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CHINESE RABBIT CULTURE IN MODERN DESIGN

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This article explores the cultural significance of rabbits in Chinese art and literature. Through an analysis of classic works, it reveals the enduring importance of rabbit themes and motifs in Chinese culture. Designers have adapted these patterns to modern aesthetics and cultural contexts, meeting consumer demand. As 2023 is the Year of the Rabbit in China, diverse and innovative rabbit-patterned products are set to enter the market, reflecting the continued relevance and versatility of this iconic cultural symbol.

Key words: Chinese, rabbit culture, design, patterns, symbolism

INTRODUCTION

The use of animal motifs in art is a universal phenomenon that has been present in human culture for thousands of years. The rabbit has played a crucial role in Chinese folklore and has been celebrated for its associations with longevity, good fortune, and fertility. Rabbit patterns are a popular motif in traditional Chinese art, design, and textiles, and have evolved over time to suit modern aesthetics and cultural contexts.

PURPOSE

This article aims to explore the beauty and meaning and application of rabbit patterns in ancient and modern China, and how they reflect cultural values, aesthetic preferences, and artistic expressions..

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The formation and development of rabbit patterns in Chinese art and design are inseparable from the traditional Chinese way of thinking that emphasizes observing and imitating nature. In terms of content, rabbit patterns align with two main elements of traditional decoration: auspicious meanings and the "ritualization" of decoration.[1]

Figure 1 is a jade rabbit-shaped piece from the Shang Dynasty. The rabbit is depicted in a crouched position, with a realistic form and strong lines, and its hind legs appear sturdy and powerful, showcasing a poised and ready-to-pounce stance. The early geometric art style is prominent, with simplified and stylized elements.



One of the key reasons for the significance of rabbits in Chinese culture is their association with good luck, prosperity, and fertility. Rabbits have also played an important role in Chinese mythology and folklore. In ancient times, it was believed that among the twelve zodiac animals, the rooster was located in the east and the rabbit in the west, representing yin and yang respectively, with the rooster representing the day and the rabbit representing the month.[2]

It is said that the rabbit is the companion of the moon goddess Chang'e, or the rabbit is the incarnation of Chang'e. This association has led to rabbits being associated with themes such as femininity, beauty, and the cyclical nature of life.



Fig.1. Shang Dynasty Jade Rabbit Shaped Tablet from The Palace Museum



Fig.2. Tang dynasty mirror with moon palace pattern from The Palace Museum



Fig.3. Qing Dynasty Green Satin Embroidered Floral God Clothes from The Palace Museum

Figure 2 shows the back of a mirror from the Tang Dynasty, featuring the theme of the Moon Palace, including elements such as the laurel tree, Chang'e, toads, and a rabbit pounding medicine. The rabbit pounding medicine pattern is one of the most classic rabbit motifs. It combines mythical imagination, making the rabbit anthropomorphic and able to use tools. The medicine pounded by the rabbit is the legendary elixir of immortality, which can allow mortals to become immortals. Therefore, the rabbit pounding medicine pattern embodies the ancient people's vision of pursuing a beautiful wish to eliminate illness, pain and achieve longevity.

The Mid-Autumn Festival, which falls on the 15th day of the eighth lunar month, originated from a tradition of moon worship. Due to the close association between rabbits and the moon, rabbits are often used to express the theme of the Mid-Autumn Festival. Figure 3 is a flower god costume from the Qing Dynasty, which features rabbit and osmanthus patterns on the main body. The rabbits in different postures are vividly depicted, including lying, standing, running, and leaping, with agility and cuteness.

The Chinese zodiac is a classification scheme that assigns an animal to each year in a repeating twelve-year cycle. The twelve animals in the Chinese zodiac are: rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig. According to Chinese folklore, the Jade Emperor decided the order of the Chinese zodiac animals based on a race. The rabbit was able to secure fourth place by using its intelligence and cunning to outsmart the other animals. The rabbit



is associated with the years 1939, 1951, 1963, 1975, 1987, 1999, 2011, 2023, and so on.

In Chinese culture, the rabbit is considered a gentle, peaceful, and caring animal. People born in the Year of the Rabbit are said to have similar personality traits, such as being compassionate, diplomatic, and tactful.

Chinese people like to buy zodiac products because of their belief in astrology and the influence of the zodiac on their lives. The Chinese zodiac is a significant part of Chinese culture, and is believed to have a strong impact on a person's character, destiny, and fortune.

Many Chinese people feel a strong connection to their zodiac sign and take pride in their birth year. They may choose to display zodiac products in their homes or wear zodiac-themed jewelry or clothing as a way of expressing this connection. This is also a behavior that enhances a sense of identity.

In addition, many Chinese people believe that wearing or displaying zodiac products can bring good luck and ward off bad luck or negative energy. This belief is especially strong during the year of one's zodiac sign, known as one's "benming nian," when it is thought that wearing or carrying zodiac-related items can help to protect against any negative influences associated with that year.

Therefore, in 2023, many brands have launched rabbit-themed products for the Year of the Rabbit, some of which are even released as limited editions to attract consumers. Brands typically use the following design methods to combine their products with rabbit elements. 1) Directly using rabbit patterns on products such as skincare, stationery, beverages, and snacks. When the core content of the product remains unchanged, enhancing freshness through changing its appearance design can prompt consumers to make purchasing decisions. 2) Combining the product's shape with rabbit form, such as adding rabbit ears to plush jacket hats to emphasize cuteness, making rabbit-shaped night lights warm and cozy, making delicate rabbit-shaped jewelry, and even creating desserts in the shape of rabbits that are so adorable that one would hesitate to eat them.

Products that use traditional rabbit patterns in their design often continue the design style and cultural connotations of the pattern. For example, the keychain in Figure 4 was a rotate rabbit keychain inspired by the pattern in Figure 3 and has a strong sense of classical Chinese style. There are also some cartoon rabbit characters that have been created and have become well-known stars, each with distinct character traits and different art styles, making them charming, such as Bugs Bunny, Judy Hopps, MashiMaro, and Tuzki. Brands often favor collaboration with well-known characters, cross-border integration, and strong alliances to attract widespread attention. As shown in Figure 5, Manish Arora cooperates with Tuzki on the stage of Fashion Week. In addition, there are many limited edition products that use rabbit elements for original design, which have stronger commemorative significance. Because the lifespan of limited edition products is relatively short, their rabbit elements are unlikely to have a lasting impact. However, these works demonstrate a variety of artistic styles, providing consumers with more aesthetic choices. For example, several luxury brands have launched Year of the Rabbit zodiac series, with Louis Vuitton offering realistic style rabbit pendants, hip-hop style rabbit necklaces, and silk scarves with rabbit prints. Burberry's pattern design



emphasizes the rabbit's long ears, with two rabbits back to back forming a heart shape, with distinct color blocks. This pattern is applied to clothing, scarves, and backpack designs. Gucci maintains its usual colorful style and has designed rabbit patterns in a colorful graffiti style that is very childlike, which is applied to clothing, shoes, and watch designs.



Fig.4. Rotate rabbit keychain from The Palace Museum taobao store



Fig.5. Co-branded from Manish Arora with Tuzki



Fig.6. The year of the rabbit from Burberry

CONCLUSIONS

Traditionally, patterns have played a significant role in cultural expression and identity. They embody historical and cultural meanings, and are used in a range of contexts, from clothing to art and architecture. With the advent of modern technology and globalization, designers have been able to explore new ways of incorporating traditional patterns into modern product design. This can create a bridge between the past and present, infusing contemporary products with cultural richness and authenticity. It also provides an opportunity to showcase the value and beauty of traditional patterns to a wider audience. However, designers must be mindful of cultural appropriation and ensure that the use of traditional patterns is respectful and appropriate. Ultimately, the relationship between traditional patterns and modern product design should be one of collaboration, balancing innovation with respect for cultural heritage.

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