring the visual beauty of the whole building.

Visitors stroll in the Summer Palace, looking around, and there are pleasing architectural color paintings everywhere, just like swimming in the artistic realm, which not only cultivates sentiment, but also sublimates aesthetic experience.

#### 4.3 Pray for blessings

The patterns in Ming and Qing Dynasties were mostly auspicious, and artists extended people's longing for a better life infinitely in their works, so that they developed to the point that "the picture must be intentional and the meaning must be auspicious". There are many auspicious patterns in Su-style color paintings in the Summer Palace. It mainly conveys four meanings, they are wealth, fame, longevity and happiness. Wealth means that people want to become rich, and it also implies a bumper harvest for the general public in the farming era; Fame is a symbol of power and promotion; Longevity represents people's pursuit of health and security; Happiness is related to marriage, friendship, having more children and grandchildren.

For the pursuit of wealth, fame, longevity and happiness, there are also many examples in the architectural color paintings. For example, Room 78 of the Long Corridor painted Blooming Prosperity, which depicts the peony with the reputation of "the king of flowers", with the implication of wealth. The paintings about crabs express the theme of the pursuit of fame(Figure 4). A crab is a symbol of the first place in the imperial examination, while two crabs are a symbol of the second place in the examination. So the whole picture implies success in the imperial examination, praying for a great future. Paintings in the Long Corridor, such as "five blessings and longevity", "Longevity Crane" and "Immortal Wishing a Birthday", all reflect the hope of longevity. The pursuit of "happiness" can be seen in such works as "Good News from Magpies" and "Everybody is happy". In addition, there are the joys of having more children and grandchildren, such as "The Joy of Having a boy" and "The Lotus and the children". In a word, the architectural color paintings of the Summer

Palace convey people's beautiful vision of praying for blessings.



Figure 4 The paintings about crabs

## 5. Conclusion

At present, there are very few architectural color paintings in Song and Yuan Dynasties in China, and only a handful in Ming Dynasty. Although there are many architectural color paintings in Qing Dynasty, there are few in the early and middle period, and most of them are late works. Most of the existing works of the Summer Palace belong to redrawing. Although these works have traces of changes of the times, they basically retain the overall style of the late Qing Dynasty. Clarifying the various artistic levels of architectural color painting in the Summer Palace will not only help us to understand the art of color painting in Beijing, but also help us to observe the overall style of architectural color painting in China in the late Qing Dynasty.

## Acknowledgement

This work was supported by Beijing Social Science Fund Planning Project "Research on Landscape Decoration Patterns of Three Mountains and Five Gardens" (20ytb010).

## References

- [1] Sun Dazhang. *China Ancient Architecture Color Painting [M]*. Beijing: China Construction Industry Press, April 2006.
- [2] Zhu Ling. *Research on Northern Royal Garden Architecture Color Painting in the Early and Middle Qing Dynasty [D]*. North china university of technology, 2012.
- [3] Long Chuyi. *The art research of official Liang Fang and Xi Cai paintings in Qing Dynasty [D]*. Hunan University of Technology, 2015.
- [4] Zou Ming. *On the social function of Su-style color painting in the public space of the Summer Palace [J]*. *Popular Literature and Art*, 2018, (07):123.
- [5] Xu Gengyang, Wang Bingzhang. *On the artistic function of colored paintings of Huizhou ancient dwellings [J]*. *Journal of Anhui Institute of Architecture and Technology (Natural Science Edition)*, 2006, (01):45-47.