

Visual Structure and Regional Identity in Guangfu Plaster Sculpture

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Abstract

This study explores the visual structure and regional identity embedded in Guangfu plaster sculpture, a distinctive decorative art form in the Lingnan region of China. Drawing from the dimensions of compositional structure, iconographic motifs, and color systems, the research deconstructs the internal logic of Guangfu plaster's visual language. Through a comprehensive analysis of its image organization, spatial patterns, and symbolic color arrangements, the study reveals how visual order in Guangfu plaster not only reflects aesthetic preferences but also serves as a medium for expressing cultural values and constructing regional identity. By proposing a triadic analytical framework of "form-motif-symbolism," the paper contributes to both theoretical understanding and practical application in the fields of heritage preservation, visual culture studies, and regional aesthetics. The findings also lay the groundwork for further cross-disciplinary studies involving digital modeling, iconographic mapping, and intercultural dissemination of traditional imagery.

Keywords

Guangfu plaster sculpture; Visual structure; Regional identity; Iconographic motifs; Symbolic color; Compositional aesthetics; Cultural representation.

1. Introduction

Guangfu plaster sculpture, a significant component of traditional architectural decoration in the Lingnan region of southern China, holds high regional representativeness and artistic value. As a folk craft that primarily uses lime, shell ash, and paper fiber, it serves not only as a material-based technique but also as a visual medium that conveys cultural symbols and aesthetic language. In ancestral halls, temples, and classical gardens, these plaster images—through compositional structures, modeling forms, and color arrangements—establish a visual system characterized by narration, symbolism, and spatial adaptability. This system not only shapes the aesthetic atmosphere of architecture but also visualizes social hierarchies, religious beliefs, and local folk culture within spatial contexts.

In recent years, academic research on plaster sculpture has primarily focused on production techniques, thematic content, and cultural significance. However, relatively little attention has been paid to the dimension of *formal composition* within its image system. Specifically, there remains a lack of systematic theoretical analysis and structural interpretation regarding the compositional logic, modeling style, and color order of Guangfu plaster sculpture. Therefore, this study adopts a perspective grounded in art theory and visual culture to examine how the formal system of Guangfu plaster sculpture constructs a unique regional aesthetic paradigm through its visual order.

This research addresses three core questions: First, what are the characteristic types of compositional modes in Guangfu plaster sculpture, and how do their spatial organizations correspond to architectural layouts and ritual functions? Second, how do its modeling language

and color systems reflect regional styles and vernacular aesthetic preferences? Third, in what ways does this formal system fulfill aesthetic and symbolic functions in the interaction between culture and space?

To address these questions, this study employs methods such as iconographic analysis, compositional classification, and stylistic synthesis, drawing on representative case studies to reveal the structural features and aesthetic logic of its visual language. By constructing a systematic understanding of the formal aesthetics of Guangfu plaster sculpture, this paper aims to enrich the analytical framework of decorative sculpture studies, support contemporary interpretations of Chinese regional art traditions, and offer a concrete example for international discourse on the aesthetic structure and cultural meaning of Chinese traditional decorative art.

2. Literature Review

As one of the most representative forms of architectural decorative art in the Lingnan region, Guangfu plaster sculpture is characterized by its intricate compositional structures, vivid modeling styles, and vibrant visual presentations. Together, these elements construct a highly organized, region-specific image system. In recent years, as interest in intangible cultural heritage and regional culture has grown, academic research on Guangfu plaster sculpture has expanded from thematic categorization and cultural interpretation to investigations of formal language and visual logic. This shift has led to the formation of a research trajectory that emphasizes visual structure and aesthetic systems.

In terms of compositional analysis, Pang, Yang, and Qin (2025), through an iconographic study of grey sculpture in Guangfu-style dwellings in southern Guangxi, identified three major compositional modes frequently found in Guangfu plaster sculpture: “horizontal expansion,” “vertical nesting,” and “thematic aggregation.” These compositional approaches exhibit clear directionality and layering, aligning closely with the spatial layouts of Lingnan architecture. They demonstrate an organic integration of “image–axis–ritual space,” reinforcing both the ceremonial function and visual guidance within architectural settings.

Regarding modeling style, Li and Liu (2018), in their comparative study of Guangzhou plaster sculpture and Shandong brick relief, pointed out that Guangfu plaster sculpture places greater emphasis on dynamic expression and narrative construction in its depictions of figures. Its modeling characteristics embody a synthesis of narrative, rhythm, and symbolism. Especially in themes such as opera characters, historical stories, and auspicious beasts, Guangfu plaster sculpture enhances visual impact through expressive gestures and rhythmic compositions, forming a regional aesthetic distinct from northern plaster styles.

In terms of color system research, Pang (2024) summarized that Guangfu plaster sculpture typically employs high-saturation hues such as red, green, and gold, occasionally complemented by cool tones like blue and black. This color arrangement serves to highlight visual focus and intensify cultural symbolism. The color system reveals a unique regional aesthetic logic that combines festivity, auspiciousness, and decorativeness. He (2019), in his analysis of the Chen Clan Ancestral Hall’s plaster decorations, noted that color choices are not merely for visual appeal but are instead planned based on spatial function, thematic content, and viewer perspective, resulting in a visually hierarchical and rationally organized color structure.

Additionally, Li (2022), in her focused study on the plaster ornamentation of the Chen Clan Ancestral Hall in Guangzhou, argued that the image system demonstrates not only a high degree of formal order in composition and modeling but also deep integration with the logic of spatial power and clan ritual. Her work provides cultural insight into the social functions of Guangfu plaster imagery, extending beyond formal aesthetics.

In summary, current research on Guangfu plaster sculpture has yielded foundational achievements in areas such as compositional logic, modeling language, and color systems. A preliminary framework of image-centered analysis—encompassing form, symbol, and semantic dimensions—has emerged. However, most existing studies remain at the descriptive or case-specific level and lack an integrated theoretical model that synthesizes composition, modeling, and color systems into a unified visual structure. This study thus builds upon existing literature to further elucidate the intrinsic mechanisms of Guangfu plaster sculpture's formal aesthetics and construct the structural logic of its visual system, offering a systematic case for exploring regional styles within Chinese traditional decorative arts.

3. Composition Patterns and Visual Logic

In the visual system of Guangfu plaster sculpture, composition is not merely a method of organizing imagery but a mechanism of visual order shaped by spatial structure, symbolic meaning, and viewer pathway. The arrangement, rhythm, and structure of imagery embody the regional visual logic of “order–symbolism–narrativity,” forming a distinct compositional paradigm that differentiates Guangfu from other plaster traditions.

3.1. Types of Composition and Regional Structures

The compositional patterns of Guangfu plaster sculpture can be categorized into three main types: (1) Horizontal expansion, typically seen in elongated architectural elements such as eaves and gables, forming narrative visual sequences; (2) Vertical nesting, applied to vertical elements like door panels and columns, organizing imagery in layered symbolic depth; and (3) Symbolic aggregation, often found in focal areas such as shrine panels and name plaques, where imagery clusters to highlight symbolic themes and clan identity. (Pang, Yang, & Qin, 2025)

These compositional types correspond not only to the technical adaptability of materials and forms but also to the architectural logic of Guangfu buildings characterized by axial symmetry, functional zoning, and spatial hierarchy. For instance, in the central hall of the Chen Clan Ancestral Hall, horizontal scroll-like compositions featuring auspicious themes such as “Scholarly Success” or “Five Blessings” dominate the main ridge, while vertically arranged moral narratives like “Filial Piety and Loyalty” appear on side doors and pillars, matching the spatial distribution of cultural function. (Li, 2022)

3.2. Image Distribution and Spatial Hierarchies

The compositional system of Guangfu plaster sculpture is closely aligned with the architectural spatial structure, reflecting a coding logic of “space–image–meaning.” Li Chao (2023) points out that the imagery typically unfolds along three types of architectural axes: (1) primary axes (e.g., main gates, central halls, ancestral altars), which carry images representing patriarchal authority and ritual symbolism; (2) secondary axes (e.g., side rooms, flanking halls), featuring images of domestic blessings and well-being; and (3) peripheral components (e.g., gables, eaves, ridge ends), which are used for ornamental purposes or moral instruction.

This nested spatial-image system not only conveys symbolic hierarchy but also serves as a visual guide, representing a material embodiment of spatial order within Lingnan traditional architecture.

3.3. Visual Rhythm and Narrative Mechanism

Composition also functions as a mechanism of visual rhythm. Through symmetry, repetition, boundary ornamentation, and focal emphasis, Guangfu plaster compositions create an experience of visual coherence and dynamic balance. In the main hall ridge of the Chen Clan Ancestral Hall, for example, symmetrical arrangements of figures and a visually reinforced central motif create a focused and hierarchical visual center. In contrast, the decorative scheme

at Liang Garden tends to adopt a surrounding narrative layout, guiding the viewer through a sequential visual story as they move along the corridor. (He, 2019; Su, 2021)


This compositional system, characterized by “rhythm–focus–guidance,” achieves not only formal beauty but also reinforces the cultural messaging embedded in the imagery. It exemplifies a unique visual logic that distinguishes Guangfu plaster sculpture from northern decorative traditions.

4. Iconographic Motifs and Symbolic System

In the art of Guangfu plaster sculpture, images are not merely decorative visual elements but carriers of cultural meaning and tools for constructing regional identity. The selection of motifs, the combination of symbols, and the organizational logic of imagery together constitute the distinctive visual symbolic system of Guangfu plaster sculpture. This system embodies local beliefs and ethical values, and through stylized visual expression, forms a stable symbolic language and regional style.

4.1. Categories of Iconographic Motifs

The iconographic motifs in Guangfu plaster sculpture are diverse and can be broadly categorized into six types: (1) Auspicious motifs, such as the Three Stars of Blessing, Prosperity, and Longevity; the Eight Immortals; and lotus with carp, which express blessings and good fortune; (2) Opera themes, such as “Three Heroes Battle Lü Bu” or “Mu Guiying Takes Command,” which reflect the region’s operatic culture; (3) Historical stories, like “Wang Zhaojun Goes Beyond the Great Wall” or “Tattooing of Yue Fei,” emphasizing loyalty and filial piety; (4) Religious deities, including Mazu, Guan Yu, and the Heavenly Empress, representing local faith systems; (5) Nature and animals, such as pine and crane, the Four Gentlemen (plum, orchid, bamboo, chrysanthemum), and auspicious beasts, symbolizing longevity, virtue, or good omens; and (6) Ethical themes, such as the “Twenty-Four Filial Exemplars” or “Loyalty, Filial Piety, Integrity,” which serve moral and didactic purposes.

This classification is based on a systematic sampling and comparison of image themes in representative buildings throughout the Guangfu region, forming an integrated structure of “theme–symbol–spatial distribution.” For instance, auspicious motifs like prosperity and promotion often appear along the central axis of main halls, while moralistic motifs are typically placed on gables or over doorways, clearly reflecting the semantic partitioning of imagery.  (Pang, Yang, & Qin, 2025)

4.2. Symbolic Structure and Organizational Logic

The symbolic system of Guangfu plaster sculpture is not only dependent on the richness of motif types but also reflected in the compositional logic and spatial placement of symbols. Pang (2024) notes that Guangfu plaster sculpture commonly adopts a model of “motif + structural element + symbolic combination,” where each image is tied to a specific architectural location and interacts with neighboring motifs in a semantic sequence of “symbolism–reinforcement–guidance.”

For example, on door plaques of the Chen Clan Ancestral Hall, the Three Stars are often combined with “pine and crane” motifs to express blessings of longevity and fertility. On pillars, “Tattooing of Yue Fei” may be accompanied by supporting elements like “a rock of honesty” or “a loyal dog,” reinforcing the overarching theme of righteousness. This compound image structure enriches the visual narrative while forming a highly stylized “visual sentence” system.

4.3. Integration of Folk Beliefs and Cultural Semantics

The visual symbolic system of Guangfu plaster sculpture is deeply rooted in local folk beliefs and ethical traditions, drawing on a visualized expression of syncretic Confucian, Buddhist, and

Daoist values. Li (2023) points out that these images often overlay multiple symbolic layers—auspiciousness, authority, and morality—creating a visual institutionalization of regional spiritual structures.

Motifs such as “Guan Yu,” “Mazu,” and “The Three Stars” may appear together, forming a triad of “protection–blessing–legacy” in local belief systems. Moreover, these symbolic images function not only within domestic and ancestral spaces but also construct a visual guidance system of “space–symbol–psychology,” allowing viewers to engage in a symbolic “reading journey” as they move through architectural spaces.

5. Color System and Visual Symbolism

The color system of Guangfu plaster sculpture not only reflects aesthetic preferences but also carries rich symbolic meanings, ritual functions, and spatial order logic. Its use of highly saturated colors, bold color blocks, and situational color narratives forms a distinct visual language imbued with strong regional characteristics.

5.1. Color Materials and Application Techniques

Guangfu plaster sculpture typically utilizes natural materials such as lime, plant glue, and mineral pigments. These substances exhibit strong adhesion and opacity, which help preserve the color’s saturation and longevity (Huang, 2022). Techniques such as flat coloring, gold outlining, and partial tinting are commonly applied on complex three-dimensional surfaces, enabling vivid contrast and layered visual expression.

5.2. Color Coordination and Spatial Distribution Logic

In terms of spatial configuration, Guangfu plaster sculpture adopts a “bright center–soft periphery–ornamental margins” rhythm strategy. According to Lin (2021), bright and high-saturation colors like red, gold, and blue are frequently used in key ritual spaces such as central halls and ancestral altars, while neutral tones like light blue, green, and beige are employed in subsidiary halls and wall surfaces to soften the visual intensity. Xu (2024) further explains that this chromatic rhythm aligns with the axial spatial structure of Lingnan architecture, creating a multi-dimensional guiding system that connects color, space, and function.

5.3. Color Symbolism and Semantic Integration

Colors in Guangfu plaster sculpture carry profound symbolic meanings. Yu (2020) analyzes the symbolic implications of traditional Chinese colors, noting that red represents celebration and masculinity; gold connotes wealth and divinity; green symbolizes life and peace; and black or blue is associated with solemnity and sacredness, especially in religious settings.

In the image system of Guangfu plaster sculpture, color often pairs with iconographic motifs in stable combinations. Xie (2023) notes that figures like Guan Gong are typically depicted with dark green robes and golden armor to emphasize loyalty and valor; the “Three Stars of Fortune” are painted with red backgrounds and gold outlines to highlight prosperity and protection; while themes such as “Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea” often feature light pink, green, and blue to convey harmony and well-being. This “color–character–context” triadic encoding mechanism forms the symbolic infrastructure of Guangfu imagery.

6. Integration of Visual Order and Regional Style

As a representative decorative art within the Lingnan cultural system, Guangfu plaster sculpture exhibits a visual style that is not shaped by isolated aesthetic choices, but rather by the interactive influence of natural ecology, local cultural structure, and clan-based architectural systems. Its iconographic motifs, compositional structures, color systems, and spatial arrangements jointly form a highly stylized and symbolically encoded “visual order,”

which serves as both a formal decorative scheme and a visual mechanism for constructing regional cultural identity.

6.1. Interaction Between Regional Ecology and Aesthetic Style

Situated in the subtropical climate zone of southern China, the Lingnan region features high humidity and abundant rainfall. Traditional architecture in this region often adopts open layouts and exposed roof structures. These climatic and architectural features contribute to the formation of Guangfu plaster sculpture's expressive strategies—highly saturated colors, bold contrasts, horizontal compositions, and multi-layered arrangements. Huang (2017) argues that this ecological-formal coupling mechanism underpins the characteristic visual features of Guangfu plaster, such as the prevalent use of red, green, gold, and blue tones, and the horizontally extended or nested compositional patterns.

In this context, the visual structure of Guangfu plaster operates as a triadic coordination mechanism of “visual tension–spatial orientation–cultural function,” in which imagery guides not only the visual experience but also the social and symbolic logic of architectural space.

6.2. Symbolic Structure and Cultural Logic of the Visual System

The iconographic organization in Guangfu plaster sculpture is marked by formulaic repetition and cultural specificity. According to Wang and Cai (2023), these motifs are not simply reused but are locally reorganized and functionally matched to specific architectural spaces, forming a symbolic structure that integrates decoration, cultural signification, and moral instruction.

For instance, the recurring motif of the “Three Stars” (Fu, Lu, Shou) is not only frequently placed in ancestral halls but also aligned with architectural axes and clan hierarchy, thereby performing a ritualized visual function that goes beyond aesthetics.

6.3. Visual Marking of Regional Style

On a structural level, Guangfu plaster sculpture has developed a complete system of regional visual style, characterized by: (1) the folk and secular nature of its thematic motifs; (2) the horizontal expansion and spatial envelopment of its compositional structure; and (3) the festive and ceremonial logic of its color palette. These three features collectively constitute the visual markers that distinguish Guangfu plaster from other regional styles such as those in Fujian, Jiangsu, and Jiangxi. Tang (2020) identifies these markers as key elements in the visual reproduction of regional cultural identity.

Hence, Guangfu plaster sculpture should not be narrowly defined as a decorative art form, but rather as a spatial visual language that embodies cultural authority and expresses regional identity through a formalized order of imagery.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, as a vital embodiment of traditional Lingnan decorative arts, Guangfu plaster sculpture demonstrates a highly organized, symbolic, and regionally distinctive visual system. This study, by focusing on three core dimensions—compositional structure, iconographic motifs, and color systems—has deconstructed the internal logic of its visual order and explored how this order contributes to the construction of regional cultural identity. Through a systematic analysis of its image system, the study clarifies the formal principles underlying Guangfu plaster sculpture while proposing a triadic “image–space–semantics” framework for understanding local visual culture.

Theoretically, this research bridges a significant gap between the visual formation of Guangfu plaster imagery and its deeper symbolic-cultural integration. It also offers a model for interpreting how regional decorative arts can encode cultural identity through formal logic.

Practically, the findings provide a conceptual foundation for preservation, redesign, and cross-media communication of plaster art.

Future research could expand on this foundation by incorporating digital modeling, visual symbol recognition technologies, or cross-cultural reception studies to explore new modes of expression and global dissemination strategies for Guangfu plaster sculpture.

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