

**ANP-JSSH**

ISSN 2773-482X eISSN 2785-8863

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53797/anp.jssh.v6i1.2.2025>

The Aesthetic Value and Cultural Inheritance of Wood Sculpture Art in Wang Grand Courtyard: A Symbolic Study Based on Traditional Patterns

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Available online: 20 May 2025

Abstract: The wood sculpture art of Wang Grand Courtyard is an essential component of traditional Chinese craftsmanship, embodying profound cultural symbolism and aesthetic value. This study employs a qualitative research approach combined with case analysis to explore five primary traditional motifs in Wang Grand Courtyard wood sculptures—animals, plants, human figures, geometric patterns, and artifacts—aiming to reveal their artistic style and symbolic meanings. The findings indicate that wood sculpture art not only plays a significant role in architectural ornamentation but also demonstrates exquisite carving techniques and diverse aesthetic expressions. Through the analysis of line drawings of carved patterns, this paper examines the visual appeal, craftsmanship characteristics, and role of wood sculpture art in cultural heritage preservation. Furthermore, the study highlights the contributions of intangible cultural heritage inheritors, particularly in the protection and transmission of craftsmanship. In the face of societal transformations and industrialization, traditional wood sculpture art urgently requires innovative development to ensure the continuity of its cultural value and to gain new vitality in contemporary art and design.

Keywords: Wang Grand Courtyard wood sculpture, carving, traditional motifs, symbolic meaning

1. Introduction

Wood sculpture art is an inherited handicraft skill that involves the meticulous sculpting and engraving of wood to create decorative, symbolic, and functional artworks. The Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1912) marked the peak of traditional Chinese wood sculpture, during which the craftsmanship reached unprecedented heights. During this period, the architectural ornamentation and cultural symbolism of wood sculpture made it one of the most popular crafts, particularly in Wang Grand Courtyard in Lingshi, Jinzhong, Shanxi (Liang & Wang, 2013). This region still preserves a rich heritage of wood sculpture art. Wood sculpture emphasizes exquisite craftsmanship, decorative aesthetics, cultural connotations, regional characteristics, and practical functions, showcasing intricate carving techniques and profound cultural symbolism while reproducing traditional patterns.

Shanxi, as a region that has transitioned from fragmentation to integration among multiple ethnic groups, carries a unique historical background where Central Plains agrarian culture and northern nomadic culture have merged and evolved. This cultural collision has contributed to the diversity and complexity of Shanxi's regional culture. Throughout the development of human civilization, belief systems have been a fundamental cornerstone of societal values, profoundly influencing people's modes of production and ways of life. The belief system in Shanxi has transformed early forms of nature worship and totem worship to later influences of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and ancestral worship. In this process, the people not only created a rich material civilization but also skillfully integrated these beliefs into the decorative arts of local dwellings, forming a distinctive artistic expression in wood sculpture. These carvings not only showcase the exquisite craftsmanship of artisans but also embody people's reverence for nature, ancestors, and religious faith, making them an essential part of Shanxi's traditional residential culture (Cheng & Yahaya, 2024).

Due to its unique geographical environment, Shanxi Province has preserved a vast number of ancient villages with long histories, where traditional residential buildings are scattered throughout the region, forming a rich architectural

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heritage. These dwellings not only reflect architectural styles from the Song & Yuan dynasties to the Ming and Qing periods but have also been praised by experts as "living fossils" of ancient residential architecture due to their well-preserved state. Shanxi's traditional dwellings are renowned not only for their grand, solid, and elegantly simple exterior forms but also for their meticulously crafted interior decorative arts, which showcase exceptional craftsmanship. Among these exquisite residences, the Wang Grand Courtyard stands as one of the most representative. Located in Lingshi County, Jinzhong City, Shanxi Province, the Wang Grand Courtyard is situated in an area characterized by flat terrain, fertile land, and convenient transportation. The region was already developed as early as the Shang Dynasty, with military garrisons and fortified settlements established during the Western Zhou period. The area's favorable natural conditions and long history contributed to its prosperity. Particularly in the early Qing Dynasty, Shanxi merchants amassed great wealth, controlling nearly half of China's economy. As they grew affluent, these merchants returned home to build grand residences. The wood sculptures in the Wang Grand Courtyard are diverse, exquisite, and highly distinctive, embodying strong regional characteristics (Wang et al., 2025).

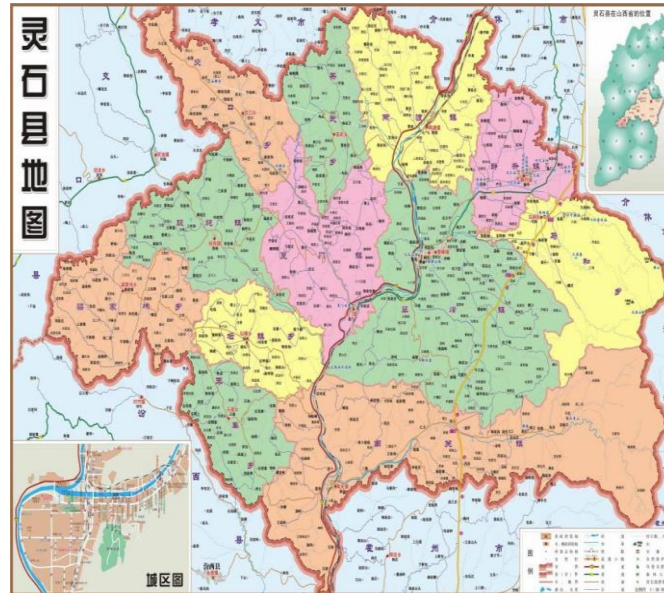


Fig. 1. Lingshi county map

Lingshi County, Jinzhong City, Shanxi Province, is renowned for the wood sculpture art of Wang Grand Courtyard, which is now inherited by Mr. Ren. Born in Jiexiu, Shanxi Province, in February 1967, he is recognized as an intangible cultural heritage inheritor of Shanxi wood sculpture (Ji Yanjie, 2016). Highly esteemed and proficient in the art of wood sculpture, he began learning the craft from his master at an early age, following the traditional master-apprentice transmission. Currently, he dedicates all his time to the preservation and inheritance of Wang Grand Courtyard wood sculpture, striving to ensure that this artistic heritage is respected nationwide.



Fig. 2. Mr. Ren Qingwen

Ren Qingwen has tirelessly dedicated himself to the preservation of wood sculpture art, demonstrating his success and widespread recognition. As a result, enthusiasts from various regions, particularly local scholars, university faculty, and students, frequently visit Wang Grand Courtyard to seek apprenticeship under him. His achievements in wood sculpture have established him as a significant figure in the field and earned him the status of an intangible cultural heritage inheritor, further solidifying his influence in the preservation and transmission of this traditional art form.

He also continuously provides his apprentices with in-depth guidance and extensive knowledge to ensure the inheritance and development of wood sculpture art amid historical changes. Additionally, he established a wood sculpture studio dedicated to both production and education, aiming to better preserve and pass down this valuable craft. Wood sculpture art traditionally relies on the master-apprentice transmission, where artisans refine their skills through continuous practice and innovation, achieving a harmonious unity of form, texture, and artistic conception in their carved works.

Ren Qingwen is frequently invited to participate in exhibitions and television interviews. He has taken part in the First China Carving Skills Competition, the China Cultural and Tourism Creative Design Competition, the Jinzhong City Fine Arts and Crafts Exhibition, and has showcased his works at the Taiyuan Exhibition Hall. Additionally, he has been awarded the Golden Finger Honor Award at the National Handicraft Expo and has earned the prestigious title of Shanxi Province Master of Traditional Arts and Crafts.

Traditional wood sculpture art must be promoted alongside China's rich array of craft forms, such as ceramics, embroidery, and batik, to facilitate the preservation and development of traditional techniques. As an art form with a long history, wood sculpture has evolved over thousands of years in China. However, with the passage of time, it has been increasingly impacted by modern industrialization and, in some cases, even overlooked by the younger generation (Wang et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the wood sculpture art of Wang Grand Courtyard stands out for its distinctive craftsmanship in form, texture, decorative patterns, and cultural symbolism, embodying profound cultural significance and aesthetic value. As a result, wood sculpture is not only an essential component of traditional craftsmanship but also plays an irreplaceable role in contemporary artistic innovation and cultural heritage preservation.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, with case study as the primary method. The case study method enables an in-depth analysis of traditional motifs in wood sculpture art, particularly focusing on patterns inspired by natural elements and social narratives. The research specifically examines five major motifs: an animal motif, a plant motif, a human figure motif, a geometric motif, and an artifact motif. Through line drawing analysis, this study explores their symbolic meanings and aesthetic characteristics. The research methodology incorporates observation, field study, interviews, and artifact analysis as key tools. The qualitative approach involves inductive evaluation, ensuring that the findings are systematically assessed. Data collection is based on the researcher's direct participation in field investigations, where observations and records are made in real-life contexts. This study prioritizes the interpretation of meaning, using expressive language to engage readers and provide a compelling analysis of the artistic and cultural significance of Wang Grand Courtyard's wood sculpture motifs.

3. Results and Discussion

The concept of beauty is deeply rooted in humanity's integrated perception of visual, tactile, and emotional experiences, and it is manifested in the harmonious relationships found throughout nature (Turan, 2023). From the perspective of philosophy and art history, "beauty" is not merely an expression of sensory pleasure, but a universal cultural cognition formed through the interaction between humans, nature, society, and the self. As Turan (2023) argues, beauty is an innate human characteristic, embodied in the perfection of form and the optimal arrangement of elements. This viewpoint highlights the structural and orderly nature of formal beauty—an ideal state sought by humans through perception and reason via proportion, symmetry, and rhythm.

From a theoretical aesthetic standpoint, the understanding of beauty can be categorized into objective and subjective dimensions. Objective beauty is reflected in the harmony and unity of physical attributes such as form, structure, color, and material, which are widely perceivable and often resonate across different cultures. Subjective beauty, on the other hand, is more complex and is profoundly influenced by the viewer's cultural background, personal experience, emotional state, and social context (Reid, 2014). Reid (2014) emphasized that beauty arises from the unity of formal relationships between sensory perceptions. This unity is not merely a visual composition but a holistic experience that evokes psychological pleasure and emotional resonance.

In the realm of art, particularly in crafts such as wood sculpture, this unity of "form and perception" is especially pronounced. As a form that integrates visual art and manual craftsmanship, the beauty of wood sculpture lies not only in the intricacy of its lines and compositions but also in the tactile sensation of the material, the carving techniques, and the symbolic motifs that evoke the viewer's aesthetic emotions (Dong Shu & Chen, 2024). In the context of wood sculpture, aesthetic principles are not abstract theories but are continuously reconstructed through practice, forming a dynamic logic of aesthetic cognition (Sun & Liu, 2022).

Wahid et al. (2021) note that contemporary expressions of wood sculpture often embody both explicit beauty and metaphorical beauty. The former refers to the craftsmanship evident in the precision of carving, fluidity of lines, and spatial layering; the latter relates to cultural implications and symbolic meanings conveyed through patterns, symbols, and compositions. This coexistence of the “visible” and the “invisible” makes wood sculpture not only a source of visual delight but also a medium of cultural interpretation. Thus, the manifestation of beauty in wood sculpture stems both from the formal aesthetics of the carving itself and from the viewer’s interpretation of its symbolic significance. In this process, artists and viewers together construct an interactive aesthetic experience, making beauty not just something to be “seen,” but something to be “understood” and “experienced.”

Throughout the history of architectural creation, the design and implementation of decorative elements have always been a challenge for artists and architects. Interior decoration is not merely a supplement to architectural form but an essential part of the spatial experience. Through carved details, pattern design, material selection, and color coordination, it shapes the visual and cultural identity of architecture. Interior decoration can thus be considered the “soul” of an architectural work—its “final touch” and the key to making spatial experiences vivid and rich (Namicev & Namiceva, 2018). As one of the most significant decorative methods, wood sculpture has a long history and is deeply embedded in regional cultural traditions, becoming a treasured art in human architectural and artistic practices.

The application of wood sculpture in interior decoration reflects not only a pursuit of spatial aesthetics but also carries profound cultural traditions and craftsmanship (You, 2020). Well-designed wood sculpture patterns enhance both the artistic value and cultural depth of a space (Song & Liao, 2022). Compared to other decorative forms, wood sculpture has a unique advantage in shaping forms. Its warm material and natural grain inject vitality into spatial environments.

Among these works, the aesthetic value of pattern design is particularly prominent. Carving patterns not only fulfill visual beauty but also convey distinct cultural messages through their symbolic meanings. Traditional patterns often embody auspicious symbols such as wealth, longevity, and harmony, reflecting people’s aspirations for a better life and their understanding of nature and society (Bentum, 2014). The wood sculpture art of the Wang Grand Courtyard exemplifies this traditional aesthetic. Through meticulous craftsmanship and distinctive patterns, it decorates architectural spaces while enriching their cultural connotations (Xu, 2019).

wood sculptures at the Wang Grand Courtyard pursue aesthetic harmony in form, shape, lines, and composition, particularly emphasizing symmetry, balance, and rhythm—core elements of traditional formal aesthetics that enhance artistic expression. The carving techniques exhibit smooth knife work and clear layering, while the natural beauty of the wood is fully utilized. The grain, color variations, and refined carving techniques give each piece high visual and tactile aesthetic value. Whether depicting flora and fauna or religious and folk imagery, these works create strong spatial depth and visual stratification, providing viewers with a deeply immersive aesthetic experience (Li et al., 2022).

Moreover, the application of wood sculpture in the Wang Grand Courtyard demonstrates the close relationship between sculptural art and spatial functionality. In architectural settings, wood sculpture are not merely decorative but often serve functional or symbolic purposes. For example, certain motifs relate to themes such as peace, family harmony, and prosperity, while others convey meanings associated with lineage honor and historical continuity. These details highlight the unique value of wood sculpture in architectural decoration: it is not only a representation of formal beauty but also a symbol of culture and spirituality.

As an art form, wood sculpture offers rich inspiration and elements for modern design. In recent years, scholarly interest in wood sculpture has increased, particularly in the study of creative concepts and pattern innovations, offering new perspectives and insights for contemporary artistic creation (Liang & Qi, 2021). Beyond its role in traditional art, wood sculpture has also shown strong potential in contemporary art and design industries. By reinterpreting traditional motifs with modern techniques, artists can explore new expressive methods and revitalize this age-old craft. The expressive power of wood sculpture is vast: it can display intricate craftsmanship or convey profound aesthetic meanings through simplified lines. Compared to complex carvings, minimalist line-based compositions can also create unique visual effects, demonstrating artistic finesse and beauty.

The charm of wood sculpture lies in two key aspects: the ingenuity of form design and the precision of carving techniques. The design determines the formal beauty and spatial presence, while technique is essential to realizing the artistic vision. Through precise tools and meticulous technique, artists transform flat wood into rich, dimensional pieces. For example, relief techniques often create spatial layering and dynamic light-shadow effects that significantly enhance the artwork’s visual impact. This multi-layered carving design not only provides greater visual engagement but allows viewers to appreciate the work from multiple perspectives and under varying lighting conditions.

In traditional wood sculpture, pattern application often expresses distinctive artistic styles and symbolic meanings. Common motifs such as dragons, phoenixes, auspicious clouds, and blessing symbols are central to Chinese culture. In the carving process, these motifs are endowed with cultural connotations. For instance, dragons and phoenixes often symbolize prosperity, authority, and harmony, while auspicious clouds represent blessings and hope. These symbolic elements not only elevate the artistic depth of the carving but also enhance its cultural and spiritual value. Through these patterns, viewers can grasp the underlying cultural narratives and the broader social and historical ideas that the artwork conveys.

In traditional wood sculpture, botanical motifs are particularly popular—not only because they are diverse and accessible, but also because they carry auspicious meanings, making them favored by artisans (Xiaoli, 2023). Patterns

such as peonies, vines, pine, and bamboo frequently appear in wood sculpture. These elements symbolize wealth, longevity, and resilience, imbuing works with higher cultural and aesthetic value. The peony, for example, represents prosperity and beauty, while pine and bamboo symbolize endurance and long life. By incorporating such motifs, artists seek not only visual perfection but also express blessings for life, family, and society.

Furthermore, wood sculpture in architecture is not solely decorative; they serve as markers of cultural identity and expressions of national spirit. As Owen (1996) states, wood sculpture is not just a visual pleasure—it is a manifestation of cultural consciousness. Each carving encapsulates social values, historical memory, and a sense of collective identity. Through wood sculpture, viewers connect with the artist's ideals and gain insight into a community's accumulated wisdom and emotional legacy. Therefore, the aesthetic value of wood sculpture lies not only in its form but also in its deep cultural and symbolic resonance. Through its visual language, wood sculpture conveys timeless cultural connections and philosophical depth, enriching architectural spaces with profound meaning.

As an outstanding example of traditional Chinese architecture, the Wang Grand Courtyard presents wood sculpture works that serve both decorative and symbolic purposes. Through the deliberate selection of motifs and masterful execution, these carvings express a unique artistic charm. They not only adorn architectural spaces but also represent traditional cultural values and contemporary relevance in terms of artistic expression, cultural symbolism, and national spirit.

Table 1: Pattern description of the wood sculpture art in Wang Grand Courtyard

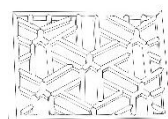
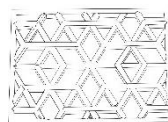
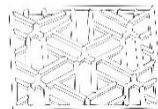
Motif Category	Actual Object	Line Drawing	Description
Animal Motifs			<p>The overall composition follows the principles of symmetry and balance, with the carvings on the left and right beams both independent and complementary, enhancing the architectural aesthetic. The design primarily employs shallow relief and deep relief techniques to create the three-dimensional effect of dragons and phoenixes. Openwork carving is used for the cloud motifs, adding a sense of transparency and enhancing the visual depth.</p> <p>The right-side carving depicts a scene where the dragon and phoenix intertwine, symbolizing imperial authority, auspiciousness, and harmony. In Chinese traditional culture, this motif represents the balance of yin and yang and the prosperity of the household. On the left, the carving illustrates a dragon soaring through the clouds, often accompanied by a pearl in its mouth or nearby, forming the "Cloud Dragon Playing with a Pearl" motif. This design was common in high-ranking Qing Dynasty residences, particularly in Shanxi merchant mansions, reflecting the homeowner's aspirations for wealth, longevity, and family prosperity.</p> <p>The dragon and phoenix motifs have been imbued with profound symbolic meanings throughout history and are frequently used in architectural decoration. The Wang Grand Courtyard's dragon and phoenix patterns encompass both figurative and abstract representations, contributing significantly to the artistic evolution of these iconic images (Cheng & Yahaya, 2024).</p>
Plant Motifs			<p>This wood sculpture integrates openwork carving, relief carving, and line engraving techniques, primarily depicting flowers, rocks, vines, and other natural elements. As a traditional auspicious motif, it symbolizes wealth, longevity, and prosperity. The chrysanthemum represents longevity and moral</p>

continued

Figure Motifs



Geometric Motifs



integrity, while the banana plant signifies good fortune. Combined with rock formations, the composition conveys stability and harmony, aligning with the values of traditional Chinese family culture.

Such motifs were commonly found in Ming and Qing dynasty residential decorations, reflecting a scholarly aesthetic and family-oriented symbolism.

In terms of composition, the design adopts a scattered perspective, with rocks, flowers, and leaves arranged in overlapping layers, enhancing the sense of depth. The main elements follow a diagonal composition, creating a balanced visual effect that makes the scene both stable and dynamically engaging.

The scene features multiple figures, arranged in a balanced composition with varied poses, creating a lively and layered tribute presentation. The characters are positioned around the central focus, some holding treasures, while others bow respectfully, emphasizing the reverent atmosphere of the tribute ceremony. The overall composition employs a scattered perspective, allowing figures, trees, and ground decorations to unfold within a richly layered space.

A combination of deep relief, openwork carving, and line engraving techniques enhances the depth and realism of the scene, making the figures appear vivid and dynamic.

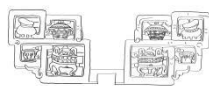
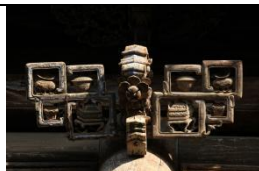
The "Eight Barbarians Presenting Treasures" screen frame is a highly valuable cultural and artistic wood sculpture, depicting foreign envoys offering treasures to the central imperial court. Rooted in historical narratives, this motif symbolizes national prosperity and unity, reflecting the allegiance of distant regions. It was a popular decorative theme in Ming and Qing dynasty architecture, signifying the grandeur and stability of the empire.

This wood sculpture features a geometric pattern design, composed of interlocking hexagons, rhombuses, zigzags, and intersecting straight lines. The design conveys a strong sense of order and reflects the structured and balanced aesthetics commonly found in traditional Chinese architectural ornamentation.

The carving employs an openwork technique, making it not only decorative but also functional, allowing for ventilation and light transmission. This technique was especially prevalent in Ming and Qing dynasty residential architecture, frequently used in doors, windows, and partition screens. The openwork design enhanced indoor lighting while also elevating the artistic appeal of the space.

continued

Artifact Motifs



This wood sculpture adopts a symmetrical layout, adhering to the aesthetic principles of ancient Chinese architectural decoration, symbolizing harmony and stability. Its main structure consists of multiple rectangular frames, each containing different carved objects that remain relatively independent while maintaining overall continuity in composition. The primary motifs include a cauldron (ding), an incense burner, a vase, and a cup or bowl, each carrying profound cultural significance in Chinese tradition: Cauldron (Ding): Symbolizes power and stability. Historically regarded as a national treasure, it represents family prosperity and social status. Incense Burner: Associated with religious rituals and ancestor worship, it signifies reverence for heaven and ancestors, embodying Confucian filial piety. Vase: Represents peace (as the Chinese word for "vase" sounds like "peace"), making it a common motif in traditional auspicious patterns. Cup/Bowl: Symbolizes abundance and refined living. This component employs relief carving and openwork techniques, preserving the solid texture of wood while enhancing spatial depth and layering.

4. Conclusion

Wood sculpture art has long held a significant position in Chinese culture and the traditional arts and crafts system. However, with the rapid development of modern society, this art form is facing challenges in both inheritance and innovation. Therefore, effective measures must be taken to protect and promote the sustainable development of this traditional craft. One such approach is to conduct in-depth research and actively promote the unique charm of wood sculpture art, ensuring its broader application in contemporary society while enhancing its artistic value and cultural influence. Moreover, it is essential to educate younger generations about the historical origins, carving techniques, and cultural symbolism of wood sculpture art. By doing so, the vitality of this intangible cultural heritage can be preserved and carried forward into the future. As Yang et al. (2022) pointed out, the inheritance and development of traditional wood sculpture techniques face numerous challenges, including the loss of skills, a lack of inheritors, and changes in market demand. Therefore, it is particularly important to take effective measures to protect and promote the sustainable development of this traditional craft.

The aesthetic value of wood sculpture art is not only reflected in the high level of carving techniques, such as the layering of patterns, the smoothness of lines, and the balance and symmetry of the overall form, but also in the cultural connotations and spiritual symbols it carries. Traditional Chinese wood sculpture emphasizes the concept of "form and spirit being complementary," not only pursuing the beauty of external forms but also focusing on conveying inner thoughts, emotions, and cultural identity through carving. Artists, in their creative process, employ various expressive techniques to create a unique visual language, allowing viewers to not only appreciate the craftsmanship but also feel the profound cultural meaning embedded in the work. Therefore, wood sculpture is not only an aesthetic object but also a concentrated embodiment of traditional Chinese aesthetic spirit (Zhong, 2023).

Furthermore, the design of patterns in wood sculpture works often carries rich symbolic meanings and cultural information. For example, auspicious animals such as dragons, phoenixes, and qilins are often used for blessings and symbolizing power, nobility, and health; flower and bird patterns symbolize abundance and family harmony; while landscape themes reflect the Eastern philosophical idea of "harmony between heaven and man," skillfully integrating views of nature and life into art. These patterns are not merely decorative elements, but an important way to construct the narrative of Chinese traditional culture. As Fang et al. (2024) pointed out in his study on the meaning and symbolism of auspicious patterns in wood sculpture, these patterns express the characteristics of regional auspicious culture through vivid representations, emphasizing the arrangement and combination of relevant objects to present the beautiful connotations of blessings. While conveying the aesthetic tastes of the nation, these patterns also make wood sculpture art a cultural bridge that spans time and space, maintaining its irreplaceable value in cultural inheritance in contemporary society.

Therefore, because Mr. Ren Qingwen has consistently preserved the authenticity and refinement of this craft, he has ensured that its traditional artistic status remains intact. From analysis, it is evident that the patterns and styles of wood sculpture art can continue to evolve without diminishing its aesthetic value. On the contrary, such development can further enhance its artistic appeal, making it an even more captivating form of traditional craftsmanship.

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