

Exploration of the Art of Pattern Decoration of the Tiger-Skin Wall in the Mu's Manor in Qixia from an Artistic Perspective

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Abstract: The Mu Family Manor in Qixia, Shandong Province, is the largest and best-preserved feudal landlord estate in northern China, serving as a quintessential example of residential architecture in Jiaodong region. This study focuses on the mosaic decorative patterns adorning the Tiger-skin Stone Walls of the Mu Family Manor, analyzing their unique characteristics in material selection, pattern design, construction techniques, and cultural symbolism. The findings provide valuable insights for the research and preservation of traditional architectural artistry.

Keywords: Tiger-skin Stone Walls of the Mu Family Manor; mosaic decorative patterns; material selection and craftsmanship; cultural symbolism

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1 Introduction

The Mu Family Manor, located in Guzhen Village, Qixia City, Shandong Province, was initially constructed during the Yongzheng era of the Qing Dynasty (1723 – 1735) by the prominent landlord Mu Molin and his descendants. By 1935, it had evolved into its current scale, renowned as the "Miniature Forbidden City of Chinese Folk Architecture." The manor complex is oriented along a north-south axis, with its main structures facing south. It spans approximately 158 meters in width (east to west) and 148 meters in depth (north to south), covering a total area of over 20,000 square meters. The estate comprises three main architectural groups encompassing six courtyards—Rixin Hall, Baoshan Hall, East Zhonglai, West Zhonglai, South Zhonglai, and Shigu (also known as Fuyou) Hall—with more than 480 rooms including main halls, auxiliary chambers, and upper-story buildings. Its architectural ingenuity is epitomized by the "Three Carvings," "Six Oddities," and "Nine Marvels." Among the "Nine Marvels" of the manor, the Tiger-skin Stone Walls stand out as an unparalleled masterpiece, representing a rare gem in the realm of Chinese architectural artistry.

2 Location and Characteristics of the Tiger-skin Stone Walls in the Mu Family Manor

The Tiger-skin Stone Wall (hu pi qiang), a traditional Chinese architectural enclosure, is constructed using irregularly shaped natural rubble stones. Typically composed of five hues—red, yellow, brown, white, and gray—these stones are mortared with lime, creating a mosaic that mimics the striped patterns of a tiger's pelt, hence its name. Historically, such walls were prevalent in temples, parks, and residential estates.

The Mu Family Manor features three distinct Tiger-skin Stone Walls, each celebrated for its unique architectural and artistic merits. The largest of these walls adorns the eastern facade of the East Zhonglai Courtyard's cluster of buildings, characterized by its minimalist geometric mosaic patterns that emphasize functional simplicity. The second wall, spanning the northern gate of the alley connecting the Baoshan Hall and East Zhonglai courtyards, measures 1.9 meters in length and 1.3 meters in width. This smaller yet exquisitely crafted wall is renowned for its Six Blessings Anticipating Harmony motif, a composition of six bats (symbolizing blessings) and two fish (representing abundance), which allegorically reflects the harmonious unity of the Mu family's six branches.

The third and most historically significant wall, hailed as "China's Finest Stone Mosaic Wall," stretches 70 meters

along the corridor between the Baoshan Hall and Rixin Hall courtyards. Constructed during the Tongzhi era (1862 – 1874), the walls are adorned with dozens of mosaic motifs, including plum blossoms, chrysanthemums, gourds, roosters, bats, longevity peaches, divine turtles, Coin-Lotus patterns, Lotus and Offspring, and Flower-Moon Harmony. These interwoven motifs achieve a harmonious balance between complexity and order, where intricately arranged patterns—meticulously crafted to emulate natural forms—demonstrate both technical virtuosity and artistic ingenuity.

3 Material Selection and Craftsmanship of the Mosaic Decorative Patterns on the Tiger-Skin Stone Walls

The mosaic patterns on the Tiger-skin Stone Walls of the Mu Family Manor are crafted through a combination of meticulously selected natural stones and refined techniques. These patterns, celebrated for their aesthetic intricacy and symbolic depth, exemplify the fusion of material ingenuity and artisan mastery in traditional Chinese masonry.

The creation process of these mosaics involves six meticulously orchestrated stages:

3.1 Selection of Inlaid Stone Materials

The craftsmen employed a strategy of sourcing materials locally, carefully selecting natural stones from both banks of the Baiyang River near the Mu Family Manor. These stones are notable for their diverse shapes, solid texture, fine grain, and natural coloration—qualities that fully satisfy the aesthetic and tactile demands of inlaid decorative patterns. Their inherent variation and visual richness provided an abundant and suitable raw material foundation for the subsequent creation of intricate inlay designs.

3.2 Design of Inlaid Patterns

The craftsmen designed the inlaid decorative motifs based on elements of traditional culture, folk symbolism, and the personal preferences of the manor's owner. By skillfully leveraging the natural shapes and colors of the stones, they employed both realistic and expressive techniques to conceive themes and arrange forms, determining appropriate proportions and spatial compositions. This process resulted in a variety of auspicious motifs—such as fish, turtles, gourds, "lotus giving birth to noble sons," and "blossoming flowers under a full moon"—each imbued with symbolic meaning. Through this creative transformation, inert stones were elevated into abstract artworks infused with thought and emotion, achieving the aesthetic ideal of “human effort without appearing artificial.” This exemplifies not only the artisans’ artistic sophistication but also their profound humanistic sensibility.

3.3 Stone Processing for Mosaic Patterns

The selected stones were meticulously processed according to pre-designed patterns. Irregularly shaped stones underwent cutting and polishing to ensure seamless integration with adjacent pieces. For motifs requiring intricate detailing, craftsmen employed chisels, hammers, and a combination of realistic carving (e.g., lifelike textures of floral motifs) and expressive style (e.g., abstracted animal postures). This dual approach balanced technical precision with artistic interpretation, enhancing the stones' natural characteristics while achieving thematic coherence. Delicate features, such as the veins of petals or the dynamic postures of animals, were accentuated through subtractive and relief carving techniques. The processed stones were then systematically arranged, ensuring alignment with the overall composition and structural stability. This phase of craftsmanship transformed raw materials into cohesive artistic narratives, ultimately enabling the mosaics to emerge as vivid, enduring expressions of cultural and aesthetic ideals.

3.4 Construction of the Foundation Wall

The foundation walls of the Tiger-skin Stone Walls in the Mu Family Manor were constructed using locally sourced granite and basalt, renowned for their hardness, weather resistance, and high compressive strength. These stones were meticulously selected and laid using traditional masonry techniques, ensuring structural durability. The walls exhibit exceptional craftsmanship, characterized by a mirror-smooth surface and hairline mortar joints, achieving near-perfect flatness and alignment. Such precision not only guaranteed the wall’s stability but also created an immaculate substrate

for the intricate mosaic patterns to be applied subsequently. This foundational rigor underscores the integration of pragmatic engineering and aesthetic intentionality in traditional Chinese architectural practice.

3.5 Pattern Assembly and Wall Construction

This stage represents the most critical phase in the creation of the inlaid “Tiger Skin Wall” patterns. Craftsmen employed adhesives such as lime and glutinous rice paste to affix the processed stone pieces to the wall, assembling them one by one. The process required precise calculation of the position and angle of each stone to ensure a tight fit and uniform joints. For intricate patterns such as the "Coin-Lotus Motif", a preliminary assembly was first conducted on the ground to verify both the artistic coherence and structural accuracy of the design. Only after this verification were the elements transferred and fixed onto the wall. The stones were interlocked with remarkable precision, forming a unified and cohesive structure. This method not only ensured the strength and durability of the inlaid wall but also highlighted the exceptional craftsmanship and artistic ingenuity of ancient artisans.

3.6 Detail Refinement and Adjustment

Upon completion of the assembly, craftsmen meticulously refined and adjusted the details of the inlaid decorative patterns on the wall surface. They inspected the uniformity of the joints between stone pieces and polished any uneven areas to ensure a smooth and level finish. The principal motifs were further refined to enhance the clarity of lines and the sense of dimensionality, making the patterns appear more natural and dynamic. In addition, natural pigments were used to subtly retouch areas where the color tones lacked harmony, thereby achieving a more balanced and visually unified overall appearance.

4 Artistic Style of the Mosaic Decorative Patterns on the Tiger-Skin Stone Walls

The inlaid decorative patterns on the Tiger Skin Walls of the Mu Family Manor predominantly derived from traditional Chinese culture, reflecting both continuity and innovation across different historical periods. In the early Qing Dynasty (mid-17th to early 18th century), the motifs were relatively simple, primarily consisting of basic geometric shapes and floral patterns. As the Mu family's wealth accumulated, there emerged a growing demand for more elaborate expressions of spiritual and cultural values. This gave rise to more intricate designs in the later periods, such as the "Coin and Lotus Pattern" and the "Lotus with Noble Offspring" motif. During the Republican era (1912 – 1949), the design of the inlaid patterns on the Tiger Skin Walls not only retained traditional auspicious symbols but also incorporated, to a certain extent, scenes reflecting everyday labor and life, as well as elements of Western culture. These developments highlight the historical context and distinctive features of the period, thereby enhancing the artistic and historiographical value of these works.

The inlaid decorative motifs on the Tiger Skin Walls of the Mu Family Manor encompass a wide array of elements, which can be broadly categorized into animal, plant, artifact, geometric, and composite types. These patterns serve not only decorative purposes but also embody rich cultural symbolism and profound cultural connotations, as illustrated in Figure 1.

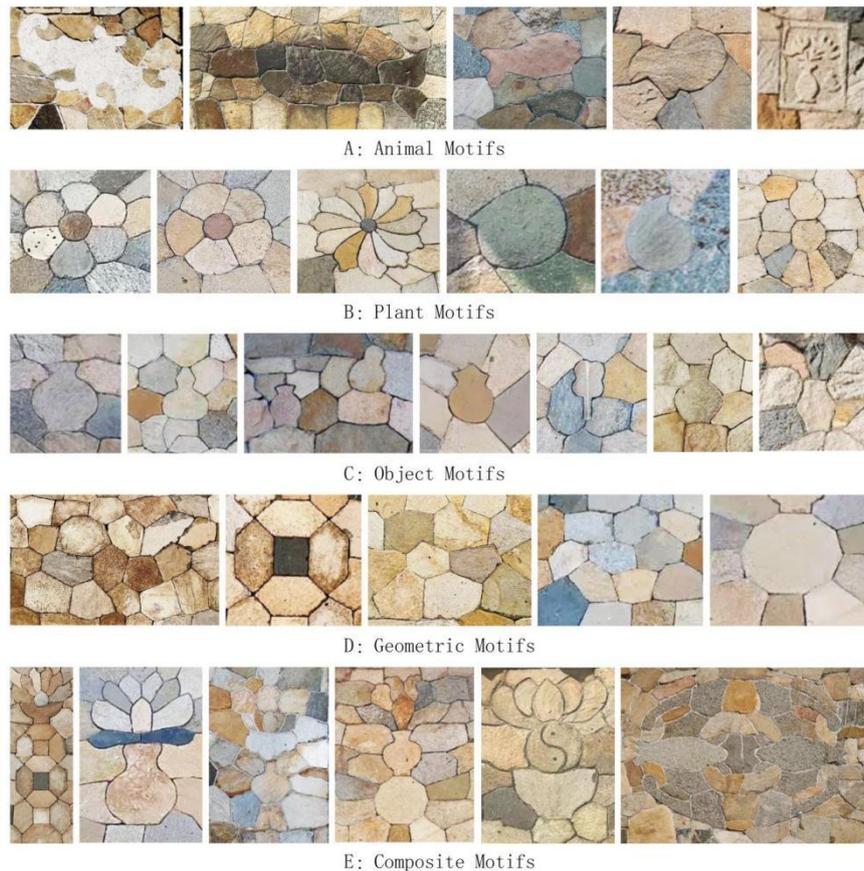


Figure 1. Inlaid decorative pattern of the Tiger Skin Wall along the corridor between the Baoshan Hall and the Rixin Hall courtyards.

4.1 Animal Motifs

The animal motifs featured in the tiger skin wall inlays include five primary types: bats, turtles, fish, golden roosters, and golden toads. In traditional Chinese culture, bats symbolize good fortune, fish represent abundance year after year, turtles signify longevity, golden roosters stand for auspiciousness, and golden toads convey the idea of attracting wealth. These motifs reflect the manor owner's aspirations for prosperity, family harmony, and a flourishing lineage.

4.2 Plant Motifs

The plant motifs include peonies, lotuses, plum blossoms, orchids, and pomegranates. Peonies symbolize wealth and honor; lotuses represent noble character and purity, growing unsullied from the mud; plum blossoms signify resilience and perseverance; and orchids convey elegance and moral integrity. These motifs not only reflect the manor owner's pursuit of material prosperity but also emphasize the importance of cultural refinement, moral cultivation, and the ethical upbringing of future generations.

4.3 Object Motifs

Object motifs include ancient copper coins, treasure vases, gourds, and fans. Copper coins symbolize wealth; treasure vases represent peace and safety; and gourds, homophonous with “fu lu” (meaning “fortune and prosperity” in Chinese), convey auspicious wishes for blessings and longevity. These motifs reflect the Mu family's aspirations for wealth, harmony, and well-being.

4.4 Geometric Motifs

Geometric motifs represent the most prevalent category of decorative patterns on the tiger-skin wall. These include triangles, quadrilaterals, hexagons, octagons, and the Taiji (Yin-Yang) symbol. Each shape embodies rich layers of Confucian

philosophy and moral instruction. For instance, quadrilaterals symbolize rectitude, embodying Confucian ideals of integrity and ethical discipline. Hexagons allude to sixfold prosperity, signifying harmony and auspicious fortune. Octagons represent eight-directional wealth accumulation, reflecting traditional beliefs in cosmic order and material abundance. Taiji diagrams encapsulate the unity of heaven, earth, and humanity, epitomizing the core principles of traditional Chinese philosophy and Confucian cultural values.

4.5 Composite Motifs

Composite motifs are formed by the combination of two or more symbolic elements, resulting in richly layered imagery. For example, the "Coin and Lotus Pattern" combines ancient coins with lotus flowers, symbolizing the estate owner's immense wealth paired with moral transcendence. The "Ruyi and Treasure Vase Pattern", composed of peonies and treasure vases, conveys wishes for prosperity and peace. The "Lotus Birth of Noble Sons Pattern" includes vases, lotus flowers, and seedpods, expressing the traditional desire for fertility and abundant offspring. These composite motifs not only enhance the visual complexity of the decorative program but also encapsulate the spiritual aspirations and cultural values of the Mu family.

5 Artistic Characteristics of the Inlaid Decorative Patterns on the Tiger Skin Walls of the Mu Family Manor

The inlaid decorative patterns on the tiger skin walls of the Mu Family Manor embody distinctive artistic characteristics that reflect the local folk culture and regional identity of the Jiaodong area in Shandong Province. These patterns are not only aesthetically rich but also closely aligned with regional customs, beliefs, and social values. The unique craftsmanship and motif design are deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of the region, illustrating a harmonious integration of artisanal skill, symbolic meaning, and aesthetic sensibility. This interplay between form and cultural function highlights the artistic significance of the decorative motifs and their role in expressing the Mu family's aspirations, virtues, and social ideals.

5.1 Exquisite Material Selection and Intricate Patterns

The decorative stone inlays of the tiger skin walls at the Mu Family Manor reflect a meticulous approach to material selection and demonstrate a design philosophy rooted in local adaptability. Materials were sourced locally, emphasizing harmony with the surrounding environment and embodying the principle of using resources wisely according to regional conditions. The design of the inlay patterns carefully considers the natural shape, texture, and color of the stone, ensuring seamless integration with the surrounding natural landscape and achieving a visual harmony between humanity and nature. These vivid and symbolically rich motifs convey auspicious meanings and profound cultural significance, fully embodying the traditional Chinese folk aspiration for good fortune, happiness, and prosperity.

5.2 Sophisticated Composition and Ingenious Layout

The decorative inlay patterns on the tiger skin walls are intricately interwoven and mutually complementary, forming a cohesive and organic whole that showcases exceptional compositional artistry. Various compositional techniques are employed, including central composition, layered composition, symmetrical arrangement, balanced structure, repetition, and gradation. These methods emphasize visual equilibrium, symmetry, and rhythmic resonance throughout the design, reflecting the craftsmen's profound understanding of spatial aesthetics and their pursuit of artistic harmony. In the "Coin and Lotus Pattern", the arrangement of coins and lotus flowers is artfully staggered, creating a harmonious aesthetic that balances complexity and unity. In the "Six Blessings Awaiting Fulfillment Pattern", the bat motifs positioned at the four corners resonate with the central character for longevity, forming a symmetrical layout symbolizing the cosmological concept of "round heaven and square earth" and conveying wishes for boundless fortune and longevity—an embodiment of solemnity and stability in artistic expression. The "Blossoms and Full Moon Pattern" features radiating motifs surrounding a central plum blossom, enhancing the composition's dimensionality and richness. This arrangement produces a visually rhythmic and dynamic effect, exemplifying the traditional Chinese architectural aesthetic that values

symmetry and balance.

5.3 Natural Colors with Appropriate Coordination

The color scheme of the tiger skin wall's inlaid decorative patterns is characterized by natural and understated tones, with a careful emphasis on contrast and harmony. Craftsmen skillfully utilized an organic combination of five-colored natural stones, creating a dynamic interplay between dark and light hues, as well as cool and warm tones. Through smooth transitions and reciprocal color relationships, the wall's color composition achieves a unified balance of contrast and coordination, effectively avoiding any sense of disorder or chaos and producing a harmonious and richly layered visual effect.

5.4 Unique Forms and Diverse Techniques

The decorative patterns of the tiger skin wall employ a combination of realistic and expressive artistic methods, blending abstraction with representation. The designs include realistic motifs such as turtles, coins, and plum blossoms, alongside more expressive and stylized forms like the "Rooster Heralding the Dawn." Through techniques such as exaggeration and deformation, the patterns capture the spiritual essence and thematic vitality of the motifs, prioritizing the conveyance of their inner spirit over strict physical resemblance.

5.5 Exquisite Craftsmanship and Precise Form

The mosaic craftsmanship of the tiger skin wall's decorative patterns is exceptionally refined. Each stone piece is meticulously polished and fitted by skilled artisans to achieve seamless joints and perfect alignment. The wall surface is smooth and mirror-like, with stone seams as fine as silk threads. Despite enduring years of weathering, the structure remains as solid and durable as when first constructed. The positioning, size, and proportion of each pattern element are carefully designed, resulting in accurate and elegant forms that harmonize beautifully with the surrounding architectural landscape. This reflects a profound integration with nature and demonstrates an extraordinary level of craftsmanship and rational design thinking.

5.6 Rich Symbolism and Profound Connotations

The mosaic decorative patterns on the tiger skin wall, such as the "Coin and Lotus" motif and the "Lotus Bearing Noble Offspring" design, embody auspicious wishes deeply rooted in traditional Chinese folk culture. These patterns carry strong symbolic meanings. For example, the "Double Blessings of Fortune and Prosperity" motif reflects the estate owner's desire for happiness and wealth, while the "Blossoming Flowers and Full Moon" motif expresses hopes for a harmonious and fulfilling family life, symbolizing reunion and domestic bliss. These designs represent the prevailing ideological beliefs and value orientations of the period, authentically reflecting the traditional Chinese emphasis on family prosperity and generational continuity.

6 Artistic Value of the Mosaic Decorative Patterns on the Tiger Skin Walls of the Mu Family Manor

6.1 Artistic Aesthetic Value

The mosaic decorative patterns on the Tiger Skin Walls of the Mu Family Manor possess exceptionally high artistic aesthetic value. The meticulous processing of the stone materials, exquisite pattern designs, and superb masonry craftsmanship, combined with profound cultural symbolism, integrate practicality, beauty, artistry, and cultural significance. These patterns exhibit a strong sense of rhythm and harmony, reflecting a unique understanding and pursuit of formal beauty. They serve as a vivid embodiment of traditional aesthetics within architectural art.

6.2 Historical and Cultural Value

The mosaic decorative patterns on the Tiger Skin Walls of the Mu Family Manor carry rich historical information, bearing witness to the rise and fall of the Mu family. They reflect the regional culture, values, aesthetic tastes, architectural

styles, and craftsmanship levels of the Jiaodong area during their respective periods. These patterns embody elements of Confucian culture and family traditions, illustrating the evolving values and aesthetics of successive manor owners across different historical eras, as well as their reverence for traditional culture and spiritual aspirations. Consequently, they serve as crucial tangible evidence for the study of traditional Chinese architecture, folklore, economy, culture, and politics. In addition, the mosaic decorative patterns on the Tiger Skin Walls also incorporate elements of Western culture, reflecting the collision and integration between traditional Chinese culture and Western influences during modern times. This fusion provides scholars with tangible historical materials for the study of modern Chinese history. As such, these patterns possess substantial historical value and represent a significant and meaningful cultural heritage worthy of in-depth research.

In summary, the mosaic decorative patterns of the Tiger Skin Walls in the Mu Family Manor, as an integral part of the estate's architectural ornamentation, embody the traditional Chinese cultural emphasis on auspiciousness, happiness, and family heritage. These patterns are rich in folk cultural significance, aesthetic concepts, and historical connotations, serving as tangible testimonies to the wisdom and creativity of ancient Chinese laborers. They hold significant importance for the study of traditional Chinese architecture and folk culture, possessing exceptional artistic and historical value. Therefore, they deserve to be highly valued, carefully preserved, and thoroughly researched. Currently, the Mu Family Manor, designated as a nationally protected cultural heritage site and a 4A-level tourist attraction, receives a certain degree of preservation. However, the site still faces numerous challenges in its inheritance and protection, including natural weathering and insufficient funding for conservation efforts. To better inherit and protect this precious architectural cultural heritage, relevant authorities should strengthen the promotion of the Mu Family Manor's cultural value, raising public awareness and appreciation for its preservation. Efforts should be made to diversify funding sources to ensure sufficient financial support for the routine maintenance and restoration of the manor's buildings and facilities. Cross-sector collaboration should be encouraged, involving government, society, and individuals, and leveraging modern scientific and technological methods to slow down the aging of the structures. Additionally, cultivating specialized professionals in conservation and research is essential to ensure that preservation efforts are both scientific and professional. By fully exploring its cultural and artistic significance, the artistic value of the Mu Family Manor's tiger skin wall mosaic decorations can be revitalized with new vitality in the contemporary era.

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