

# Emotions Conveyed by Objects — The Colourful Sculptures of Nanzen Temple as an Example

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## Abstract

Various kinds of objects fill our lives, and in different contexts, they carry more meanings than just their own use. Nanchan Temple is the earliest wooden mortise-and-tenon structure building of the Tang Dynasty, and the coloured sculptures enshrined in it are also rare coloured sculptures in the world, which have profound research value. This paper takes Nanchan Temple-coloured sculptures as the object of study and explores the historical information and deeper meanings contained in material historical objects through the five aspects of craft, making, biography, affect, and enchantment.

**Keywords:** Nanchan Temple, colourful sculpture, art and emotion

## 1. Introduction

People use sculpture to freeze a moment in life or create a beautiful fantasy, and its art form has many variations with different materials, and coloured sculpture is one of them. This kind of traditional Chinese arts and crafts is still active, both in the past and the present. By combining the most brilliant colours with the most rustic clay, coloured figurines are able to capture a moment of beauty, can be preserved for a hundred years or more, and can be presented to the people of today. Colourful sculptures of different periods and regions are influenced by their social environment and historical backgrounds, which make their styles and forms different and express different meanings, thus generating different deeper meanings.

In this paper, the author will take the coloured sculptures of Nanchan Temple in Shanxi during the Tang Dynasty as an example to study, starting from the five aspects of craft, making, biography, affect, and enchantment, combining them with history, archaeology, and sociology, applying the methods of image analysis and literature analysis, and through the consideration of their cases, we will explore the history contained in this kind of material and historical objects of coloured sculptures in different periods. Through the consideration of individual cases, we will explore the historical information contained in coloured figurines from different periods of time and then extend the information support that different materials and techniques can provide to archaeological exploration.

## 2. Craft and Making of Coloured Sculptures

First of all, we will explain the production process of colourful sculpture so as to facilitate the subsequent understanding of colourful sculpture, which is a kind of traditional Chinese arts and crafts. Colourful sculpture belongs to a kind of sculpture that is formed by means of clay, a material that is continuously shaped and formed into a kind of sculpture art. Although coloured sculpture is also called clay sculpture, it is somewhat different from clay sculpture in terms of production process and material and even more different from stone sculpture, which is carved directly from stone.

Although it is said that coloured figurines are created through the use of mud or a material that can also be called clay, this is not entirely true. Colourful sculptures vary in size; some are small enough to be made directly from

clay. Some are as tall as a person and cannot be made stable with clay alone. So, the wise craftsmen chose to evolve a number of different ways of making the skeleton of a coloured sculpture, depending on the size of the sculpture required. The two most common are: one is to use wood to cut the general structure of the statue, and then apply fine clay to the surface to mould it. The other is to use wood according to the statue of the dynamic tie skeleton; part of the human body components, such as the palm of the hand made of wood, fingers made of iron bars, the arm made of wood chipped into a mortise and tenon fittings, on the mud before the use of hyacinth or reed binding, and then the surface of the mud moulding system. The second method is more widely used; people are familiar with the Dunhuang Mogao Caves, and most of the coloured sculptures are made from this method. At the same time, the subject of this paper, the Nanchan Temple colourful sculpture, is also made this way.



Figure 1. Colour Plastic Skeleton Picture (Photo by Yifan Zheng)

Coloured plastic, as the name suggests, must have colour. In the case of colouring, the surface layer is first dried out thoroughly and sanded to make the surface more polished. Then a layer of cotton paper is mounted with glue and pressed to make the surface layer flatter, more detailed, and stronger, and then a layer of white powder with glue is applied. The white form is then coloured. Most of the pigments used are traditional Chinese mineral pigments, which is why some of the coloured sculptures remain radiant after thousands of years. Some even have gold leaf applied to add to their craftsmanship.

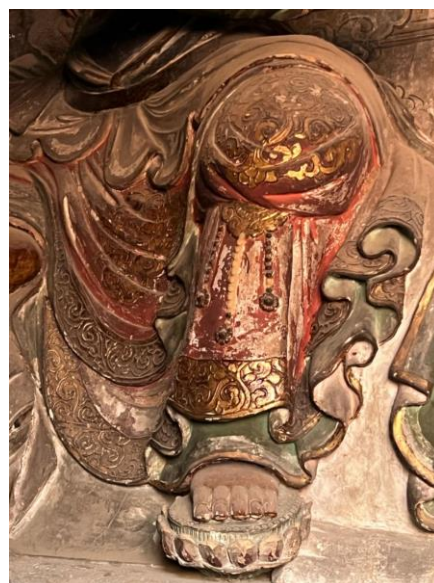


Figure 2. Colourful sculptures with gold foil (Photo by Yifan Zheng)

### 3. Biography of Nanchan Temple Coloured Sculptures

The coloured sculptures of Nanchansi Temple, as coloured sculptures alone, concentrate the exquisite skills of the craftsmen. At the same time, as a historical relic that has survived for more than a thousand years, it also shows people the unique historical value it contains, allowing them to travel through a thousand years to appreciate the beauty of the Tang Dynasty. Nanchan Temple is located in Wutai Mountain, Shanxi Province, China. Built in the Tang Dynasty, this hall is the earliest surviving wooden structure in China. It also contains a group of coloured Buddhist statues, which are among the few well-preserved coloured statues from the Tang Dynasty in China, except for those from the Mogao Caves.

Colourful sculptures were mostly used in the early days of Buddhist temples, and the Nanchan Temple is no exception. It was built during the Tang Dynasty, when Buddhism was at its peak in China, and was constructed by private individuals as an offering to Sakyamuni Buddha. There are seventeen colourful sculptures, except for the main figure of Sakyamuni Buddha; the rest are bodhisattvas and heavenly kings, which often appear in Buddhist stories and are symmetrical.



Figure 3. Overall picture of the coloured sculptures of Nanzen Temple

Unlike Western societies, where there was a divine right of kings, the Chinese emperors believed that their power came with the help of a god or a patriarchal family, but that they had to be above it. Therefore, in order to consolidate his rule and power, he would suppress religion. Buddhism, as one of the major religions in China, has been suppressed many times in history. There were three large-scale campaigns, collectively known as the Three Martial Exterminations of Buddhism. Each time, a large number of temples and their exquisite Buddhist murals and various colourful Buddhist sculptures were destroyed and wiped out. South Temple, because of its remote location, luckily escaped the extermination movement, so that the main hall and the period of the temple in the colourful sculpture group could be preserved intact as the only existing contemporary wooden buildings and the few existing colourful statues.

As one of the few temples that were preserved during the Buddhist extermination movement, Nanchan Temple and its coloured sculptures were later used as a temple and continued to be worshipped by local people. During this period, it also underwent many restorations, but each restoration did not change its original appearance, so that no matter the shape of the colourful sculptures or their original colours, they were the closest to the real appearance of the Tang Dynasty colourful sculptures.

After the founding of New China in 1949, the Nanchan Temple and its hall of coloured statues were valued, and cultural relics and archaeologists began to carry out formal and systematic protection and restoration of its restoration. But still, in 1999, by the organised and premeditated robbery, the main hall of the Tang dynasty statue of Buddha was dug open when the chest and belly of the treasure were stolen, Manjushri bodhisattva's back was also hollowed out, and the rest of the several statues were also damaged. Two of the most beautiful "Kungwa-like" statues, unique to the Tang Dynasty, were sawn off and robbed, and the statue of a lion cub was broken off at the heel.

Nowadays, with the understanding of culture and the popularisation of history, more and more people are aware of the Nanchan Temple and the exquisite Tang Dynasty-coloured sculptures in its halls and pay more attention to their protection. Each colourful sculpture is individually scanned and archived in three places, which facilitates

the observation and study of subsequent scholars and the restoration and research of cultural relics and archaeologists. The beauty of the Tang Dynasty across the millennium to show people now. In this way, the coloured sculptures of Nanchansi Temple have been treated as a separate entity with its own life history, giving it a special historical significance. (Tringham, 1995:98)

#### 4. Affect and Enchantment of Nanchan Temple Coloured Sculptures

The understanding of affect and enchantment is mainly influenced by culture, history, and society. As Chinese Buddhist-coloured sculptures, Nanchan Temple-coloured sculptures have been influenced by both the history and culture of the local Chinese society and the foreign religion of Buddhism. As the coloured sculptures are made, they also carry the thoughts and feelings of their makers. It allows the craftsmen to realise their self-worth in society and, at the same time, influence the development of beauty in society. (Sennett, 2009) These influences have been interpreted differently over time to convey different emotions.

From the Tang Dynasty until 1949, before the founding of New China, Nanchansi colourful sculptures in the history of the temple played more in the dissemination of religion to give the local people certain religious beliefs. Each villager, as a Buddhist believer in the small main hall, will see with their own eyes in the nearly one-meter-high altar and the height of seventeen colourful statues of Buddha from above looking down on the worshippers with a kind of indifference to the compassionate eyes of all living things. That kind of shock is for the Buddhist faith; it is a kind of religious meaning of emotion. Making the believers of their own faith is not easy. When people now go to Nanchan Temple to visit the temple's colourful sculpture, they are also deeply shocked from the depths of their hearts by the remaining fourteen colourful sculptures. The difference is that nowadays, the standard of people's examination of them is less religious and more based on their unique attainments in art and the superior technology of the craftsmen at that time, which was too excellent and beyond the era, and it is the emotion generated by examining them from the angle of cultural relics and works of art. This kind of emotional communication can be regarded as a kind of transformation from "language" to "vision," that is, from "space" to "vision." (Wu, 2016) At the same time, so is the glamour embedded in the coloured sculptures of Nanzen Temple. In the earliest days, people focused more on the religious glamour in it, which made people from its neighbouring villages come to worship it. After their subsequent systematic conservation and research, people were attracted to their excellent artistic attainments.

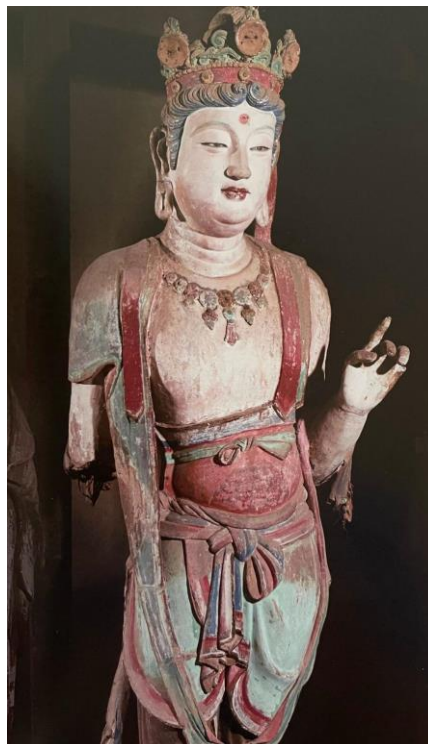


Figure 4. Pictures of Colourful Sculptures of Nanzen Temple (one of them)

#### 5. Artistic and Emotional Connections to Colourful Sculpture

Gell argues that the neglect of art in modern human sociology is necessary and relevant because human sociology is, by nature, anti-art. (Gell, 1992) But the author argues that this claim is false. On the contrary, art is



the intellectual and emotional crystallisation of the excellence of human society and is a complementary being to human sociology. A good example of this is the colourful sculptures of Nanzen Temple, which, through figurative art, form colourful sculptures. Not only does it become an embodied representation of a connection between people across millennia (Buchli, 2015), i.e., the connection between the artisan and the viewer, whether made by the artisans themselves or at the request of their employers, the artisans put their own emotions into the making of the coloured sculptures, presenting and communicating them.

It is not only the emotion conveyed by the craftsmen themselves but also the material properties of the object that are crucial in conveying the emotion of the object. (Jones, 2020) Colourful sculptures, which are mostly made of clay, are compared to the stone sculptures of the Longmen Grottoes in China, which are both Buddhist sculptures, but because of the difference in materials, they give different emotions to the viewer. The stone sculptures are more rigid due to the technology of the time and the geology of the area, and they are not as detailed as the coloured sculptures. Standing in the art appreciation point of view is more simple and rounded. On the contrary, the colourful sculptures made of clay can add or subtract from the clay to adjust the more rounded and realistic features and better portray the details of the costumes on the colourful sculptures. When you see the colourful sculptures, you will be amazed at the high level of technology, the fine details of the colourful sculptures, which are more realistic, and the beauty of the fineness and subtlety of the sculptures.



Figure 5. Longmen Grottoes Buddha Pictures

## 6. Conclusion

This article takes the Nanzen Temple coloured sculptures as an example, through the five aspects of craft, making, biography, affect, and enchantment, through an understanding of its production process and background, and then explores the emotion and enchantment brought by the coloured sculptures and the connection between their art and emotion and the relevance given by the history. The Nanchan Temple coloured sculpture group itself is an individual with independent historical significance, which is a perfect interpretation of the autobiography of the objects, and at the same time, it also well expresses the different emotions conveyed through the material materials to create brand new objects and with the passage of time in different periods. By analysing the emotions conveyed and tracing the history, it demonstrates the emotions that this coloured plastic object may contain. In addition, through the changing interpretations of coloured figurines at different times and in different social environments throughout history, the influence of society, culture, and time on the deeper meaning of the object is highlighted.

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