

The Technique of Making a Traditional Imperial Package and its Development in Cultural Relics Conservation

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Image



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Regarded as an excellent representation of heritage packaging in ancient China, the traditional imperial package (hereinafter referred to as “Nang Xia”) has been protected and developed in the Palace Museum with a long history and unique aesthetic beauty. The making technique of the traditional imperial package (hereinafter referred to as "Nang Xia making") is included in the

traditional techniques category of China's intangible cultural heritage. The history of Nang Xia can be traced back to the imperial package workshop of the Yongzheng period of the Qing Dynasty (1723-1735), when skilled craftsmen were gathered to make imperial packages in accordance with the Emperor's order.

Nang Xia has constantly evolved from a package of wood, paint, metal, etc. By the mid to late Qing Dynasty, straw board paper or thin wooden boards became the main materials due to the accessibility of the materials and the shorter production time.

Generally, Nang Xia has three main characteristics: it is a customized hand-made package designed according to the dimension, material, stress points, storage requirement and cultural connotation of the relics placed inside; since Nang Xia are mainly made of paper and cloth, it is usually for packing small and medium-sized objects; and it is a package that snugly fits around the cultural relics inside, avoiding the wear and tear caused by friction and collision during transportation.

Principles of Nang Xia Making

The design concept of the Nang Xia mainly focuses on securing the cultural relics from jostling around in transit or damage caused by external forces. The interior of the package is soft and compact, while the exterior is solid and firm, which has a certain degree of shock absorption during storage or transportation. Here are five principles that need to be followed when making Nang Xia:

Safe. Because they are used as storage in the warehouse, the material of Nang Xia should be safe and harmless. Those materials in direct contact with cultural relics must be mildew proof, buffering, and free from harmful gas volatilization. Also, to ensure the safety of transportation, Nang Xia should be reasonably designed and in line with the concept of preventive conservation.

Practical. Nang Xia are usually designed in regular and simple shapes and should not be over-decorated, as this may distract people's attention from the cultural relics themselves.

Coordinated. This not only refers to the color matching of the package to the housed object, but also demonstrates an integrated coordination with the style and connotation of the cultural relics inside, requiring great skill of the craftsmen in color matching and knowledge of cultural relics.

Recognizable. Each Nang Xia has a tag displaying the basic information of the cultural relic inside, such as name, code, date, grade, etc. Additional notes and instructions for handling and housing the cultural relics must be marked on the tag of the Nang Xia, which are often designed with a complex structure.

Scientific. Honoring past traditions and continually developing Nang Xia techniques are both important. Currently, advanced technological achievements and new materials are being adopted to promote better science-supported methods and materials for Nang Xia making. For example, polyethylene (PE) foam is used as a safer buffer material, and acid-free paper has replaced the traditional straw board paper for the package's frame.

General Steps for Nang Xia Making

Nang Xia making requires natural materials. Its frame is made of multiple layers of acid-free paper which plays a weight-bearing and shape-forming function. After the framework is established, the cloth covering of Nang Xia, made of Song brocade or blue cloth, is glued to the frame using wheat starch paste. The inner Nang is usually framed in a trapezoidal shape and filled with soft buffering materials like high-quality cotton wool and white silk fabric. Because the entire Nang Xia is handmade, it takes at least one week to finish just one.

The making process of Nang Xia can be roughly divided into two steps: outer Xia making and inner Nang making.

Outer Xia making is based on the dimension, material, weight and other details of the cultural relics. Craftsmen plot out the overall structure; calculate the length, width, and height of the Xia's walls; cut the corresponding sizes of acid-free paper; and glue them into the frame. The craftsman will then smooth the frame with abrasive paper and press it with lead blocks for consolidation. When the glue dries, the paper frame is then coated with blue cloth or Song brocade using paste as adhesive. Two bone clips are then installed as lock buckles for the package.

Inner Nang construction includes making the inner frame and the cotton buffer. Depending on the material, shape and specifications of the cultural relic to be housed, craftsmen will choose an appropriate type of inner Nang. Since the inner frame is a trapezoidal shape, craftsmen must calculate the length, width and height of the inner frame and then cut the acid-free paper strips, pasting them into a trapezoidal shape. The height of the inner frame must be lower than the height of the outer Xia.

After finishing the construction of the inner frame, it's time to make the cotton buffer. The bottom of the inner frame is covered with two cm of cotton. Then cotton rolls, made with a suitable degree of softness, are positioned to surround the cultural relic according to its shape. This shaped cotton is then covered with a single sheet of cotton, reinforcing and smoothing the snug fit for the object and raising its placement slightly above the level of the cotton bed. The surface of the cotton base is then covered with a gently tightened silk cloth, and the silk cloth edges are pasted to the border of the inner frame. When the paste dries, the inner frame is fitted into the outer Nang.

To prevent the vertical movement of cultural relics inside the Nang Xia, craftsmen use cotton and silk cloth to make a pillow-like cushion, adhering this to the underside of the Xia cover lid, so that the cultural relic cannot move around easily after closing the Xia. It's necessary to accurately measure the thickness of the pillow-like cushion. If it is too thick, extra pressure will be placed on the cultural relic, and if it is too thin, there will be space for the cultural relic to move up and down. After finishing the pillow-like top cushion, the craftsman will cut and glue small acid-free paper strips to fill the height differences between the outer Xia and the inner frame's wall.

Development and Prospect of the Nang Xia Making

At present, Nang Xia making is an important part of the collection and protection of cultural relics in China; it is a unique technique with a long history and tradition which distinguishes it from other techniques in cultural relic restoration and conservation. This traditional technique has been continuously passed down between craftsman in the Palace Museum, playing an important

role in the preventive care of cultural relics.

Nang Xia making has continued to improve in many ways. Large paper cutters and digital cutting machinery now assist craftsmen greatly in enhancing work efficiency and accuracy. The digital cutting machine has also contributed to countless possibilities for creating a much more refined internal Nang structure by imputing computer-aided design (CAD) drawings. As far as updating materials, PE and microfiber cloth have been adopted for better protection. It is worth mentioning that the Nang Xia design has now entered a new stage. Craftsmen today consider the protection and decoration together and make more innovations in structural design with the cultural relic's physical nature, as well as its cultural connotations, in mind, advancing Nang Xia's aesthetic value. For example, the following image shows a comparison between the new (clearly superior) version of Nang Xia for the Crown (right side of the image) and the old version (left side of the image); viewing these images we can compare aspects of the old and new Nang Xia including practicality, protection, color matching and aesthetic value.

Looking forward to the future, Nang Xia will not merely be a box or package, but will, in and of itself, be an artwork demonstrating the creative minds of Chinese craftsmen and celebrating Chinese cultural elements.

Author Bios

Cui Mingyuan is an associate researcher at the Palace Museum. She graduated from Beijing International Studies University with master and bachelor degrees and majored in translation and interpretation. She worked for five years in the Conservation Department of the Palace Museum including one year making the imperial package. During these years, she translated passages of traditional Chinese conservation techniques, wishing to draw people's attention towards Chinese conservation techniques

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Find the Chinese translation [HERE](#), and read the full article in the December-January 2024 "News in Conservation" Issue 99, p. 18-23