https://doi.org/10.37420/j.adr.2025.040

The Application of Ancient Dian Bronze Art Forms in Cultural and Creative Design Courses in Higher Education

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Abstract
Guided by the core concept of "promoting the creative transformation and innovative development of outstanding traditional Chinese culture," this study explores innovative strategies for integrating traditional fine arts into contemporary cultural and creative design education within the framework of "New Liberal Arts." Taking Ancient Dian bronze art as a paradigm, it investigates how this cultural heritage can be translated into pedagogical practices in university settings through in-depth analysis and systematic summarization of artistic praxis.

Keywords
Traditional Culture; Higher Education Pedagogy; Cultural and Creative Design; Ancient Dian Bronze Art

1. Introduction

Based on current archaeological findings, the Dian Kingdom civilization flourished roughly from the late Shang Dynasty to the late Western Han Dynasty (c. 11th century–1st century BCE). During this period, while Central Plains culture had already developed a sophisticated and enduring written historical tradition, the Dian Kingdom—shaped by its unique geographical environment and topographical conditions—underwent a relatively gradual developmental trajectory, remaining in a "pre-literate" phase. This heavy reliance on visual language meant that graphics and imagery assumed crucial roles in recording and expressing daily production, life, and social activities.

2. Research Status

Academic research on Ancient Dian bronze art has yielded substantial theoretical achievements and pointed to specific directions for its practical application. In his book *The Bronze Art of the Dian Kingdom*, Zhang (2000) provides a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the historical context, socio-economic life, and cultural-artistic characteristics of the Dian Kingdom, grounded in the visual imagery of its bronze artifacts. Long (2016) focuses on formal aesthetics, exploring the theoretical aesthetic qualities embodied in Dian bronze art. Liu (2014), in "The Inspiration of Ancient Dian Bronze Art for Modern Design," notes that the unconventional artistic imagination and expressive techniques of Dian bronze art can provide rich resources rooted in

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traditional Chinese cultural consciousness for contemporary sculpture and artistic creation. Zhang (2020), in "Interpretation of the Pattern Design Characteristics of the Li Jiashan Ox-Tiger Bronze Table," further emphasizes that its artistic value extends beyond sculpture to encompass various artistic domains such as craft design. These studies not only strengthen the multidimensional connections between Dian bronze art and the art of Yunnan Province as well as national art traditions but also provide abundant materials for related fields, laying a solid theoretical foundation for the subsequent inheritance, preservation, and creative reproduction of this cultural heritage.

In the current era of rapid technological advancement, the power of images as a non-verbal communication medium has become increasingly prominent, becoming an indispensable part of human life. Wassily Kandinsky profoundly argued that a primary task of the new science of art is to conduct a thorough analysis of art history, understand the artistic elements, structures, and compositional methods employed by artists across different periods, and explore their evolutionary trajectories (Kandinsky, 1977). Throughout history, scholars and artists worldwide have conducted extensive research on various artistic forms, drawing inspiration to create significant works and continuously advance artistic movements. For instance, masters such as Picasso, Henry Moore, and Matisse absorbed the essence of primitive art, capturing the intrinsic characteristics of their subjects with remarkable precision. However, despite its rich visual language and compositional principles, the transformative application of Ancient Dian bronze art in contemporary artistic practice remains relatively underdeveloped.

Therefore, research on Ancient Dian bronze art urgently needs to focus on cultural reproduction that meets the needs of contemporary society. Nevertheless, the pathway to achieving this reproduction requires contemporary scholars to explore multiple dimensions and channels, conducting meticulous deconstruction, reorganization, and in-depth analysis. Only through such efforts can the potential value of Ancient Dian bronze art be fully exploited, enabling it to radiate new vitality in the contemporary art landscape.

3. The Value of Ancient Dian Bronze Art

Ancient Dian bronze art embodies profound and diverse cultural connotations. According to Sima Qian’s *Records of the Grand Historian*, the Ancient Dian Kingdom was a political entity formed by ancient ethnic minorities in the southwest borderlands of China. Its historical development was intertwined with the rise and fall of multiple clans and tribes. During this dynamic evolutionary process, the cultural forms of various groups continuously converged and interacted. Meanwhile, the gradual infiltration of Central Plains culture led to the coexistence of diverse elements—including expressive content, techniques, and themes from different periods—within the same historical context, collectively shaping the rich and distinctive features of Ancient Dian bronze art. This not only greatly enhanced cultural identity and diversity but also promoted in-depth exchange and integration between art and aesthetics. Consequently, a series of artistic forms infused with multicultural connotations emerged in the presentation of bronze art. These forms not only demonstrate the unique charm of Dian bronze art but also profoundly reflect the integration and coexistence of different cultures.

Ancient Dian bronze art possesses high aesthetic value, representing the crystallization of the wisdom of

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the people of Yunnan. As an integral part of Yunnan's traditional fine arts system, it reflects a profound exploration of realism in plastic arts and the abstraction of natural forms into geometric patterns. These characteristics bear certain similarities to the early exploratory forms of Egyptian and Ancient Greek art, which exerted far-reaching influences on the development of subsequent art. This not only reflects the unique aesthetic concepts and cultural traditions of the Yunnan region within the national context but also establishes a cross-temporal dialogue and resonance with other ancient artistic systems worldwide in terms of artistic form and expression.

Ancient Dian bronze art serves as a testament to the harmonious integration of multiple ethnic groups and carries strong contemporary significance. From the Shang and Zhou dynasties onward, various dynasties in China witnessed archaistic trends in ritual systems and arts and crafts. For example, during the reign of Emperor Huizong of the Song Dynasty, the archaism movement reached its peak, requiring that bronze vessels and porcelain conform to ancient models in form and ornamentation. The "Zhenghe Ding" (Zhenghe Cauldron), currently housed in the National Palace Museum in Taipei, is a typical representative of this period. Such state-led social initiatives, aimed at enhancing ethnic self-identity, promoted unity among all ethnic groups and thus maintained border stability.

Therefore, selecting the uniquely charming Ancient Dian bronze art of Yunnan as a research focus in university teaching, with cultural and creative design as a practical orientation, aims to organize teacher-student teams to conduct multidimensional in-depth exploration and diversified practice through pedagogical innovation. This initiative not only leverages team collaboration to enrich the research scope of Ancient Dian bronze art, laying a solid theoretical foundation for its inheritance, protection, and re-creation while enhancing its application value in contemporary society but also provides valuable insights and references for exploring pathways to integrate traditional fine art forms into contemporary art and design education.

4. Characteristics of Ancient Dian Bronze Art

Since the dawn of human civilization, humanity has sought answers to questions such as "Who am I?" and "Where do I come from?"—essentially a quest for "identity." In this regard, Eastern and Western cultures share striking similarities: all ethnic groups have attempted to explain these profound questions through mythology, such as the Genesis narrative in the West or the story of Nüwa creating humans in the East. As production relations and social organizational forms evolved, the earliest creation myths expanded from isolated tales to systematic narratives. Consequently, the few deities associated with fertility worship in the matrilineal clan era gradually diversified, giving rise to gods catering to various human needs and totems representing different tribes.

4.1 Coexistence of Abstraction and Figuration

Ancient Dian artisans excelled at infusing wild, realistic vitality into rigorous geometric frameworks. Take the "Shizhaishan-type bronze drum" as an example: the powerful sun motif at the drum's center, with its radiating straight rays, forms the first layer of geometric contrast with the rotating arcs of the circling flying egret motifs. Meanwhile, the static triangular bands composed of dense thunder patterns and interlocking designs on the drum body contrast remarkably with the realistic depictions of deer and tigers in intense movement—

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either running or fighting—on the decorative bands, creating a harmonious unity of movement and stillness, order and dynamism. This is not mere "decoration" but embodies the Dian people's philosophical worldview, integrating cosmic order (represented by geometric patterns as immutable laws) with natural vitality (represented by animals as a symbol of vigorous energy).

4.2 Conflict

The "conflict" in Ancient Dian art is by no means a simple opposition but rather a form of "design violence." Artisans forcibly tamed and cast the life-or-death struggle moments of the natural world onto structurally stable vessels used for ritual or daily purposes. This fundamental tension between the "wildness of content" and the "order of form" is precisely what renders Ancient Dian bronze art so emotionally resonant and spiritually stirring.

4.3 Freedom

The "freedom" of Ancient Dian bronze art can be described as a "dance within constraints." On the expensive and solemn medium of bronze, artisans dared to cast such brutal yet straightforward imagery as the "Bronze Spear with Hanged Figures," or to combine the practicality of the "Frog-shaped Bronze Spear" with biological forms in a naive and charming manner. This freedom does not lie in unrestricted subject matter but in the artisans' ability to seamlessly compress the solemnity of priests, the toil of farmers, the fierceness of tigers, and the grace of waterbirds within the confined space of a cowrie container. It is the freedom of a storyteller who regards the entire secular and spiritual world as their creative canvas.

4.4 Complexity

Ancient Dian bronze art emphasizes the ingenious integration of two-dimensional incised designs and three-dimensional modeling. For instance, the lids of cowrie containers often employ round carving techniques to depict complex life scenes or sacrificial rituals, while the bodies are adorned with various patterns and motifs through incised lines. This combination not only creates a clear hierarchical structure and strong sense of three-dimensionality but also reflects the superb carving skills and aesthetic pursuit of Dian artisans. Furthermore, the ornamentation on Dian bronzes is intricate and exquisite, covering almost the entire surface of the vessels. This maximalist decorative style renders the works more magnificent and solemn.

4.5 Textual Narrative Function

Although the Dian Kingdom did not develop a mature writing system, the images and motifs on bronze vessels assumed a "textual narrative" function. Through vivid and lifelike depictions, these visual elements recorded scenes of the Dian people's production, life, warfare, and sacrificial activities, serving as important primary sources for understanding the social history and culture of the Dian Kingdom. For example, scenes such as the "Grain Offering Diagram" and the "Field Ploughing Procession Diagram" vividly reproduce the social life and customs of the Dian people.

4.6 Form Following Material

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"Form following material" typically describes a sculptural technique where creation is based on the natural form of the stone. Although the term originates from stone carving, Ancient Dian bronze art also embodies a similar concept of "working in harmony with nature" in its modeling. During the production of bronze vessels, Dian artisans often employed ingenious conception and design based on the characteristics and natural shape of copper, ensuring that the works not only meet practical functions but also possess artistic beauty. For instance, they might utilize the natural texture and color of copper to enhance the visual effect of the works during the casting process; in modeling design, they also fully considered the mechanical properties and plasticity of copper, making the works both stable and dynamic. This concept of "form following material" is vividly reflected in Ancient Dian bronze art.

5. Methodology

The core of cultural and creative design lies in shifting from superficial symbolic borrowing to the transfer of deep cultural essence. This study adopts design composition analysis methods. Design composition is a common thinking path for design students, and its design process aligns with the logic of abstract expression. By parsing the plastic art characteristics of Ancient Dian bronzes through the foundational knowledge learned in basic design courses such as *Composition Design*, this approach aligns with university students' cognitive abilities, facilitating their understanding and application at this stage.

5.1 Repetition Composition

In the lid decoration of Dian cowrie containers (e.g., the sacrificial scene cowrie container M12:26), repetition is not merely the replication of elements but an ordered narrative strategy. Numerous figures (such as palanquin bearers and sacrificers) are arranged in regular or irregular repetition with similar postures and orientations, forming a strong visual rhythm. This technique transforms individual, momentary actions (such as carrying a palanquin or marching) into collective, eternal ritual scenes. Its function transcends decoration, becoming a visual carrier that reinforces the logic of social collective action and shared memory.

5.2 Gradation Composition

Ancient Dian art subtly implies three-dimensional space on two-dimensional surfaces through gradation techniques. When depicting animal groups or human processions (as seen on some plaques and cowrie container rim ornamentation), artisans create a sense of depth through the gradual reduction of form size and changes in the density of element spacing. This gradation differs from the mathematical precision of Western linear perspective, representing an intuitive spatial expression based on visual experience. It effectively expands the narrative capacity within the limited surface area of the vessels.

5.3 Approximation Composition

Dian artisans excelled at seeking subtle variations in posture and movement under a unified motif. In plaques such as "Three Wolves Attacking a Sheep" or "Monkey Pattern Plaque," each animal's attacking posture or movement is distinct, yet they are collectively unified under the theme of "combat" or "group living." This "approximation" composition is not a replication of static models but a capture and reproduction of con-

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secutive moments in the process of biological movement, showcasing the Dian people's meticulous observation of nature and their high level of ability to generalize the forms of biological behavior.

5.4 Radiation Composition

Radiation composition embodies the Dian people's worldview, most typically in the sun motif on the surfaces of Shizhaishan-type bronze drums. Its composition takes the center of the drum as the core, with ray motifs radiating uniformly outward, forming a stable yet dynamically charged visual field. This structure is by no means mere decoration; it is a microcosmic cosmic schema that intuitively reflects the Dian cultural belief system centered on the "sun" or "deity." It transforms the physical center of a utilitarian object into the spiritual center of faith.

5.5 Anomaly Composition

In figurative group scenes, "anomaly" is a key technique for marking social hierarchy. Taking the "Cowrie Container with Alliance-Swearing Scene" as an example, the main officiant seated inside the house atop the drum-shaped lid differs significantly from the numerous surrounding participants—who have similar forms—in terms of size, costume complexity, and position. This deliberately introduced "variation" amidst repetition and approximation serves as a non-textual declaration of power, clearly identifying the core figures and peripheral groups in the social structure and revealing the rigid social hierarchy of the Dian Kingdom.

5.6 Density Composition

Plaque art pushes "density" composition to its extreme, especially in animal combat themes such as the "Two Tigers Attacking a Boar Plaque" or "Two Leopards Attacking a Boar Plaque." Artists compress, intertwine, and overlap the bodies of multiple creatures within an extremely flat rectangular space. Through the interpenetration of limbs and the tense compression of muscles, they create a "visual force field" filled with internal momentum and destructive tension. This dense composition aims to condense and intensify the most explosive moment in a life-or-death struggle, endowing cold metal with intense life energy.

5.7 Contrast Composition

Ancient Dian bronzes profoundly embody the plastic art principle of "the unity of opposites." The "Ox-Tiger Bronze Table" is a paradigmatic example of this principle: its form integrates the dynamic momentum of the tiger with the stability of the table, the tiger's aggressiveness with the ox's forbearance, and the tiger's strength with the calf's fragility—encompassing multiple contradictions. Yet, all these contrasting elements are perfectly integrated within the structure of a functional "table," achieving a high degree of unity between form and function, dynamism and balance. This reflects the Dian culture's profound understanding and artistic mastery of the natural law of the unity of opposites.

5.8 Texture Composition

The texture treatment of Ancient Dian bronzes is an important source of their artistic realism. Artisans collectively constructed rich tactile and visual layers through the original casting texture left by the piece-mold casting process, the delicate linear textures (e.g., animal fur) formed by post-casting engraving, and the mate-

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rial and color contrasts brought by inlay techniques (e.g., turquoise inlay). These conscious texture treatments are not merely for mimicking the surface quality of natural objects but also for alleviating the coldness of the bronze material, endowing the works with the warmth and breath of life, and enhancing their artistic expressiveness.

6. Practical Teaching Case Analysis

After completing the theoretical deconstruction of the formal language of Ancient Dian bronze art, this study systematically integrated it into cultural and creative design courses in higher education, constructing a practical pathway from theoretical cognition to design transformation. The core pedagogical objective is to guide students to abandon the habit of simply appropriating the superficial appearance of traditional motifs and instead delve into the internal logic of their formal organization, exploring creative translation methods from "cultural imagery" to "design elements." The following presents relatively mature modular practice content formed through two iterations of teaching.

6.1 Teaching Module One: Decoding and Extracting Formal Language

This module aims to cultivate students' "visual analytical competence." In class, key artifacts such as the "Cowrie Container with Alliance-Swearing Scene," the "Ox-Tiger Bronze Table," and a set of animal combat plaques are selected as core analytical objects. Students are required to complete a specialized "visual diagnostic report." This report is not a general description but requires reverse analysis using the principles of planar and three-dimensional composition. For example, when facing the complex group of figures on the lid of the "Cowrie Container with Alliance-Swearing Scene," students need to strip away the narrative content and instead analyze the order of its spatial layout: how the main officiant becomes the "anomaly point" through size and position; how the surrounding crowd forms a visual rhythm through postural "approximation" and arrangement "repetition"; and how the entire scene is enclosed within a circular "radiation" composition, thereby reinforcing the ritual's centripetal force and sacredness. This process equips students with a set of understandable and operable formal language vocabularies for their subsequent creative practice.

6.2 Teaching Module Two: Translation and Experimentation of Design Principles

Building on the mastery of formal vocabularies, the second module focuses on the generative experimentation of "design grammar." Several transformation tasks closely aligned with the core characteristics of Dian art are set in class. For example, addressing its "coexistence of abstraction and figuration," a task requires students to take the "sun motif" or "flying egret motif" as prototypes and complete a series of abstract evolutionary transformations—"from natural form to geometric symbol." Students are then asked to discuss the modern product contexts to which each stage of formal change could be applied: for instance, the transformation from a realistic flying egret to geometric lines might correspond to applications ranging from pattern printing to architectural decorative components. Another task, addressing its "conflictual" narrative, guides students to abandon the direct depiction of tigers attacking oxen and instead capture the internal structure of "instantaneous balance of opposing forces," transforming it to express abstract contemporary concepts such as "tradition and modernity" or "conflict and coexistence." This module emphasizes "resemblance in spirit rather than form," encouraging students to break free from the constraints of original imagery and capture and

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transform its inherent aesthetic relationships and spiritual essence.

7. Conclusion and Outlook

Ancient Dian bronze art presents a unique aesthetic paradigm where wild vitality bursts forth within a framework of high order. By systematically organizing and deconstructing its complex artistic forms into a set of formal principles that can be interpreted and inherited through modern design language, this study demonstrates the feasibility and value of its creative transformation in contemporary design education. Teaching practice indicates that this pathway can not only effectively enrich the connotation and depth of cultural and creative design but also help students establish an innovative methodology based on local cultural resources.

However, this research remains a preliminary exploration. In teaching practice, several issues requiring further deepening have been identified: Firstly, the balance between the accuracy of cultural interpretation and the freedom of design innovation. How to avoid misinterpretation and over-interpretation in design transformation while respecting academic research requires closer dialogue between archaeology, art history, and design studies. Secondly, the expansion of transformation levels. Current teaching practice mostly focuses on transformation at the visual-formal level. Translating the deeper spiritual values embedded in Dian bronze culture—such as primitive religious beliefs, social organizational forms, and ecological concepts—into design concepts and user experiences remains a more challenging task. Thirdly, the integration of technological media. Beyond physical products, how to utilize digital media such as motion graphics, interactive design, and virtual reality to reinterpret the dynamic and narrative-rich scenes in Ancient Dian bronze art, opening up broader dimensions for transformation, is an important direction for future research.

Funding

This research was supported by the Yunnan Provincial Department of Education under the project “A Study on the Application of the Formal Principles of Ancient Dian Bronze Sculptures in the Teaching of Cultural and Creative Design at Yunnan Universities” (Project No. 2023J0869).

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