

Original Paper

Artifacts and the Worship of Immortals: An Image Analysis of the Maoling Bamboo-Joint Boshan Furnace in the Han Dynasty

Liu Yushu¹

¹ School of Design and Art, Jingdezhen Ceramic University, Jingdezhen 333403, China

Received: April 25, 2024

Accepted: April 29, 2024

Online Published: May 13, 2024

doi:10.22158/jar.v8n2p22

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/jar.v8n2p22>

Abstract

The Boshan furnace of the Han Dynasty is famous for its intricate carving, which possesses both decorative features and symbolic functions. The gilt silver and bamboo-joint bronze fumigation stove, with its continuous Boshan design, towering bamboo joints, and vivid carvings, reflects the two major characteristics of “beauty” and “utility” of the Ming Dynasty artifacts. This article mainly focuses on the transition from three-dimensional to two-dimensional imagery, the transformation of symbolic meanings into spatial analogues, and the comparative analysis of foreign and domestic shapes. The intention is to explore the morphological characteristics of Ming Dynasty artifacts through image research.

Keywords

Han Dynasty, Maoling Bamboo-Joint Boshan furnace, planar image, spatial concept

1. The Legend of the Immortal Mountain and the Maoling Boshan Censer

The gilt silver and bamboo-joint Boshan censer was unearthed from a mound adjacent to five unnamed tombs on the eastern side of Maoling, with the first pit located 60 meters to the south (Note 1). Its lid resembles a series of mountains, with overlapping peaks and misty clouds, presenting an illusionary image of the immortal mountain.

The earliest recorded legend of the immortal mountain in official history appears in “Records of the Seals and Sacrifices” in the “Historical Records”: “During the reigns of Emperor Wei and Emperor Xuan of the Han Dynasty, Yan Zhao sent people to the sea to search for Penglai, Fangzhang, and Yingzhou. These three sacred mountains are said to be located in the Bohai Sea, not far from people. When disasters approach, the ships are carried away by the wind. It is rumored that some have reached these places, where immortals and the elixir of immortality reside. The animals and birds there are all white, and the palaces and pavilions are made of gold and silver. Before arriving, they appear like

clouds in the distance. However, once approaching the three sacred mountains, they are actually located underwater, and the wind always blows the ships away, making it impossible to reach them in the end (Note 2)". Since the pre-Qin period, Emperor Qin Shi Huang and Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty repeatedly sent expeditions to search for the immortal mountains, but they "never succeeded in reaching them". The floating nature of the sacred mountains further enhanced the mysterious spatial imagery in people's minds. In "Liezi", it is written: "There are five mountains: Taiyu, Yuanqiao, Fanghu, Yingzhou, and Penglai. Each mountain is three thousand li tall and circumferenced, and the flat area on top covers nine thousand li. The distance between these mountains is seventy thousand li, yet they are considered neighbors. The pavilions and observation towers on the mountains are made of gold and jade, and the animals and birds are all pure white. The pearl-like trees grow in clusters, and their flowers and fruits are all delicious and nourishing. Eating them will confer immortality. The inhabitants of these mountains are all descendants of immortals and saints, and countless beings fly back and forth between them day and night (Note 3)". The characteristics of the five immortal mountains, such as their flat tops and pavilions made of gold and jade, formed the textual basis for the later depictions of the immortal mountains in art. However, there is a notable difference between the flat-topped image of the immortal mountains described in the texts and the triangular-shaped image of the immortal mountains depicted on the Boshan censer.



Figure 1. Maoling Bamboo-Joint Boshan Censer (Western Han Dynasty)

The Maoling Bamboo-Joint Boshan censer, with a multi-layer structure, can be divided into four parts from top to bottom: the censer cover, the censer body, the censer handle, and the pedestal base (Figure 1). The overall shape is in the form of a tall-handled bamboo-joint bean, with a golden and silver finish throughout. The cover is shaped like an immortal mountain, with rolling peaks resembling waves. There are small vents on the peaks, and when the incense burns, it creates the illusion of a misty Boshan. The censer dish and the censer body are connected by a threaded joint. A band of gold and silver adorns the middle of the censer, with four relief golden dragons carved around it. Below the censer dish are ten triangular patterns, each decorated with coiled dragon motifs. The censer handle is cast with three coiled dragons, with the dragon heads supporting the censer dish in a graceful S-shape. The censer handle is divided into five sections, with water-drop-shaped bamboo leaf patterns carved at the tail end. On the sides of the pedestal base, two coiled dragons are carved in relief, with their mouths open and connected to the bamboo-shaped handle. The outer side of the censer cover is inscribed with a circular inscription of 35 characters, and the bottom of the pedestal is also inscribed with 33 characters. The Boshan censer is named for its mountain-shaped cover. The Maoling Bamboo-Joint Boshan censer features a mountain shape that curves and wraps around like waves, presenting an overlapping image of an immortal mountain. The imagery of the mountain has its roots in the iconography of the Han dynasty, where portrait bricks depict realistic mountain scenery. The image of the mountain has “worship of immortals” characteristics dating back to painted pottery images, and in Han dynasty art, the “mountain” is further mythologized. The ancient people’s quest and imagination of the immortal mountain since the pre-Qin period are full of reverie. To satisfy their desire to see the legendary immortal mountains in their daily lives, the ancients gradually began to simulate the mythical realm in censers. The differences between the fairyland and the human world are described in the “Records of the Historian” as mountains inhabited by “immortals”, surrounded by “clouds”, and the “sea”, populated by exotic beasts with white fur and palaces built of gold and silver.

The vivid portrayal of the immortal mountain is not only a detailed narrative of nature but also a reflection of subconscious psychological processes such as consciousness, imagination, and creation. The artistic beauty of the Boshan censer, shaped by its imagery, pleases the viewer and forms an impression of the theme represented by the image or its owner. The wave-like mountains in the Maoling Boshan censer are powerful images, and the craftsman hoped that the images would attract the “spirit of the immortals”. The author may combine the design of the fairyland with the prototypes of decorative art and analyze the imagery of the immortal mountains, palaces, and animals in the flattened images to obtain a unique Confucian aesthetic image.

2. The Concept of the “Immortal Mountain” Originated from the “True Mountain” Described in Ancient Literature

“The great affairs of a state lie in sacrifice and war” (as stated in “Zuo Zhuan: The Thirteenth Year of Cheng Gong”). In the political and cultural life of ancient society, the Boshan censer played a significant role. Besides its practical function, the imagery of the “immortal mountain” was also endowed with mystical and symbolic meanings. The study of the symbolism of mountains became an important sample for the research of Han dynasty artifacts.

Most of the records in the literature reflect the “immortal mountain” as an unattainable and revered peak in reality. The “mountain” served as a symbol of deity. The Boshan censer is a typical model of the immortal mountain (Note 4), embodying the belief in immortality among the people of the Han dynasty. Its multi-layered construction, with overlapping peaks, symbolizes the unreachable worship of the immortal mountains, seeking immortality and the ascension of the soul to heaven. In the “Records of the Grand Historian: Book of Sealing and Worshipping”, Sima Qian described the attitudes of Emperor Qin Shi Huang and Emperor Wu of the Han towards immortals. From the 3rd to the 2nd century BC, people began to use artifacts and images to “emulate the gods”. The dialogue between Wen Chengyan and Emperor Wu of the Han provides a vivid embodiment of the Boshan censer simulating the fairyland: “If you wish to communicate with the gods, the palace and attire must resemble the gods; otherwise, the divine beings will not arrive (Note 5)”. People believed that an environment or scene resembling the fairyland could attract the arrival of immortals. Wu Hong argues that “the Boshan censer, which became popular from the 2nd century BC, clearly represents the immortal mountains in the sea (Note 6)”. The mountainous imagery on the lid of the Boshan censer serves as the “prototype” of the legendary immortal mountain.

Most scholars believe that the immortal mountain depicted in the Boshan censer represents “Kunlun”. Wen Yiduo interprets the term “immortal” as referring to the belief that “heaven resides on Kunlun Mountain, and ascending to heaven is equivalent to ascending to immortality (Note 7)”. The belief in ascending to immortality had already taken shape during the Warring States period, and the soaring mountains gradually evolved into a path leading to heaven and immortality. In the culture of the Chu state during the Warring States period, the images of Kunlun and the immortal mountains merged. The Han dynasty people were not satisfied with merely imagining Kunlun as a fantastical entity; they attempted to transform abstract words into intuitive images, embodying it as a “real” existence. This medium was the Boshan censer, an artifact. The ancients needed to create an image and shape of the “immortal mountain” that conformed to their fantasies. The three-peaked image of the Chinese character “shan” (mountain) provided the ancients with a basic framework for visualizing the immortal mountain (Note 8).

The Boshan censer, as a model of the immortal mountain, was endowed by the ancients with mystical and symbolic meanings, reflecting the Han dynasty people's aspiration for immortality. Analyzing its planar images reveals the implicit adoration of the ancients towards mountains. The revered mountains in reality became symbols of divine authority and were believed to be the path leading to the fairyland. To a certain extent, this planar mountain imagery embodies the fantasies of the ancients.

3. The Planar Images within the Boshan Censer: Narration and Symbolism

3.1 Narrative Immortal Mountains and Symbolic Immortal Mountains

Viewing from the perspective of planar "visual projection" (Note 9), both the gilt cloud-patterned Boshan censer unearthed from the tomb of Liu Sheng in Mancheng and the gilt silver Boshan censer from Maoling exhibit distinct images of the immortal mountain. The former presents an overall image of jagged and towering peaks, with various exotic and mythical creatures wandering between the peaks and valleys. In contrast, the latter exhibits a more orderly and compact form, with a full and rounded appearance.

These two outstanding Boshan censers from the Western Han period differ significantly in terms of their styling techniques, outer contours, rhythmic lines within the imagery, and the proportional representation of the mountains. The planar images reveal two distinct approaches in portraying the images of the immortal mountains. The gilt cloud-patterned Boshan censer exhibits a narrative quality in its depiction of the immortal mountain, with illustrations and text complementing each other. Elements such as cloud vapors, sea waves, and exotic beasts, as described in the "Records of the Grand Historian", are interspersed among the various levels of the mountains. For instance, agile monkeys perched atop the peaks, toads in verdant areas, hunters concealed among the mountainsides with bows and arrows (Figure 2), fleeing wild boars, and mythical creatures engaged in a dynamic chase, all captured in wavy curves, add a sense of fun and narrative depth to the imagery (Figures 3 and 4). On the other hand, the bamboo-jointed Boshan censer from Maoling, from the perspective of traditional Chinese styling, exhibits a more converged and compact mountain form. The inclination of the censer's lid follows a nearly straight diagonal line, giving a clearer and more defined sense of the mountain's overall direction and flow. The imagery of the mountains is concise and powerful, with a strong sense of dynamism. Each censer, a masterpiece of its time, offers insights into the diverse artistic expressions and cultural imaginations of the Western Han period, reflecting the rich tapestry of beliefs and aspirations surrounding immortality and the divine.

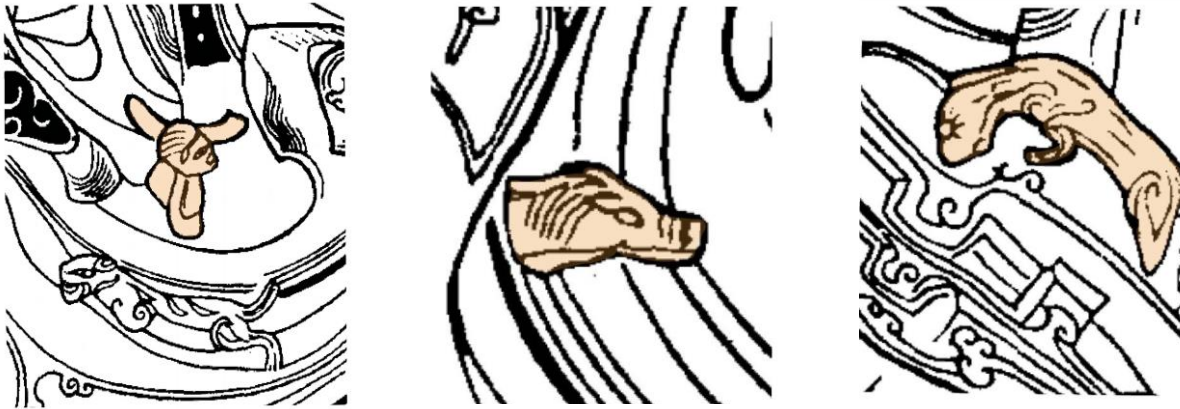


Figure 2. Line Drawing of the Gilt Cloud-Patterned Boshan Censer (Partial)

Figure 3. Line Drawing of the Gilt Cloud-Patterned Boshan Censer (Partial)

Figure 4. Line Drawing of the Gilt Cloud-Patterned Boshan Censer (Partial)

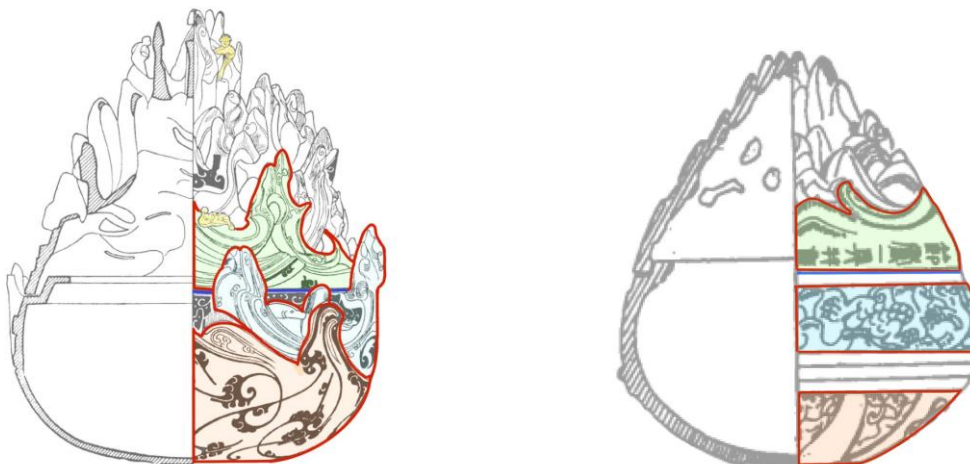


Figure 5. Line Drawing of the Gilded and Silver Cloud-Patterned Boshan Censer

Figure 6. Line Drawing of the Maoling Gilded Silver Bamboo-Jointed Boshan Censer

Analyzing the two Boshan censers demonstrated in this article from their contours and shapes, the one decorated with inlaid gold and silver cloud patterns has a more scattered mountain shape, with flexible and changing peak trends and obvious ups and downs in the peak and valley areas. It gives people a sense of high and steep peaks and jagged ridges. The author divides the different areas of the Boshan censer into three colors for analysis (Figure 5). From the orange area of the lower censer body with gilded cloud patterns to the blue area above with cloud-like and wave-like patterns, the curving lines break the straight lines of the mouth of the censer. Then to the green area above with water-like and mountain-like patterns that continue to the top of the mountain. From the censer body to the censer cover, the overall line rhythm rises and falls like waves overlapping and intertwining with each other.

The overall visual image is dynamic, with lines composed of graceful curves throughout the Boshan censer, except for the straight lines at the mouth of the censer. However, the specific animal elements depicted in the line drawing, such as tigers, leopards, monkeys, and toads, somewhat weaken the object-oriented nature of the overall image. In contrast, the Maoling gilt silver and copper Boshan censer exhibits a more unified trend in its mountain peaks, which basically coalesce into a triangular shape (Figure 6). The converging peaks resemble the close connection between Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty's imperial power and political situation during that time. The outline of the image is like a bud waiting to bloom, with the calyx supporting the censer body, giving the entire image a complete and unified sense of power. The bud-shaped design makes the image appear more orderly and structured. From the overall image layout, the different colored areas are clearly divided, with no overlapping parts between them. The distinct layers give the overall image a sense of orderliness.

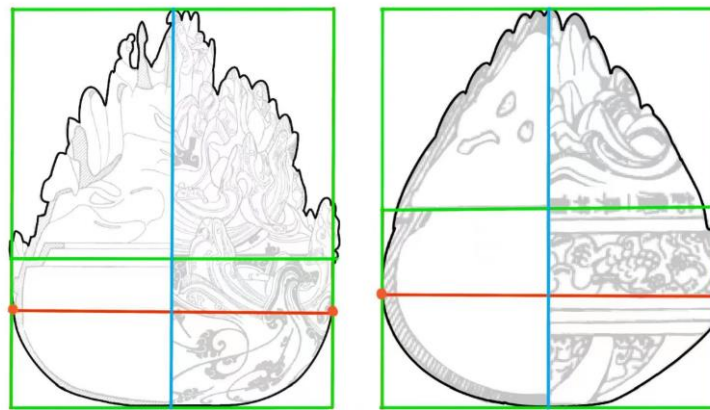


Figure 7. Planar Proportional Diagram of the Boshan Censer

Ancient Chinese paintings emphasized the vividness of their qi and charm, and the lines crafted by artisans often carried a sense of fluidity. The rhythmic cadences can be perceived in the lines of these images, each unique in its melody. The art forms of the Han Dynasty, whether painting, sculpture, dance, or otherwise, all exuded a vibrant and dynamic energy, full of life and vitality (Note 10). The body of the Mancheng Boshan censer features intricate patterns created by intertwining thin and thick gold wires, resembling fine hair or flowing clouds that wrap around the censer, giving the lines a rhythmic dance-like quality. The cloud patterns also act as the skeletal framework of the entire censer, creating a distinct separation between the orange and blue areas. The artisan skillfully used the gold-inlaid lines to express a rhythmic cadence filled with dynamism.

The lid of the Boshan censer also differs in terms of its proportional representation in the images (Figure 7). In the line drawing of the left censer with gilt cloud patterns, the curves of the censer body are more gentle, giving the artifact a sense of stability and solidity. On the right, the Maoling bamboo-jointed Boshan censer has a more pronounced slant in the lines at the base of the censer body,

with the widest point of the censer being higher. As for the mountain-shaped lid, the left image has a more prominent proportion of mountains, with a rich variety of mountain forms that contribute to the solidity and stability of the censer body, making it capable of supporting the weight above. The right mountain-shaped lid is more compact and smaller in volume, with a tendency to converge and rise upward. The overall image gives a visual impression of a budding flower, appearing lighter and more ethereal.

The planar images of Boshan censers from the same period present two distinct spatial symbols. The overall image of the censer adorned with gilt cloud patterns exudes a sense of fluidity, with lines undulating and intersecting like rolling waves, imparting a dynamic quality to the peaks and cloud vapors of the censer. Conversely, the Maoling bamboo-jointed Boshan censer exhibits a clear and distinct hierarchy, symbolizing order and unity. The spatial forms of the immortal mountains portrayed in the image are characterized by a more compact and full-bodied appearance. The censer lid, shaped like a budding flower, mimics the biomorphic form of a plant, evoking a sense of vigorous vitality and strength.

3.2 The Biomimetic Forms Depicted in the Image



Figure 8. Comparison of Line Drawings of the Boshan Censer and Floral Patterns

In the “Origins and Evolution of Boshan Ornaments”, it is proposed that the design of Boshan censers often incorporates plant-like features. The bamboo-jointed handle and the floral calyx shape at the base of the censer are both manifestations of botanical forms (Note 11). As can be seen from the planar image, the triangular axillary regions between the pink petal-like areas are adorned with intricate decorations (Figure 8), forming a clear contrast with the blank spaces of the calyx. The green receptacle area is separated from the orange ovary, and the receptacle is skillfully transformed by the craftsmen into three coiled dragon shapes branching out from the end of the handle. The image presents a slightly curled S-shaped curve, with a coiled dragon-shaped receptacle in the center and two on either side, supporting the bud-like censer body above. The calyx, receptacle, ovary, and stem together compose a biomimetic form of a flowering plant, while the blue stem incorporates the more symbolic bamboo joints. The parts of the plant, such as flowers, calyxes, leaves, and stems, are summarized and

abstracted.

Han dynasty craftsmen, through observation and fusion of ingenious ideas, combined the vitality and upward-reaching sense of life of plants with the forms of utensils, infusing natural symbolism into their creations.

4. Spatial Concepts in the Image: Reality and Illusion

The Boshan censer combines practicality with ornamentation. In the Han dynasty, it was often placed on a bed or table, decorating the real space while also presenting illusions. As a representation of nature, craftsmen reshaped the natural forms, intertwining reality with illusion. The smoke emitted from the burning incense within the censer belly represents the illusory “qi” that the Han people revered. The Han believed that “qi” resembled clouds and mist, transforming into various shapes such as pavilions, banners, boats, mountains, and animals (Note 12). The scene of clouds and mist swirling around evokes memories of ancient imperial sacrificial rites. According to the “Book of Seals and Sacrifices” in the “Records of the Grand Historian” and Zhang Shoujie’s “Commentary on Justice”, it is written: “On Mount Tai, soil is piled up to form an altar for sacrificing to Heaven and thanking it for its blessings, hence the term ‘feng’. On the smaller mountains below Mount Tai, the ground is cleared to thank Earth for its contributions, hence the term ‘shan’. The word ‘shan’ also implies consecration or worship” (Note 13). Incense burning and prayer have always been crucial components of ancient sacrificial rites. Through the act of burning, people communicate with the gods, transmitting their wishes to the heavens and achieving the purpose of communicating with the divine realm.

The image of the Boshan censer created by craftsmen represents the “real”, while the imagination it evokes is the “illusory”. The imagery generated by the image is the non-physical cloud and mist. Craftsmen skillfully intertwine illusion with reality, and the atmosphere of swirling clouds fully expresses the Han dynasty’s belief in ascending to immortality. Images often depict the misty clouds of the fairyland. Clouds are closely associated with ascending to immortality, and various documents from the pre-Qin period record the connection between cloud vapor and the fairy realm. According to historical records, there is no direct representation of palaces and pavilions in the Boshan censer, possibly hidden in an invisible manner.

When viewed from a “distant perspective”, the two-dimensional plane produces the concept of a three-dimensional spatial object due to factors such as light and shadow, perspective, foreshortening, and clarity. The undulating mountains of the Boshan censer, from various angles, excite the viewer’s perception of spatial layers, making it a visible space. The Maoling gilt silver and copper Boshan censer exhibits a gentle mountainous space (Figure 9).

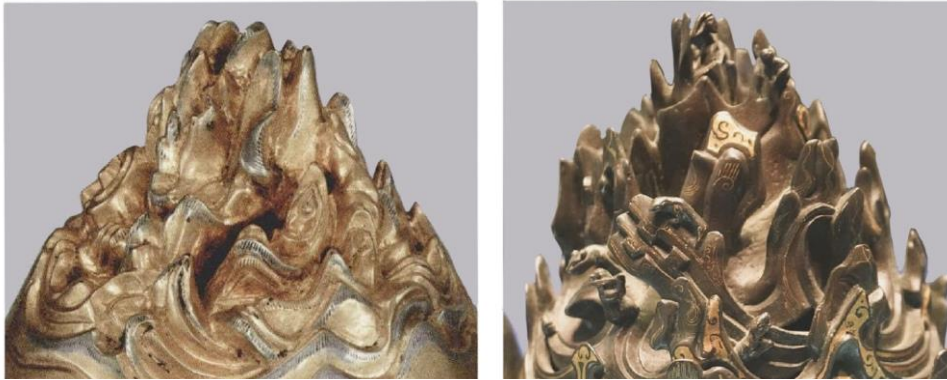


Figure 9. Partial Comparison of Boshan Censer Lid

The undulations of the mountains in the foreground and background are relatively gentle, resembling a landscape painting that gives one the feeling of being able to wander and reside within it. The space seems like the mountains in reality, so realistic that one could almost wander among them. The Boshan censer amidst the curling clouds and mist makes the legendary fairy mountains, once seemingly unreachable, appear almost tangible. In the censer adorned with intricate patterns of clouds in gold and silver, the spatial differences between the mountains are more pronounced. Visible through the interplay of light and shadow from different angles, numerous shadows are formed between the layers of front and back spaces. Each piece of the craftsman's creation is sculpted to be thin, resembling clusters of flaming flames. Each group of mountains exhibits a sharp and pointed feel, akin to the tip of a blade. The volume of an individual animal's form is implied by its contours, while the volume of air is revealed by the objects placed around it. The boundaries of these objects also define the volume of air between them. The relationship and position of light and shadow, as well as the varying degrees of brightness and darkness, all influence the viewer and their perspective.

5. The Influence of Form: Extraterritorial and Local

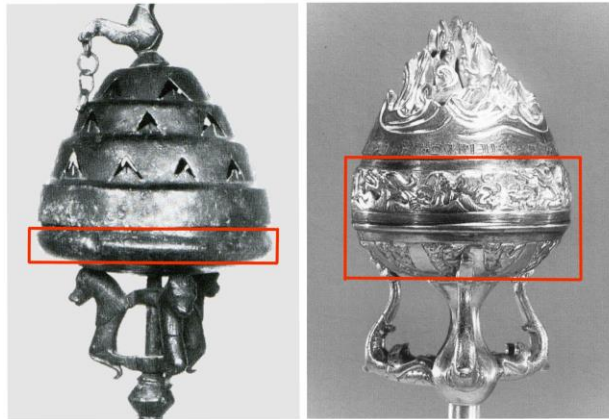


Figure 10. Partial Detail Images (Left: Archimedean censer collected by the Mannil family, Right: Maoling gilt silver and bamboo-knot Boshan censer)

The shape of Boshan censer was influenced by the used incense, and the change of incense also led to the change of the shape of the censer. During the period of Emperor Wudi of the Han Dynasty, the expeditionary force reached Central Asia and finally approached the Roman Empire. The central plains area originally used Maoxiang, but in order to adapt to the resinous incense introduced from abroad, the abdomen of the censer gradually deepened and the censer cover gradually became higher, forming the Boshan censer shape we see now (Note 14). In the environment of incense, the swirling smoke provided an infinite imaginary space for ascending to immortality. The incense and censer became the embodiment of the Han people's aspiration for eternal life.

Jessica Rawson believes that the shape of the Boshan censer in the Han Dynasty was influenced by foreign cultures from West Asia and Central Asia. The censer collected by Manier may be the prototype of the Han censer near Maoling (Note 15). Most of the Boshan censers discovered in the Han Dynasty are short-legged bean-shaped censers, while high-handled censers are relatively rare in China but very popular in West Asia. The bronze censer collected by Manier is supported by a slender and tall base, with two nodes in the middle of the censer handle. The parts supporting the censer body and censer cover are shaped like three feline animals, and the top is a stepped conical cover. Visually, there are similarities in the overall shape and proportion of the two censers. Locally speaking (Figure 10), compared to the Maoling high-handled Boshan censer, the censer body of the Manier bronze censer is smaller. The former censer cover exhibits a stepped shape, which gives a sense of strict regularity and formality. The distribution of censer holes is regular, making its practical function more prominent.

The censer holes in the Maoling high-handled Boshan censer are hidden among the wavy mountains, without destroying the overall shape of the mountains. Instead, it accentuates the completeness and fine detail of the censer's form. The slender censer handle has also been designed by Han craftsmen into a

bamboo-joint shape, symbolizing the elegance of scholars. The cross-section of a bamboo stalk is circular, hollow inside and straight outside. In ancient China, the mention of a circle immediately evoked the description of “heaven is round and earth is square” from the “Huainanzi Tiawenxun”. Han Fu is not lacking in verses praising bamboo as a symbol of aspiration. There are also bamboo-joint shapes in other objects of the same period in the Western Han Dynasty, such as the original celadon bamboo-joint vase with two prominent chord lines resembling bamboo joints at the neck. There were also censer handles with similar bamboo-joint shapes in the early Eastern Han Dynasty, such as in the gilt Boshan censer, which is relatively low in overall shape. In Chinese traditional culture, bamboo symbolizes longevity, resilient life, and unyielding character, as well as embodying the virtues of a gentleman’s self-purification and moral cultivation. The three-dimensional shape of the bamboo-joint censer handle and its auspicious implications may have been carried down through the changing dynasties, adding more local characteristics.

Long-handled objects have been unearthed in Han Dynasty tombs, such as the gold and silver inlaid hunting pattern vehicle ornaments of the early Western Han Dynasty. The multi-branch lamps of the Han Dynasty were created based on the shape and decoration of the Boshan censer and other similar objects (Note 16). Both the early Western Han nine-branch lamp and the painted pottery hundred-flower lamp of the Eastern Han period feature long lamp handles. Among them, the gilt and silver inlaid vehicle ornament is shaped like a hollow cylindrical bamboo joint, with nodes similar to those found on the Maoling high-handled Boshan censer. The painted pottery hundred-flower lamp unearthed in Tonghuagou, Zhicheng, Jiyuan, Henan, has a lamp base decorated with mountains, rivers, and figures of pigs, sheep, beasts, and humans intertwining among them. The mountain-shaped shade resembles the image of Kunlun, the mythical mountain in Han Dynasty legends, which is similar to the motifs of mountains and beasts found on the Boshan censer. Moreover, there is a bamboo-joint-shaped protrusion between each of the three lamp dishes, indicating that the bamboo-joint element on the multi-branch lamp likely originated from the Maoling high-handled Boshan censer.

Jessica Rawson suggests that the Manier censer may be the prototype for the Han Dynasty censers found near Maoling. Visually, there are indeed similarities in the overall shape and proportion of the two. However, there are notable differences between the Manier bronze censer and the Maoling Boshan censer in terms of casting techniques, the proportion of the censer cover, and other local features. Given that multi-branch lamps and other Han Dynasty objects were based on the Boshan censer prototype, and that bamboo-joint shapes repeatedly appeared in the early Eastern Han period, it cannot be excluded that there was mutual influence between the Maoling bamboo-joint Boshan censer and other native Han Dynasty objects.

6. Conclusion

The Boshan censer served both practical and ornamental functions, with its mountainous form embodying a spatial concept that intertwined reality with illusion. Through a comparative study of the Yunwen Boshan censer from Mancheng and other examples, this article analyzes different forms of planar visual images. The former tends to favor narrative planar images, with mythical creatures interspersed among the mountains to create a mythical storyline. The latter exhibits symbolic image characteristics, with symbolic meanings hidden within the imitation of plants and the compact mountain shapes. Han Dynasty craftsmen skillfully integrated reality with illusion in the mountain-shaped covers, giving the Maoling Boshan censer a spatial effect reminiscent of a painting that invites exploration.

From the perspective of foreign culture, the tall censer handle is noteworthy. Scholar Jessica Rawson suggests that the Manier censer from abroad may be the prototype for the Maoling Boshan censer. Visually, the bronze censer in the Manier collection exhibits a more rustic and uncomplicated treatment of the censer holes, and the carving is not as intricate as that of the Maoling Boshan censer. The bamboo-joint Boshan censer from Maoling was created during the reign of Emperor Wudi in search of immortality, with both the object and its decoration aimed at “emulating the gods”. Therefore, the Han Dynasty Boshan censer not only served the practical function of fumigating and insect control, but its essence was also a materialized expression of the illusion of immortality. From the perspective of native culture, the bamboo-joint shape shares similarities with contemporary excavated celadon bamboo-joint vases and copper lamps, all of which derive from the belief system of the Han Dynasty. The presence of bamboo-joint motifs in the gilt Boshan censer of the Eastern Han period suggests that this form was not a special case but a reflection of the Han people’s preferences in object forms.

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Notes

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- Note 2. [Han Dynasty] Sima Qian: "Records of the Grand Historian—Book of Sacrifices and Pilgrimages" [M], Volume 6, annotated and translated by Chen Xi et al., Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2022, p. 3460.
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- Note 5. Same as reference Note 2, page 3499.
- Note 6. [USA] Wu Hung, compiled by Wang Rui, translated by Zheng Yan et al., "Art in Ritual: Essays on Ancient Chinese Art History by Wu Hong" [M], Shanghai: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2005, pp. 463-464.
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