

Yi Lacquerware Artistic Characteristics of Modern Art Design Applications

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Abstract

This article delves into the cultural background and artistic elements of Yi lacquerware, exploring their integration with modern art design concepts to underscore the imperative of preserving Yi lacquerware in today's society. The focus lies on innovatively blending the visual aspects of traditional Yi handicrafts into contemporary art design, ensuring the retention of Yi cultural characteristics while addressing modern aesthetic and functional requirements. Through a detailed examination of the application of Yi lacquerware's artistic attributes in modern design, the article derives pertinent design strategies that serve as a dual legacy — preserving traditional ethnic culture and offering a substantial contribution to the realm of contemporary art.

Keywords: Yi lacquerware, artistic characteristics, art design, innovative applications

1. Introduction

Yi lacquerware, as a treasure of traditional Chinese handicrafts, carries a profound cultural heritage. However, in the context of modern globalisation, this traditional art is facing new challenges and opportunities. With the rise of tourism, tourists' demand for authentic cultural products is increasing day by day, and this, to a certain extent, has led to mass-produced lacquerware losing its original authentic use and symbolic meaning. To adapt to the market demand, the Yi lacquerware market is flooded with a large number of rough and gaudy lacquerware tourist commodities. How to find a balance between traditional culture and modern needs is a new issue for the development of Yi lacquerware.

As the evolution of the overall structure of social life becomes more intricate and complex, human beings are faced with two opposed missions: on the one hand, it is necessary to exploit extremely effectively the unique and unrepeatable potential of socially recognised and increasingly highly valued works of art; on the other hand, it is necessary to maintain the direct link between artistic creation and human practices, since there is no other way of distilling the content of art (Kandinsky, 1977). Therefore, in dealing with Yi lacquerware, one expects both positive conservation measures to reverse the trend of extinction, and to free it from excessive dependence on external support to form a self-healthy and sustainable industry. In this context, the application of modern art design to Yi lacquerware has become a topic of concern.

It is also now widely recognised in the industry that Yi lacquerware can only be passed on through a sustainable development path. In this study, sustainable development is considered to mean supporting traditional craftsmen to achieve sustainable business through innovative design, drawing on modern art design modes of thinking, while protecting the ecological and humanistic environment. This includes developing cultural and creative products with local cultural characteristics, continuously improving the creative process and craftsmanship to achieve economic profitability, enhancing economic status, and maintaining the sustainability of the circular development model (Li et al., 2019). Therefore, by integrating the artistic characteristics of Yi lacquerware with modern art design, not only can we give full play to the unique value of traditional culture, but also maintain a

close connection with contemporary social practices. This innovative design application not only revitalises Yi lacquerware in terms of aesthetics and cultural heritage but also finds a wider range of application scenarios for it in contemporary society.

2. Overview of Yi Lacquerware Artistic Characteristics

2.1 History and Traditional Application of Yi Lacquerware

The Yi, as one of the unique and rich ethnic minorities in China, has a self-contained cultural and artistic tradition that is deeply rooted in the place where history and geography meet. The Yi culture is known for its unique religious beliefs, language and writing, and living customs. For the Yi, art is not only a way of expression, but also a vivid interpretation of its rich cultural connotation.

Yi lacquerware, as an outstanding representative of Yi culture, carries a long historical origin. The production process of lacquerware has been baptised over the years, forming a unique traditional technique. Its origin can be traced back to the decoration and use of the objects by the ancestors of the Yi people in major ceremonies such as sacrifices and marriages. Traditionally, lacquerware has both practicality and a strong religious ceremonial nature and is regarded as a sacred cultural symbol.

In Yi lacquerware is often used in wedding ceremonies, funeral rites and other cultural occasions. Their ornamentation and colours are not unique but also contain profound cultural meanings. The production process of Yi lacquerware is rigorous and complex, and the inheritance of traditional skills has become the link that maintains Yi culture.

These traditional production procedures are not only craftsmanship but also a kind of ritual to pay homage to the gods, reflecting the close connection between objects and gods in Yi culture.

2.2 Performance of Artistic Characteristics of Yi Lacquerware

As a typical Yi art form, Yi lacquerware has become a major symbol of Yi cultural heritage through its unique shapes, decorations and colours (Zeng, 2017). In the two regions of Liangshan and Dafang, Yi lacquerware exhibits some commonalities in artistic characteristics, while there are also some significant differences. These differences mainly stem from different functional requirements, material availability, and different production techniques, thus showing similarities and differences in ware type, ornamentation, and colour.

Firstly, in terms of ware types, both Liangshan and Dafang Yi lacquerware are based on common ware types such as tableware and utensils to meet the functional needs of daily life. However, due to the influence of regional differences, different production techniques and consumer markets, the types of Yi lacquerware in Dafang are more diversified and complex, and their production techniques are more complicated.

Secondly, there are differences in ornamentation. The ornamentation of Liangshan Yi lacquerware is usually based on natural and life patterns and geometric patterns, reflecting the observation and understanding of the natural world by the people of Liangshan Yi, with distinctive national characteristics. On the other hand, the ornamentation of Dafang Yi lacquerware, besides retaining the homologous elements, is more diversified, integrating the influences of different ethnic cultures and showing richer ornamentation and patterns.

In addition, the colours also show differences. Liangshan Yi lacquerware is famous for the “three-colour” culture of black, red and yellow, with distinctive national characteristics. On the other hand, Dafang Yi lacquerware adopts the “five-colour” colour system of black, red, yellow, green and white, showing more diversified colour combinations.

The formation of Yi lacquerware artistic characteristics in the two regions is influenced by a variety of factors such as national culture, regional environment and lifestyle. These factors are intertwined with each other, and together they shape the uniqueness of Yi lacquerware art. Yi lacquerware culture has had a profound influence on the artistic characteristics of Yi lacquerware in the two places, the regional environment has provided rich materials and inspiration for artistic expression, while the lifestyle of the Yi and the development of traditional craftsmanship techniques have also injected unique aesthetic concepts and styles into the artistic characteristics of lacquerware. These factors make the Yi lacquerware of Liangshan and Dafang present their unique artistic characteristics in terms of modelling, craftsmanship and function.

Figures 1 and 2 below show representative lacquerware types from the Liangshan and Dafang regions, respectively, which can be seen to have unique visual characteristics in terms of form and decoration.



Figure 1. Liangshan Yi Lacquerware

Source: Photographed by the Researcher.



Figure 2. Dafang Yi Lacquerware

Source: Photos provided by Chen & Gao.

3. Relationship Between Yi Lacquerware Artistic Characteristics and Modern Art Design Applications

In the past, craftsmen were directly facing consumers with relatively fixed forms of consumption. However, the ever-changing user needs of today's society require a shift from tradition to modernity to accommodate modern lifestyles (Kaur & Bahl, 2018). Addressing the challenges of local industrial revitalisation inevitably requires the application of design knowledge (Tung, 2012). The artistic characteristics of Yi lacquerware are key to the trend and future of Yi lacquerware's survival in today's society by creating connections with modern art design, generating design strategies, and forming a sustainable model.

However, while embracing this trend, we must face up to the dilemmas faced by Yi lacquerware's artistic characteristics in the application of modern art design. First of all, the training of talents in traditional lacquerware is still stuck in the master-apprentice system, which requires years of repetitive labour to accumulate experience, while there is a relative lack of talent in design thinking. The production of lacquerware has even formed an assembly line model, with practitioners focusing only on local processes such as colour painting and knowing almost nothing about design innovation (Zhan & Walker, 2019). Therefore, it is insufficient to place the inheritance of Yi lacquerware on craftsmanship alone.

Secondly, in the case of Liangshan Yi lacquerware, for example, there is a serious proliferation of its commercialisation. The pursuit of profit has led to the emergence of a large number of cheap tourist products, and the so-called innovative design is just a repetition of the original artistic elements on different carriers, lacking exquisite craftsmanship and the projection of scientific design.

Thirdly, Yi lacquerware, as a folk craft, has artistic characteristics with localised regional attributes, making it very difficult to promote and be recognised by a wider range of consumers (Zhan & Walker, 2019). Addressing

these issues requires a more systematic and comprehensive strategy. Soares et al. (2016) point out that design can inspire traditional crafts to become new materialised representations of a people's culture. Li et al. (2019) also argue that the discipline of design is an effective mediator connecting the natural disciplines and the humanities and that it promotes the sustainable development of traditional crafts through scientific design. Handicrafts show prominent functions, application areas, and ways of economic utilisation while highlighting the cultural genes and cultural values they contain.

To better inherit the artistic tradition of Yi lacquerware, it is not only necessary to introduce modern art design concepts to break through the limitations of lacquerware innovation, but also to allow other fields of art design to make full use of the artistic characteristics and visual elements of Yi lacquerware. Therefore, in addition to the modern art design innovation of Yi lacquerware itself, making full use of its unique artistic characteristics elements for cross-border design is also a positive application strategy. This way of thinking helps to integrate the artistic language of Yi lacquerware into a wider range of modern art design fields, expand the application scenarios of lacquerware, and promote its wider recognition and dissemination in modern art design.

Therefore, this study advocates a two-way relationship between Yi lacquerware's artistic characteristics and modern art design applications. On the one hand, it is necessary to explore how to apply the knowledge in the field of modern art design to the design of Yi lacquerware, so that it can be renewed with new artistic charms in contemporary society. On the other hand, it is also necessary to study how other modern art design disciplines can apply the knowledge of Yi lacquerware artistic characteristics to expand the innovative application of these art and design disciplines. Through an in-depth study of the visual artistic characteristics of Yi lacquerware, it is possible to explore the possibility of integrating its visual elements into graphic design, spatial design, product design and other modern art design fields. This cross-disciplinary research will help to better understand and pass on Yi lacquerware culture and give these elements new contexts and meanings in contemporary art design, expanding the innovative applications of these art design disciplines.

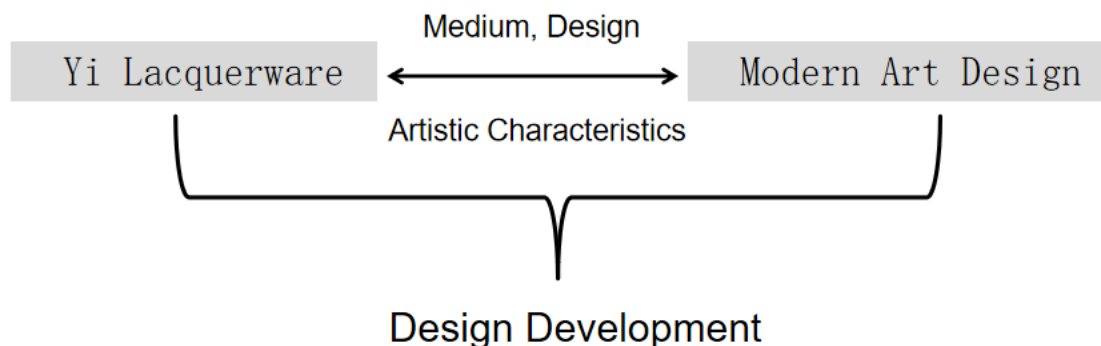


Figure 3. The Relationship between Yi Lacquerware's Artistic Characteristics and Modern Art Design Applications

Source: Researcher's illustration.

Only when these two aspects are considered comprehensively can a more complete and meaningful design application strategy be formulated. Through in-depth study of this two-way knowledge transfer relationship, we can understand more comprehensively the interaction mechanism between Yi lacquerware and modern art design, and provide more systematic and comprehensive guidance for promoting the inheritance and innovation of Yi lacquerware.

4. Application of Artistic Characteristics of Liangshan Yi Lacquerware in Modern Art Design

4.1 Application of Modern Art Design Methods in the Innovative Design of Yi Lacquerware

Craftsmanship is an art form that presents a unique expression of culture and community through techniques, technologies and materials. In traditional contexts, artisans often double as makers and designers; the concepts of art, craft, and design are closely intertwined with each other (Kaur & Bahl, 2018). Of the lacquerware industry companies in the two regions known so far, only the Qumujia in Liangshan and the Gao Guangyou Lacquerware Company in Dafang have specialised design departments or designers. However, the former only has collaborating designers with irregular identities, and their design works are not centred on lacquerware. The latter, on the other hand, has set up a specialised design department with two designers with professional design backgrounds and is simultaneously developing a design team. However, there is a shortage of professional designers in the lacquerware industry, and most of the time, craftsmen with rich creative experience take charge

of their work. Lacquerware craftsmen continue their roles as both makers and designers, especially some famous old lacquerware artists, such as Jiwu Wuqie in Liangshan, and Gao Guangyou and Xia Minglang in Dafang, as well as young lacquerware artists with modern higher education, such as Jiwu Wuga in Liangshan, and Gao Yan in Dafang, and so on.

Practical functions and aesthetic values, as well as modern features that evolve with the changing times, make it necessary to explore the expression and dissemination of craft culture in the context of modern design from the research perspective of design (Wu, 2021).

In practice, however, there are two main problems of collaboration between designers and craftsmen: the realisation of the design vision and poor communication. For example, the lacquer workshop of the Qumu Shiwu family used to collaborate with a professional designer, but the differences that arose during the collaboration and the lack of necessary face-to-face communication due to geographical distance eventually led to the termination of the collaborative research and development. Currently, the workshop still mainly produces traditional Yi lacquerware and does not consider developing new lacquerware. On the other hand, Gao Guangyou's lacquerware company has a special R&D department and focuses on the training of professional designers. His son is a professionally educated designer with an understanding of craftsmanship and is a composite talent who understands both craftsmanship and design. In addition, the company also employs a professional designer, who is permanently stationed at the front line of production and understands the basic lacquer craftsmanship to communicate well with the craftsmen and realise the perfect combination of design and craftsmanship.

Today, the consumer base has shifted from local community members to tourists and art connoisseurs as the new patrons of these crafts, and the utilitarian handmade utensils have thus become highly appreciated artefacts (Chutia & Sarma, 2016). However, for non-local communities, the lack of relevant living scenarios and habits makes it difficult for them to use Yi lacquerware as practical utensils. Tourists usually regard cultural products such as arts, rituals, and artefacts as authentic because they are handmade by local people and made from local materials. At the same time, tourists look for authentic local indigenous people's living practices in tourist destinations, and these are often reflected through tourist souvenirs (Shen, 2011). Liangshan Yi lacquerware caters to tourists' need for authentic customs with its notable craft status and visual characteristics. In contrast, mass-produced handicrafts have lost their original authentic use and symbolic meaning. This has led to the emergence of a large number of rough and gaudy lacquerware tourist commodities or crafts in the Liangshan region to satisfy tourists' needs, and this short-sighted development poses a great threat to the development, inheritance and sustainable development of Yi lacquerware. In rural societies pursuing utilitarian production, traditional handicrafts have experienced a continuous process of innovation and reinvention as they have relatively little value in the urban market and are even considered to have no value. The lacquerware industry in the Dafang region has been operating according to this belief, focusing on market demand. Many workshops and companies are directly orientated to consumers, with no intermediaries to form communication errors. As a result, the lacquerware industry in the Liangshan region has become proactive in the creation of lacquerware types after adopting this model.

For lacquerware development companies, design is a necessary tool to develop new products, innovate new products, remain competitive and gain benefits (Gao, interview). In the sustainable design of traditional Chinese crafts, innovation is seen as the best way to achieve sustainable development. Through innovation, we can draw new inspirations from culture, materials, crafts, experiences, local elements, and interactive experiences to express new ideologies (Li et al., 2019). Lacquer artists are experts in cultural heritage and their knowledge integrates elements of experience, including personal history, local cultural heritage, and craft techniques. Combined with modern art design concepts, they can create more innovative and meaningful lacquerworks, injecting new vigour into traditional crafts and promoting their sustainable development. The lacquerware ashtray in Figure 4 below is a restructuring of the artistic characteristics elements of Yi lacquerware in terms of ornamentation and colours combined with traditional Han lacquerware ornamentation and applied to modern ware.



Figure 4. Cultural and Creative Product Series of Lacquerware

Source: Photos provided by Gao.

4.2 Yi Lacquerware Artistic Characteristics in the Field of Modern Art Design

Traditional handicrafts can provide a positive transformative perspective as they embody the cultural knowledge, practices, and values of communities rooted in specific contexts and geographies (Zhan & Walker, 2019). Designers play several product-related roles in this process. As a result of designers' training, they can dig deeper, and extract and integrate information and experiences from traditional crafts (Suib & Crul, 2020). In the field of design, autonomous production based on the idea of co-creation represents a reconciliation between different fields of knowledge (Zhan & Walker, 2019). Therefore, it seems more reasonable and feasible to engage in cross-border cooperation with designers from other fields to enrich the design elements of different fields by extracting artistic characteristics of Yi lacquerware for sustained dissemination of Yi lacquerware cultural characteristics.

Modern art design usually extracts elements from the artistic characteristics of Yi lacquerware for modification in three ways, which include moulding, ornamentation and colour. In the optimal solution, not only the innovative reapplication of the elements of the artistic characteristics of lacquerware should be achieved, but also the semantics behind these elements should be reflected.

According to Tung & Chen (2013), if the designer has a deeper understanding of the craft, the commonality between the designer and the craft artist will be enhanced, thus influencing the creativity of the whole team. Some hints of this can be seen in the lacquerware products of Highlight Lacquerware Company, but the main focus is still on decorative design as well as craft modification around traditional lacquerware ware types. On the contrary, in different fields of art design, the designers mainly create designs based on the artistic characteristics of Yi lacquerware itself, without focusing on the craftsmanship of lacquerware. Nevertheless, they have been able to bring out unrivalled creativity, at least from the perspective of visual elements, to preserve and disseminate the unique visual elements of Yi lacquerware. Figure 5 below is a decorative pottery vessel designed and produced by potter He Xia, on which the ornamentation is an innovative decorative pattern formed by using a variation of the Yi lacquerware ornamentation motifs from the Liangshan region.



Figure 5. “The Leisurely Yi Style” Ceramic Series Design

Source: Photos provided by He.

5. Design Strategies and Principles

By working closely with craft artists, designers can incorporate unique craft culture into their design elements and achieve strategic differentiation. At the same time, craft artists can draw on the professionalism of designers to create craft products that are adapted to contemporary consumer needs. Collaboration and complementarity between designers and craft artists can help shape unique and recognisable designs in a globalised market, thereby promoting craft heritage and innovation (Tung & Chen, 2013). These improvements are expected to further enhance the position of Yi lacquerware and related design products in the overall economic competition, support cultural preservation, and promote the sustainable development of the regional craft economy.

Yi lacquerware artisans and designers can work together to better demonstrate the inherent qualities of their work with the help of a more sophisticated set of modern art design strategies. The sustainable development of Yi lacquerware can be promoted through a series of stages, including the recognition, reorganisation and interpretation of Yi lacquerware’s artistic characteristics, to guide the relevant designs. Design participates in cultural shaping, and by introducing object participation, the history of the designed object is the history of culture. Design has never been culturally neutral, but has always conveyed social and cultural values. Analysing Yi lacquerware and combining the artistic elements with modern art design, is a new way of developing lacquer art and creating a national brand with Chinese characteristics. It is an effective way to win the competitiveness of the international art market and has important practical significance.

5.1 Application Strategy Construction

Modern design emphasises function, aesthetics and commodity value, and is a blend of art, technology and management. In urban development, handicrafts not only create practical and aesthetically pleasing products but also give birth to pure works of art. To explore the new aesthetic direction of urban handicrafts in the context of modern design, it is first necessary to understand the basis of its transformation: the ontological language of handicrafts (Wu, 2021). Lacquerware artisans and designers first need to gain an in-depth understanding of the forms of artistic characteristics, and symbolic semantics of Yi lacquerware, as well as the cultural and social contexts behind it and other related knowledge systems. The field of design and craftsmanship contains knowledge and experience that is valuable for product development, but this knowledge is usually tacit, confined to a specific geographic area and deeply rooted within their respective fields. To maintain and pass on this knowledge, it must be transferable (Suib & Crul, 2020). However, the knowledge of Yi lacquerware is socio-culturally based implicit knowledge, which includes the social context constructed by factors such as ethnicity, history, and social ideology, as well as the small group environment in which an individual is embedded, all of which have an impact on how an individual perceives. This implicit knowledge is acquired by craftspeople over a long period of experience in their particular racial, cultural, and natural environments. If designers ignore the tacit knowledge component of handicrafts and rely only on the explicit knowledge features such as symbols and forms presented in traditional handicrafts for the redesign of traditional handicrafts, their innovations will be limited and tend to remain only in the surface form. Only when the tacit knowledge in a particular organisation (group) can be shared by the organisation’s members in a way that enables the tacit

knowledge to be connected, transferred between the members, and externalised into explicit knowledge can knowledge innovation gain exponential growth, thus fostering the most valuable ideas (Zhang, 2015).

A heritage product is an object that demonstrates cross-domain knowledge. From the perspective of the craft domain, it carries the knowledge to make the product, which is usually acquired through inheritance and informal learning and is inherently tacit. From the perspective of the design domain, although traditional products have unique cultural characteristics, they are still part of the product. Therefore, the understanding of modern products and their production processes in design theory is equally applicable to traditional products. The point of overlap between the informal knowledge gained by craftspeople and the formal knowledge learnt by designers can be an interesting focus for knowledge exchange (Suib & Crul, 2020). Design products are standardised products produced to meet the needs of the masses, whereas craft products carry specific cultural and emotional symbols and present customised or diverse characteristics. Although design and craft are different, they share many similarities in terms of behaviours, goals and processes. Because of this, collaboration between the design and craft industries possesses unique advantages over collaboration with other fields or industries, creating powerful complementary effects and promoting substantial development for both (Tung & Chen, 2013).

Design is the ability to obtain logical results through the way of thinking, through which designers reshape the artistic characteristics and cultural meanings of crafts to fit the way of cultural interpretation in the new era. As an interpreter of a regional or national culture, designers have a social responsibility to protect the transmission of the original cultural attributes of handicrafts. However, it is also necessary to consider how to make consumers accept ancient forms of handicrafts in today's society (Soares et al., 2016). The process of making Yi lacquerware is itself an evolutionary process of art and design, progressing over time. The purpose of introducing these new elements is to enable traditional craft products to keep pace with the demands of modern life (Huhtamaa, 2006). The modern product diversification of Yi lacquerware has important economic value and cultural significance. As a cultural carrier with specific functions and commodity significance, the design of Yi lacquerware first needs to focus on its decorative features and functionality. Designers should meet the needs of modern life through product differentiation and segmentation, inject new vitality into them, and find new opportunities for development in the market. The possibility of reconstruction becomes a necessary way to maintain the vitality of urban handicrafts (Wu, 2021). Inheriting the elements of the artistic characteristics of Yi lacquerware and restructuring them is a very typical and effective way of designing, which is the key to promoting the success of Yi lacquerware's artistic characteristics in the application of modern art design. In the process of design restructuring, design elements can be extracted from the three aspects of moulding, ornamentation and colour and the symbolic semantics they represent, and a variety of design composition methods can be used to form new elements for reconstruction and derivation. This approach not only helps to preserve the uniqueness of the traditional Yi lacquerware national culture but also provides innovative and in-depth design applications for contemporary society.

The pursuit of creative and rich application forms of Yi lacquerware artistic characteristics in modern art design aims to seek a new interpretation of traditional crafts and modern art, making Yi lacquerware a unique resource in modern art design and presenting it in a new context, highlighting the continuous vitality and richness of traditional culture in the field of contemporary art. Therefore, in the interpretation stage, we focus on fully explaining the cultural connotation of the design, digging deep into the intersection of traditional crafts and modern art, and giving the work a deeper meaning and a unique way of expression. The interpretation is not only an extension of the design idea but also a deep reading of the culture carried by Yi lacquerware so that it can be inherited and innovated in the field of contemporary art. Therefore, the integrity of the interpretation process is crucial to ensure that the design concept and cultural elements can be fully and accurately conveyed, so that the work will have more profound cultural connotations and modern significance.

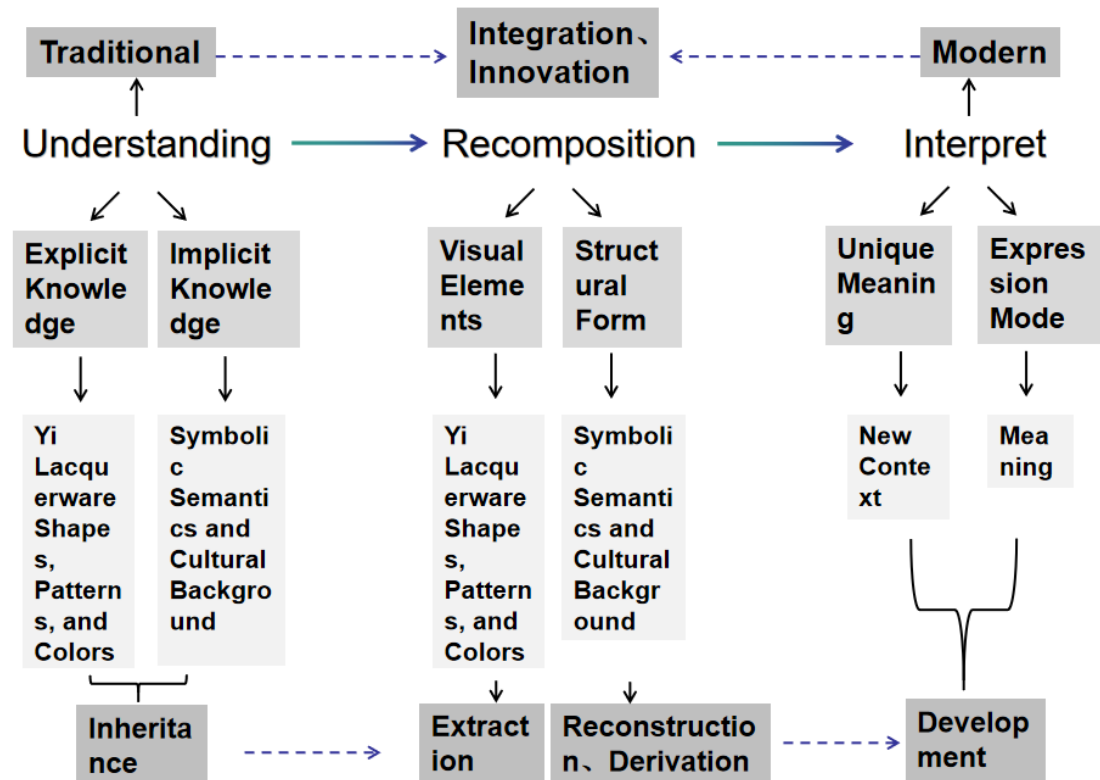


Figure 6. Modern Art Design Application Strategy Illustration of Yi Lacquerware Artistic Characteristics
Source: Researcher's illustration.

5.2 Principles of Design Strategy

The principles of design strategy include three key issues. Firstly, in the process of application, designers need to moderately draw on Yi lacquerware decorative patterns but avoid simple copying and replication. The extraction and reconstruction of elements should put an end to one-sided symbolisation, and instead create works that are in line with individual inner feelings and cultural identity. Secondly, designers need to stay away from blind imitation of Western art and design. The design should maintain the traditional and national identity in spirit and essence but reflect modernity and fashion in the form of expression. Finally, the design strategy needs to respect the principle of national taboo. For Yi lacquerware ornamentation matrices, such as the sun rays pattern and flame pattern, designers should treat them with extra caution to ensure that they do not arbitrarily change their visual characteristics and misuse them regardless of the scenario, to fully respect the ethnic culture and tradition.

6. Conclusion

In summary, the modern design application of Liangshan Yi lacquerware is both the inheritance of traditional culture and the pursuit of modern aesthetics. The design strategy is constructed with an emphasis on the sustainability of the crafts and full consideration of social values, making the design not only satisfy the aesthetic needs but also reflect a deep understanding of traditional culture. Lacquerware artists can create higher-quality lacquerware products and crafts through modern art design methods to meet the use and aesthetic needs of modern people, thus re-invigorating the vitality of traditional Yi lacquerware. Designers are also able to draw on and integrate elements of Yi lacquerware's artistic characteristics, which not only expands the innovative application of modern art design but also injects new design concepts into Yi lacquerware. This cooperation and symbiosis make the traditional values of Yi lacquerware take on a new lease of life in modern society and provide a solid foundation for its sustainable development.

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