

# Thoughts on the Artistic Standpoint of the Study of Seal Cutting in the Ming and Qing Dynasties

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**Abstract:** Seals have appeared in China since the Yin and Shang dynasties, and the art of seal cutting was once all the rage during the Qin and Han dynasties. With the development and popularization of papermaking and printing technology, the combination of seals and calligraphy and painting has become more common. Calligraphers and painters have their own private seals for signing off their works. These seals, each with its own characteristics, maintain harmony and unity with the aesthetic taste of the artist and his painting and calligraphy works, revealing a strong artistic atmosphere and humanistic feelings. In the art history of Chinese seal cutting, the Ming and Qing dynasties have unique characteristics. Related scholars are more inclined to explore the Ming and Qing seal cutting from the standpoint of art. In-depth study of the development history and artistic creation elements of the Ming and Qing seal cutting art was conducted which is conducive to a better understanding of the seal cutting in Ming and Qing dynasties. Significant references and guidance are therefore presented for us to better grasp the characteristics and connotation of seal cutting.

**Keywords:** Ming and Qing Seal Cutting; Artistic Standpoint; Art; Aesthetics

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## 1. Artistic standpoint

For the study of seal cutting in the Ming and Qing dynasties, different standpoints are often adopted by scholars. Some studies are analyzed from the perspective of cutting tools and materials needed in seal cutting, some are analyzed from the standpoint of seal reproduction, edition etc., others are analyzed from the perspective of the seal cutting artists regarding their identity, social interactions, economic status, social status, etc. However, on the whole, among the researches on seal cutting in Ming and Qing dynasties, the literature with the perspective of art history is the most common, which includes multi-disciplinary and multi-perspective analysis. Related researches focus on the analysis of the art of seal cutting, hence, they are categorized as studies on the art history of Ming and Qing seal cutting. In the studies of seal cutting in Ming and Qing dynasties, some of them elaborate on the art history of seal cutting, which seems to be comprehensive, but in fact, some of them fail to identify the quality of artistic works. Most of their studies are based on the analysis of diversified sociological standpoints, which differs from what we call artistic standpoint. It shall be clarified that the number of researches on seal cutting art and history in Ming and Qing dynasties is very limited. Additionally, few of the researchers have accepted western art theories. Therefore, the sociological research atmosphere of art history accepted by them at the present stage actually poses no outstanding influence on the study of seal cutting art. As a result, the current research on the history of seal cutting is inclined to adopt the artistic standpoint.

In terms of the artistic standpoint, it refers to the academic research based on and directed at the basic issues of art studies.

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Art studies focus on art knowledge, which is why art analysis based on other sociological standpoints are also listed in the research category of art. However, if the fundamental question of what art is can be dealt with, the differences between those standpoints are conceivable. In essence, art is the creation product of human free spirit, and artistic creation is the core part of the study of art. Grasping this, the answer to the fundamental question of art shall be obvious, that is, the reflection of artists to the real society is the basic research content of art. In art history, many things and events are carried out with artistic creation as the core. Art research activities that take artistic creation as the core are research activities based on the artistic standpoint. Based on this standpoint, only research and analysis of artistic historical phenomena can be classified as art history. It should be made clear that the analysis of art history based on the artistic standpoint does not deny the necessity of studying surface phenomena and peripheral factors of art, but means that the study of art creation from the perspectives of social history, economic history and technological history have laid the foundation and paved the research path for the study of art history. It is also indispensable for a better understanding of artistic creation and reasonable solution to the basic problems of art. Therefore, to analyze seal cutting from the artistic standpoint, it is of utmost importance to take artistic creation as the basic starting point and foothold, and take artistic creation as the ultimate goal, so as to confirm that the research is based on the artistic standpoint.

## **2. An analysis of seal cutting in Ming and Qing dynasties from the artistic standpoint**

### **2.1 Historical research on seal cutting in Ming and Qing dynasties**

In the history of Chinese seal cutting, the seal cutting works and artistic techniques of the Ming and Qing dynasties are of great significance. The study of the seal cutting art of this period needs to be carried out from the aspects of regions, society and individuals.

First of all, from the perspective of material research, the development of materials in the Ming and Qing dynasties is an important foundation for the development of seal cutting art. Seal Collection Theory Stone Seal in Ming Dynasty recorded: "Seals were not made from stone in ancient times until the private seals of the Tang and Song dynasties." However, there actually were stone seals before the Tang and Song dynasties, but they were not passed down since stone is not durable. At the end of Yuan Dynasty, Wang Mian used opicalcite to make seals, which really promoted seal cutting in the direction of art. In the Ming dynasty, due to major changes in the social economy, political culture, etc., the humanistic aesthetics of the society also began to change. Wen Peng made seals from agalmatolite, which was gradually spread widely. During the Qing dynasty, stone seals were ever more diversified. The Seal Cutting Selection of Stones of the Qing dynasty recorded more than a dozen types of stone materials. Emperor Qianlong's preference of seals made from Field yellow Stone (a kind of koreite) made the material famous. With the development of seal cutting and the demand for stone, the mining of stone has been accelerated, and the variety has been increasing, which laid a solid foundation for the development of seal cutting.

Secondly, during the Ming and Qing dynasties, great social changes occurred, such as imperial dictatorship and political darkness, which strengthened the sense of suffocation in the hearts of the literati, and prompted them to reflect on the tradition and pursue the emancipation of individuality, which had an impact on the traditional poetry and calligraphy. Due to the chaos of war at the end of the Ming dynasty and the change of dynasties, under the rule of the Manchu and Qing dynasties, people's thoughts were restricted. To avoid politics, they concentrated on the archaeological activities of sphragistics, which made sphragistics popular. At the same time, the study of steles also gained popularity.

Finally, the emergence of many outstanding seal cutting sitarists accelerated the inheritance and development of the art of seal cutting. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, there were many celebrities in seal cutting, such as Wen Peng, He Zhen, Wang Guxiang, Su Xuan, Cheng Yuan, Gan Yang, Liang Qianqiu, Jin Guangxian, Zhu Jian, Wang Guan in Ming dynasty, and Ding Jing, Jiang Ren, Xi Gang, Chen Yuzhong, Chen Hongshou, Zhao Zhichen, Huang Yi, Qian Song, etc., in Qing dynasty. In particular, the exploration, innovation and breakthroughs made by a bunch of artists such as Deng Shiru, Wu Xizai, Zhao Zhiqian, Xu Sangeng, Wu Changshuo, Huang Mufu, Zhou Lianggong in middle and late Qing dynasty has greatly promoted the development of seal cutting art, and created the peak period of seal cutting history.

### **2.2 Artistic interpretation of Ming and Qing seal cutting**

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the literati grew a strong desire for freedom and individuality. They first used stone as the basic material for artistic creation. In addition, many knowledgeable people in the calligraphy and painting circles also participated in this process. This led to the peak development of the Ming and Qing seal cutting art, reflecting the unity of people, objects, and social culture. In fact, both art and human are complicated, and their reflections on the same thing vary from one to another.

In the seal cutting art of Ming and Qing Dynasties, literati played the most important role. They were knowledgeable, highly cultured and cultivated. Many literati had diverse talents in poetry, calligraphy and painting. All these had a great impact on the style and level of seal works, and also enriched cultural connotations behind different seal works. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, many seal cutting artists were also painters and calligraphers. They created art by combining culture and people, which made the seal cutting art unique and colorful.

The art of seal cutting is a combination of seal and carving, which includes the process of writing, calligraphy, and carving. Seal cutting is based on the art of calligraphy, and there is a difference between seal cutting and calligraphy. From the rise of stone seals in the Ming dynasty to the popularization of tablet calligraphy in the Qing dynasty, seal calligraphers and seal cutters became integrated, which was one of the notable features of seal cutting in the Qing dynasty. Many seal cutting artists have demonstrated the unity of calligraphy and seal cutting styles in their creations. Among the seal cutting works of Ming and Qing dynasties, the works that can be praised by posterity often have their own individual and exclusive styles. Such styles can be more influential. The exclusive personality is actually a manifestation of the aesthetics of the seal. The personalized aesthetic characteristics of seals shall be demonstrated by appropriate seals. Only with proper selection of materials with moderate hardness and no obvious damage, seal cutting can be done with ease which produces exquisite seal cutting works.

### 3. Conclusion

In summary, there are deep social and practical reasons for the peak development of seal cutting art in Ming and Qing dynasties. On the one hand, the rich and varied seal cutting materials at that time, coupled with the change of thinking brought by the social reform, gave impetus and material support to the development of seal cutting art. Besides, the exploration and research of many famous literati and scholars also played a promoting role in the development of seal cutting art. To study the seal cutting art of Ming and Qing dynasties from the artistic standpoint, it is necessary to fully and accurately grasp the social development and various deep-seated favorable factors of the Ming and Qing dynasties, so as to lay a foundation for promoting the development of seal cutting art and cultural inheritance.

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