

A Review of Research on Plant Motifs on Everyday Objects of the Song Dynasty

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Abstract

The Song dynasty represents a pivotal period in the transformation of Chinese social structure, the rise of Neo-Confucian thought, and the evolution of decorative art. During this era, plant motifs completed a historic transition from the "divine and aristocratic" aesthetic paradigm of the Tang dynasty to a "rational and secularized" one. Grounded in archaeological typology, this article systematically reviews scholarship of the past three decades on plant motifs found on everyday objects of the Song dynasty, focusing on the establishment of periodization frameworks, typological studies linking motifs to social structure, iconographic approaches to interpretation, and specialized research on individual material categories such as ceramics and silk textiles. On this basis, the article argues that existing scholarship suffers from two principal limitations: at the macro level, the sample of motifs examined remains insufficient and cross-category comparison is largely absent; at the micro level, research on different material categories tends to proceed in isolation from one another. This article contends that only by grounding analysis in archaeologically excavated artifacts and integrating motif systems across ceramics, gold and silver ware, and silk textiles can the evolutionary patterns of Song-dynasty plant motifs—and the shifts in social aesthetics they embody—be more fully revealed.

Keywords

Song dynasty; plant motifs; everyday objects; archaeological typology; decorative art.

1. Introduction

The Song dynasty was a pivotal period of social transformation and cultural evolution in premodern China. As the imperial examination system matured and the urban commoner class expanded, Chinese society underwent an unprecedented process of "commonization"; at the same time, the Neo-Confucian methodology of "the investigation of things" (*gewu zhizhi*) infused the aesthetic sensibilities of the age with a new emphasis on rationality and verisimilitude. Under this twofold impetus, decorative art completed its historic transition from the "divine and aristocratic" character of the Tang dynasty to the "rational and secularized" character of the Song [1]. Plant motifs—peony, lotus, daylily, chrysanthemum, and others—gradually shed their subordinate status as mere accessory ornamentation and rose to become independent objects of visual representation and aesthetic contemplation, owing to their naturalistic, verisimilar forms and their embodiment of the principle that "every image must carry meaning, and every meaning must be auspicious." In doing so, they came to encapsulate the Song literati's reverence for nature and their pursuit of an aesthetic of "artless naturalness" (*pingdan tianzhen*) [4].

The Song dynasty has long been regarded as the "formative period" and the "period of consummation" in the history of Chinese decorative motifs [1]. Plant motifs on everyday objects, as the material embodiment of the aesthetic spirit of this era, not only display remarkable craftsmanship but also carry a wealth of historical information. Meng Yuanlao's detailed

account, in the Dongjing Menghua Lu (A Dream of Splendor in the Eastern Capital), of the flourishing seasonal customs and interwoven flower markets of the capital Bianjing [12], together with Wu Zimu's summary in the Mengliang Lu (Record of the Millet Dream) of the "four refined pursuits"—burning incense, brewing tea, hanging paintings, and arranging flowers [13]—together constitute a distinctive record of Song urban life and, at the textual level, corroborate the widespread enthusiasm across Song society for the aesthetics of natural flora. This social ethos formed the societal foundation upon which plant motifs came to be extensively developed across ceramics, gold and silver ware, silk textiles, and other everyday objects.

A systematic examination of the types, techniques, and evolution of Song-dynasty plant motifs offers a broader observational vantage point for the study of Song decorative art, deepens our understanding of the relationship between Song social aesthetics and material culture, and provides historical reference for the contemporary transmission and reinvention of traditional motifs. This article accordingly undertakes a systematic review of existing scholarship on plant motifs on everyday objects of the Song dynasty and identifies the areas in which further breakthroughs are needed.

2. Historical Trajectory and Theoretical Foundations of Song Plant-Motif Research

2.1. Establishing a Periodization Framework: From Tracing Origins to Determining Stylistic Stages

At the macro-historical level, Zhang Xiaoxia's doctoral dissertation, *The Origins and Development of Ancient Chinese Plant Decorative Motifs*, is of foundational significance [1]. Employing methods drawn from archaeological typology and systems theory, this study divides the development of ancient Chinese plant motifs into four stages: an incipient stage (from remote antiquity to the Han dynasty), a transitional stage (the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties), a developmental stage (the Sui and Tang dynasties), and a flourishing stage (the Five Dynasties, Song, and Yuan), explicitly designating the Five Dynasties–Song–Yuan period as the "formative period" of ancient Chinese plant motifs [1]. The study pays particular attention to the profound influence of the flourishing of bird-and-flower painting on the pictorial quality and verisimilitude of contemporaneous motifs on material objects, arguing that the rise of literati-official culture in the Song imbued motifs with a rational, poetic refinement, while the gradual advance of popular culture rendered motif subjects increasingly infused with the flavor of everyday life [1]. This periodization framework has furnished subsequent scholarship with a fundamental historical coordinate system and a point of reference for tracing stylistic evolution.

2.2. Typological Research and Its Relation to Social Structure

In the domain of detailed classification and periodization, Gu Li, in *A Study of Decorative Motifs of the Song, Liao, Xia, and Jin Dynasties* [2] and "On the Paradigm of Song-Dynasty Decorative Motifs" [3], applies archaeological typology to systematically classify and periodize the motifs found on artifacts excavated from the territories of the Song, Liao, Western Xia, and Jin regimes, and further correlates variations in motif form with social-structural factors such as social class, ethnic identity, and economic mode, seeking to uncover the ethnic identities and social stratifications underlying stylistic differences [2]. By integrating morphological analysis of motifs with the study of social and cultural history, this line of research provides a critical analytical framework for understanding both the differentiation and the commonalities of plant motifs across different social groups in the Song period.

2.3. The Introduction of Iconographic Interpretation

In *A Study of the Connotations of Song-Dynasty Plant Ornamentation* [4], Meng Dehong adopts a research method that combines typology, iconography, and the mutual corroboration of historical texts. Drawing on a systematic record and statistical analysis of Song-dynasty ceramics, bronze mirrors, and silk textiles held in the collections of institutions such as the Palace Museum and the Shanghai Museum, the study classifies these artifacts along three dimensions—plant species, compositional form, and material medium—and, building on Erwin Panofsky's three-tiered iconographic method, proceeds through formal analysis, thematic identification, and cultural interpretation [4]. This study demonstrates that motif research confined to formal description alone cannot penetrate the deeper cultural significance of the material; the introduction of iconographic method offers a workable path for elucidating the relationship between decorative motifs and the history of thought, religion, and folk custom.

2.4. Deepening the Discourse on "Shengsehua" (Motifs of Living Color)

In *A Study of "Shengsehua" (Vividly Colored Floral) Patterns of the Song Dynasty* [5], Qin Hailun offers a systematic elucidation of shengsehua, a concept with strong roots in indigenous Song-dynasty decorative theory. Drawing on extant Song-dynasty silk textiles, ceramics, lacquerware, and architectural polychrome painting held in collections such as the Palace Museum and the Shanghai Museum, the study demonstrates the central place of shengsehua within the system of Song decorative arts, emphasizing the sense of vitality and natural charm that floral patterns convey even within a static decorative form. The study situates this concept within the broader Song aesthetic pursuit of "genuine naturalness," concluding that Song-dynasty plant motifs are, at their core, a material expression of a way of life and an aesthetic ideal [5]. This body of research suggests that the study of plant motifs cannot remain at the level of formal description alone, but must penetrate more deeply into the cultural connotations and philosophy of life that underlie them.

3. Specialized Research by Material Category

Alongside the construction of macro-level theoretical frameworks, existing scholarship has also accumulated a substantial body of empirical research on specific material categories, notably ceramics and silk textiles.

3.1. Research on Ceramic Objects

As the most representative category of everyday object in the Song dynasty, ceramics have generated a particularly rich body of motif research. In *A Preliminary Discussion of the Decorative Art of Song-Dynasty Ceramics* [6], Hu Xizhen combines textual synthesis with comparative analysis of extant artifacts to establish an analytical framework built on three core dimensions—decorative subject matter, craft technique, and vessel typology—offering a relatively comprehensive account of the overall landscape of Song ceramic decoration and providing an empirical foundation for horizontal comparisons of decorative styles across kilns and periods [6].

In *A Study of the Decorative Motifs on Song-Dynasty Yaozhou Celadon* [7], Ma Xuan employs a method of pictorial-morphological analysis focused on the carved and stamped motifs found on Yaozhou-kiln celadon wares of the Song dynasty. The study establishes a clear classificatory system, dividing the plant motifs found on Yaozhou ware into two broad categories—"principal motifs" and "auxiliary motifs"—and further subdividing these into a number of specific types [7]. This classificatory approach and its methodology offer valuable reference for comparative studies of motif characteristics across vessel categories and kiln sites.

In *An Archaeological Study of Ceramic Pillows of the Song and Yuan Dynasties* [8], Liu Hui applies archaeological typology to conduct a systematic periodization and regional analysis of ceramic pillows of the Song and Yuan periods, situating these objects within the broader framework of the social history of daily life in the Song and Yuan. Through a systematic statistical survey of the decorative themes found on pillow surfaces, the study finds that plant motifs account for as much as 63.7 percent of the decorative repertoire on ceramic pillows of the Song–Jin period, with principal motifs such as peony, lotus, and chrysanthemum embodying not only literati aesthetic sensibilities but also rich folk-auspicious connotations [8]. The archaeological chronological system established in this study also provides an important scientific basis for the dating of related artifacts..

3.2. Research on Silk Textiles

In the field of silk textiles, Chen Ruixin, in *A Study of the Aesthetic Connotations of Plant Motifs on Song-Dynasty Silk* [9], undertakes a mutually corroborative analysis of silk motifs alongside Song-dynasty poetry and painting, offering an in-depth exploration of the aesthetic pursuits and cultural connotations underlying these refined patterns. In *An Analysis of Sprig-Flower (Zhezhihua) Motifs in Song-Dynasty Woven and Embroidered Textiles and Their Cultural Connotations* [10], Su Jing examines the application of sprig-flower motifs across different social contexts of use, revealing the spiritual world and philosophy of life of Song-dynasty literati embedded within these motifs, and thereby outlining a relatively complete symbolic system [10]. In *A Cultural Interpretation of Plant Decorative Motifs of the Song and Yuan Dynasties* [11], Mao Xianyun supplements existing scholarship by examining more explicitly secular thematic types such as "the year in bloom" (yinian jing) and "joy under heaven" (tianxia le), thereby revealing the auspicious connotations of plant motifs at the level of popular culture [11] and redressing the tendency of prior research to privilege literati aesthetics at the expense of the tastes of ordinary urban life.

Taken together, this body of research demonstrates that the study of decorative motifs cannot be divorced from its specific social and cultural context: research must attend both to the formal evolution of motifs themselves and, in conjunction with the historical background and the texture of everyday life, to a comprehensive analysis of the multiple layers of cultural meaning carried by Song-dynasty plant motifs..

4. Limitations of Existing Scholarship and Directions for Further Research

Taken as a whole, scholarship on Song-dynasty plant motifs has proceeded through roughly three phases. Early research was devoted chiefly to establishing periodization frameworks and foundational classificatory systems. Research of the middle phase turned toward a deeper elucidation of the cultural connotations and aesthetic significance of these motifs. More recent research has concentrated on specific material categories, offering detailed, focused analyses of individual classes of object—chiefly ceramics and silk textiles—and accumulating a substantial body of empirical material.

Nonetheless, existing scholarship exhibits two salient limitations. First, macro-level studies of decorative motifs have generally drawn on an insufficiently large sample of physical artifacts, and in-depth interpretation of individual motif cases remains comparatively limited. Second, much recent scholarship has been confined to specialized discussions of single material categories, with research on ceramics, silk textiles, lacquerware, and bronze mirrors typically proceeding independently of one another and lacking a comparative, cross-material perspective. As a result, the variation in spatial arrangement, the mechanisms of technical translation, and the modes of visual expression of a given motif across different material media have not yet been systematically examined or explained.

In light of these limitations, future research should be grounded in archaeologically excavated artifacts and should move beyond the fragmentation that has characterized study by material category, systematically surveying plant motifs across the full range of Song-dynasty everyday objects. On this foundation, comparative analysis should be undertaken of the spatial arrangement, technical translation, and visual expression of shared motif motifs across different material media. Only by focusing on everyday objects—the material carriers most intimately bound up with the daily life of the Song populace—and by tracing the evolutionary logic of plant motifs within concrete contexts of use, can scholarship offer a more complete interpretation, grounded in the material record, of Song social aesthetic orientations and the decorative culture of daily life, thereby providing a more integrative observational perspective for the study of Song decorative art.

5. Conclusion

Plant motifs stand among the most representative themes of Song-dynasty decorative art, embodying at once a concrete projection of the Neo-Confucian spirit of "the investigation of things" into the realm of material production and a direct expression of the everyday aesthetic sensibilities of an increasingly urbanized society. From Zhang Xiaoxia's tracing of historical origins, through Gu Li's typological research linking motifs to social structure, to Meng Dehong's iconographic interpretation and Qin Hailun's deepened treatment of the shengsehua discourse, scholars have established a relatively comprehensive theoretical framework. Meanwhile, the empirical research of Hu Xizhen, Ma Xuan, and Liu Hui in the field of ceramics, and of Chen Ruixin Su Jing, and Mao Xianyun in the field of silk textiles, has provided a solid case-based foundation for understanding the evolution of motifs within specific material categories. Building on this foundation, the task of bridging these material boundaries and constructing a genuinely cross-category comparative framework remains a pressing direction for further deepening the study of Song-dynasty plant motifs—and constitutes the basic point of departure for the subsequent research this article seeks to advance.

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