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A Study of the Commonality between Ceramic Art and Chinese Garden Art

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Abstract

Chinese ceramics and garden art are both major carriers of traditional Chinese culture. Although each has developed a distinct artistic language and aesthetic system over a long historical process, the two are connected at a deeper level. Drawing on existing scholarship, this paper compares them across four dimensions—material basis, aesthetic orientation, spatial organization and cultural grounding—and identifies three shared principles. First, both convey aesthetic experience through tangible material forms: the clay body and decoration of ceramics, and the rocks, water, plants and architecture of gardens. Second, both pursue naturalness, harmony and poetic atmosphere (yijing), organizing the viewer's experience through the separation and composition of space. Third, both are shaped by the same cultural tradition, which gives rise to a predominantly one-way flow of subjects: landscapes, architecture, flora and human figures from gardens recur in ceramic decoration, while ceramic objects enter garden settings as furnishings. Recognising this commonality helps explain the integrity of traditional Chinese art and offers a reference for cross-medium borrowing in contemporary practice.

Keywords

Ceramic art; Garden art; Commonality; Aesthetic sensibility; Cultural infiltration

1. Introduction

Pottery and porcelain are collectively referred to as ceramics. Pottery appeared in the Neolithic period, and porcelain gradually evolved from it[1]. Ceramics were originally made as vessels for storing objects, and their value lay first in utility; with the refinement of aesthetic sensibility and advances in craftsmanship, their appreciative value steadily increased. In terms of civilizational history, pottery may be regarded as material evidence of early human civilization, while porcelain embodies the technological wisdom and aesthetic experience of the Chinese people. Both undergo processes of material selection, shaping, decoration and high-temperature firing,

through which clay is transformed by the artisan into objects of distinctive character.

A garden is an environment created within a given area by using and transforming natural landscapes, or by artificially constructing them, in combination with planting and architecture, so as to provide spaces for appreciation, recreation and dwelling. Blessed with favourable natural conditions and a profound humanistic tradition, China has produced a large number of gardens across successive dynasties. Whether the grand imperial gardens, the exquisite private gardens, or the solemn temple gardens, together they constitute a distinctive system of classical Chinese gardens[2].

Ceramic art and garden art are both important branches of Chinese aesthetics, reflecting the artistic achievement and aesthetic cultivation of earlier generations. The two are closely connected: both convey aesthetic experience through tangible media, both take different forms under the influence of cultural ideas, and both allow elements to permeate each other's making and construction. Existing scholarship has extensively discussed garden theory, garden types and spatial layout, and has systematically examined ceramic craftsmanship, decorative patterns and typological features; however, dedicated studies of the commonality between the two remain relatively limited[3-4].

On this basis, this paper addresses three questions: first, at which levels do ceramics and gardens exhibit comparable commonality? Second, what material and conceptual conditions underpin each of these commonalities? Third, what directionality and limits characterize the flow of elements between the two? In response to these questions, and drawing on a review of the literature, this paper adopts a cross-genre comparative approach and examines the two arts at four levels: material basis, aesthetic orientation, spatial organization and cultural grounding. The purpose of the comparison is not to judge which art is superior or to determine the primacy of influence, but to reveal the artistic logic shared across different genres, thereby offering a perspective for understanding the integrity of traditional Chinese art.

In terms of feasibility, the comparison in this paper rests on three conditions. First, ceramics and gardens belong to the same context of traditional Chinese culture and thus share a comparable historical and cultural premise. Second, both exist as visible and tangible material forms, providing a comparable experiential basis. Third, existing research has accumulated considerable findings on the craftsmanship, typology and layout of each, furnishing material for a cross-genre comparison. The comparison developed on this basis aims to identify commonality within difference, rather than explaining one art in terms of the other or reducing similarities simply to the effects of influence.

2. Material Basis of the Commonality: A Shared Starting Point of Beauty Embodied in Objects

People invariably convey their feelings through visible and tangible objects, and ultimately form an experience of beauty. Ceramics and gardens present beauty in

different forms, yet both must rely on a material basis: only when beauty acquires a concrete form does it possess a perceptible texture, and only then can spiritual content be distilled from specific images. The material carrier therefore constitutes the first level of the commonality between the two.

2.1. Ceramic Art: Clay Body and Ornamentation

The beauty of ceramics is presented chiefly through variations in the form of the clay body and in ornamentation. Body forms differ according to function, giving rise to such shapes as jars, vessels, tripods, gui and pots[1]; differences in proportion, contour and volume cause the objects to display rhythm and tension even at rest. Ornamentation varies with technique, with floral, dragon and cloud-and-thunder motifs among the common types. Decoration is not merely a surface addition; it unfolds along the turnings of the vessel and, together with the form, determines the visual path of the viewer. The combination of form and decoration gives ceramics an independent aesthetic value beyond their practical function.

2.2. Garden Art: Rocks, Water, Plants and Architecture

The beauty of gardens is presented through their constituent elements. Rocks, water, plants and architecture are the four basic elements of a garden, with paths and garden ornaments also commonly seen[2]. Rocks form the skeleton of the garden, water is regarded as its soul, and architecture serves its functions; the four are not displayed in isolation but form a whole through mutual complementation. Through the layout and combination of these elements, the garden designer presents the garden in different forms to the viewer. Similar to the surface of a ceramic vessel, the combination of garden elements likewise serves the organization of viewing: where the scene opens out and where it contracts is determined by the density and placement of the elements.

It can thus be seen that the commonality at the material level does not lie in the two arts using the same materials, but in both treating material form as a means of carrying aesthetic experience. Ceramics fix images in clay and glaze; gardens unfold a realm through rocks, water, flowers and trees. The one is condensed in the palm, the other extends with the pace of the walker; yet in both, beauty must first take the form of a perceptible object before it can be further experienced and interpreted.

3. Aesthetic Orientation of the Commonality: Nature, Harmony and Yijing

Building on this material basis, both ceramics and gardens pursue natural beauty, harmonious beauty and the beauty of yijing in their making. Progressing from the superficial to the profound, these three correspond respectively to material and subject matter, form and structure, and meaning and realm, jointly reflecting the distinctive aesthetic sensibility and aspirations of the Chinese people.

3.1. The Pursuit of Natural Beauty

Ceramic making generally employs natural materials such as clay, and the finished object retains a connection with nature. Artisans often take things of the natural world as their themes: landscapes, flowers and birds, and animals are incorporated into both form and decoration, while technique and colour convey the vitality of nature. Garden making follows the principle of "rooted in nature yet surpassing nature," emphasising the representation and simulation of natural scenery and creating a sense of being immersed in nature through spatial layout and planting. Within the garden, rocks and water, plants and architecture are all regarded as components of nature, merging and setting one another off to form a harmonious whole. The attitude of both arts towards nature is not simple imitation; it is refinement grounded in respect for the properties of natural things, so that human-made works do not lose the charm of the natural.

3.2. The Embodiment of Harmonious Beauty

In ceramic art, artisans emphasise the unity of form and decoration, so that the work presents a visually harmonious beauty. Taking blue-and-white porcelain as an example, the artisan selects patterns and colours according to the shape and function of the vessel, ensuring that decoration and object coordinate with each other; the unity of material and technique is also valued, as fine raw materials and consummate skill together guarantee the quality of the finished piece. Garden making likewise treats harmony as an important criterion: architecture coexists harmoniously with the natural environment, and a unified spatial landscape is formed through layout and planting. Buildings in the garden are mostly rendered in simple, natural lines and colours that complement their surroundings; the unity of the humanistic and the natural is achieved through the incorporation of cultural elements such as poetry and painting, enriching the garden's meaning and yijing. It is evident that, in both arts, harmony means the coordination of differing elements rather than the repetition of identity.

3.3. The Creation of the Beauty of Yijing

Ceramic art attaches importance to the creation of yijing. Through skill and imagination, the artisan imbues the work with meaning and charm, so that beyond its form it possesses both poetic and philosophical resonance. Works with landscape themes often employ concise lines and subtle colours to express the seclusion and tranquillity of mountains and water; works with figure themes convey the inner world and emotional states of their subjects through delicate brushwork and vivid imagery. Garden making likewise places yijing in a prominent position: through spatial layout and planting, the garden forms a specific atmospheric mood; rocks and water, plants and architecture are all regarded as elements in the creation of yijing; the designer employs contrast and foil to produce an interplay of void and solid and a

balance of movement and stillness[5], while poetry and painting deepen the layers of the garden's meaning. This shared pursuit of yijing shows that neither art takes sensory gratification as its endpoint; both use finite forms to point towards infinite meaning.

Although the three aesthetic orientations are emphasised to different degrees in the two arts, they form a progressive relationship: natural beauty establishes the direction of subject matter and materials, harmonious beauty governs the organisation of form and structure, and the beauty of yijing points to the spiritual content of the work. From nature to harmony, and from harmony to yijing, there traces an ascending path from external image to inner meaning. This path unfolds in parallel in ceramics and gardens, indicating that what the two rely on is not an accidental similarity but the realisation of the same aesthetic value system in different media.

4. Spatial Logic of the Commonality: An Order of Viewing through Separation and Composition

Aesthetic orientations require concrete means of organisation in order to be realised. Both ceramics and gardens attach importance to the separation and composition of space, and through spatial treatment produce a specific artistic atmosphere and aesthetic effect. "Space" here refers both to the volume of an object and the layout of its surface, and to the pattern and sequence of movement through a garden; the two differ greatly in scale, yet follow a similar logic of organisation.

4.1. Spatial Treatment in Ceramics

Spatial treatment in ceramics is manifested chiefly in two aspects: form design and decorative pattern. Form design determines shape according to the function of the object and aesthetic requirements: tea wares, to satisfy the aesthetics of tea drinking, generally adopt graceful forms with flowing lines that are convenient to hold and to appreciate; tableware places greater emphasis on the combination of utility and beauty, serving daily use while remaining appreciative. Decorative patterns are likewise selected according to form and function. Blue-and-white porcelain often arranges landscapes, flowers and birds in accordance with the shape and size of the vessel, allowing the image to unfold with the turnings of the body; famille-rose porcelain favours figures and flowers, using delicate brushwork and rich colour to render vivid and tender images. These patterns not only enrich the artistic content and aesthetic value of ceramics, but through their layout and composition create a specific spatial atmosphere and visual effect, guiding the viewer's gaze in an orderly movement across the surface[6-7].

4.2. Spatial Treatment in Gardens

Spatial treatment in gardens operates at two levels: overall planning and the design

of individual scenes. Overall planning is drawn up according to topography, climate, and the functional and aesthetic needs of the garden: private gardens in the Jiangnan region often exploit the terrain to create spaces in which rocks and water depend on one another and paths wind and turn[8], while the division and composition of space produce an interplay of void and solid and a balance of movement and stillness. Scene design selects architectural forms and planting according to theme and function: in the treatment of water, bridges and revetments enrich the layering and three-dimensional quality of the surface, while aquatic and ornamental plants create a clear and natural landscape atmosphere; planting combines species according to their form and colour so that the overall visual effect tends towards harmony and unity. The separation of space allows the landscape to unfold layer by layer, and the movement of the visitor is thereby endowed with a sequential order[2].

Placing the two side by side, we see that ceramics delimit the boundary of viewing through the form of the vessel, while gardens extend the process of viewing through the visitor's route. The former is condensed space, the latter unfolded space; yet both, through separation and composition, guide a free gaze into an ordered act of seeing. This similarity in spatial logic is a key link in establishing the commonality.

5. Cultural Grounding of the Commonality and the Interpenetration of Elements

The similarities described above at the material, aesthetic and spatial levels are not accidental; their deeper reason lies in the fact that both arts have been shaped by traditional Chinese culture. This shared cultural origin further promotes the flow of subjects and elements between the two arts. Cultural grounding and the interpenetration of elements therefore constitute the fourth level examined in this paper.

5.1. A Shared Cultural Origin

Ceramic art originated in the Neolithic period and is one of the important markers of ancient Chinese civilisation; its development passed through a process from simple to complex and from coarse to refined. In this process, artisans valued both the transmission and innovation of technique and the incorporation of national sentiment, religious belief and aesthetic ideas into their work, making ceramics an art form of profound cultural content. Garden art is an important component of ancient Chinese culture, its origins traceable to the palaces and private gardens of the pre-Qin period[9]; over the course of history it gradually developed a style represented by the private gardens of Jiangnan and came to occupy an important place in traditional Chinese culture. Although the two belong to different categories—objects and environment—they share a cultural foundation of views on nature, cosmology and the enjoyments of life. It is upon this common root that the aforementioned aesthetic orientations and spatial consciousness take mutually intelligible forms.

5.2. The Transformation of Garden Elements into Ceramics

The constituent elements of the classical garden include landscapes, architecture, flowers and trees, and human figures, all of which are fully reflected in ceramic decoration. Landscapes are used chiefly to express the beauty of nature, with artisans rendering the spirit and momentum of mountains and water on the vessel's surface through fine brushwork and rich colour[10]. Architectural elements express the beauty of classical garden buildings, so that pavilions, terraces, towers, corridors, bridges and waterside kiosks are reproduced on ceramics[11]. Flowers and trees are no less widely used: peonies, plum blossoms and bamboo possess not only ornamental form but also cultural meaning and symbolic significance. Human figures convey the activities and emotions of the garden, with scenes such as scholars drinking tea and admiring flowers, or ladies playing the qin and composing poems, becoming common decorative subjects.

5.3. Refinement, Innovation and Reverse Permeation of Subjects

While reproducing the classical garden, ceramics also refine and innovate upon it. On the one hand, artisans summarise and distil garden scenery and architectural images through technique and conception, giving them a more concentrated presentation on the object[12]; on the other, creators incorporate their own aesthetic views and creative ideas, allowing garden subjects to continue in new forms and techniques. Some creators introduce modern design concepts into the expression of garden themes, producing works that are both contemporary and fashionable; others draw on new ceramic materials and techniques so that the classical garden appears on ceramics in richer forms and more delicate visual effects. At the same time, ceramic objects enter the garden environment as furnishings and utensils, participating in the creation of its scenes of daily life[13-14]. On the evidence available to this paper, the transformation of garden elements into ceramics is marked, while the reverse influence of ceramics upon gardens is relatively limited; the flow of elements is thus uneven in direction, and this unevenness itself reflects the differences between the two arts in medium and function.

Taking the four levels together, it can be seen that the commonality is not a coincidence of scattered traits but a whole with an internal structure: the material basis provides the prerequisite of a carrier, aesthetic orientation defines its value direction, spatial logic supplies its mode of organisation, and cultural grounding explains the origin of the similarities. The interpenetration of elements takes place upon this structure and is the outward manifestation of the commonality at the level of subject matter. The four levels support one another, making the commonality an object that can be described layer by layer and also understood as a whole.

6. Conclusion

This paper has compared ceramic art and garden art with respect to their

commonality at four levels: material basis, aesthetic orientation, spatial organization and cultural grounding. It is argued that the commonality consists first in a shared way of carrying aesthetic experience through material form, secondly in a shared pursuit of nature, harmony and yijing, thirdly in a spatial logic that establishes an order of viewing through separation and composition, and finally in roots within the same traditional culture. At the level of elements, the transformation of garden subjects into ceramics constitutes the principal flow, while the entry of ceramic objects into gardens represents a limited reverse permeation. Moving from the concrete to the abstract and from form to meaning, the four levels together show that, although the two arts belong to different categories, they share a deep artistic logic.

This conclusion offers a clue to understanding the integrity of traditional Chinese art: the boundaries between categories are not impermeable, and the shared logic at the material, aesthetic and conceptual levels allows different forms of art to confirm one another. In the contemporary context, the relationship between the two retains its relevance: an understanding of their commonality helps cross-genre creation avoid the simple transplantation of subjects and instead turn towards the transformation and re-creation of a shared artistic logic.

It should be noted that this paper takes the review of literature and cross-genre comparison as its principal methods, and that its material consists mainly of existing research and general descriptions; no systematic iconographic or object-based analysis of specific works has yet been undertaken. The conclusions therefore apply chiefly to an overall description of the commonality and should not be extended directly to individual works or specific historical periods. Future research could combine case studies of representative objects and gardens to test how the four levels identified here manifest in different periods, and to provide a more detailed account of the directionality and limits of the flow of elements.

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