Old Craftsmanship, New Value

When the greasy filth is wiped off, those vessels appear in front of me, beaming and shining. I feel like I am traveling back to ancient times to talk with my ancestors,” Hou Xue says proudly whenever he mentions repairing and restoring cultural relics in the Palace Museum in Beijing. Hou is a representative inheritor of the state-level intangible cultural heritage of producing gold-inlaid lacquerware. “It is the honor of a lifetime to repair these precious ancient vessels,” he said.

**‘The wrong job’**

Hou majored in art and design at North China University of Technology in Beijing. “At that time, I hoped to find a job in a newspaper or a periodical as an art editor or designer,” said Hou. As chance would have it, he met Bai Qun, a member of the state-level intangible cultural heritage representative inheritor program for the production of gold-inlaid lacquerware, who invited Hou to visit an exhibition of palace arts.

Elegant and simple folding screens, graceful cabinets and other works in the exhibition appealed to Hou, and more importantly, he was surprised and deeply impressed by the exquisite craftsmanship. Touching the furniture and vessels used to be reserved for royal families, Hou felt he was dreaming: He could feel that the craftsmanship involved in making these things has been well-preserved. “I was so impressed by these vessels, that when Bai asked whether I would like to learn this craft, I nodded without hesitation. This visit to the exhibition hall changed my career goals,” said Hou.

Chinese lacquerware dates back approximately 8,000 years. Gold-inlaid lacquerware is an important part of this craft and was once reserved for the royal families of history. Beijing, an ancient capital city for multiple dynasties, is the major production base for lacquerware.

The gradual development of lacquerware craftsmanship over approximately 700 years during the three Beijing-based dynasties, Yuan, Ming and Qing, laid a foundation for its modern development. When the Qing Dynasty collapsed in 1911, many of the craftsmen once working in royal workshops were forced to begin selling their wares in ordinary society. They contributed to the rise of the eight Beijing-style handicrafts, including jade carving, ivory carving and carved lacquerware in Beijing. The art and style of gold-inlaid lacquerware in Beijing, as well as the way it is taught and passed on, have their roots in royal craftsmanship of the Ming and Qing dynasties.

At Bai’s recommendation, Hou formally joined Beijing Gold Lacquer Inlaid Co. Ltd. in 2009 as an apprentice in the gold-inlaid lacquerware workshop. Every day, he got up at 4 a.m. in order to be at work by 8 a.m., and took a bus to go back to his dormitory in the evening. In summer, it was scorching in the workshop, while in winter, it was freezing.

Through several years of dedicated study and practice, Hou has won many honors and titles. He says that accidentally taking on his current job has brought him a career he will cherish for the rest of his life.

**Reverence and craftsmanship**

Hou worked in the Palace Museum from 2014 to 2016, focusing on protective restoration and replication of lacquerware collected. This experience is demanding and even sometimes torturous, but is also a precious opportunity to strengthen his craftsmanship.

“For example, when touching up the blue color that has worn away from objects over time, we need to apply the lacquer seven to eight times, with the color going from light to dark to reach color saturation. Additionally, work on the same piece must be undertaken at the same time in the same location and under the same weather conditions in order to avoid color differences between the repaired part and the old part,” explained Hou.

These are seemingly simple steps, but they require a high-level of professionalism, and also the knowledge of every ancient vessel, he said. Cultural relics reflect the aesthetic level of a certain historical period. They are still charming and appealing even today because they are tangible embodiments of excellent Chinese culture and first-level craftsmanship handed down through centuries. “My reverence for ancient craftsmanship and wisdom grows with each passing day.”

If classified in terms of functions, Beijing gold-inlaid lacquerware can fall into different categories, such as vessels, furniture, folding screens, plaques and mural decorations. In the Palace Museum, most lacquerware furniture and vessels were made in the gold-inlaid form. These include the dragon throne in the Hall of Supreme Harmony, and almost all beds, desks, and toilet cases in the imperial palace. Hou is proud of his company’s long-term cooperation with the Palace Museum. “It’s because we have inherited the best skills in this technique and we are making innovations on this solid basis,” he said.

**Integrated into modern life**

Beijing Gold Lacquer Inlaid Co. Ltd. boasts a history of 66 years. It is an important platform for the protection and inheritance of the skill of making gold-inlaid lacquerware. Hou’s personal development in this technical arena is to a large extent benefiting from a good intergenerational learning model. When he was alive, Bai Deyuan, a fifth-generation inheritor of the craft and Bai Qun’s father, used to emphasize the importance of making rational and effective innovations on the basis of inheriting traditional craftsmanship. By innovation, Bai Deyuan meant innovation in response to the needs of the era as well as restoration and replication of ancient techniques lost for years.

In early 2022, the company joined hands with local museums and cultural organizations to launch handcrafted watches, which are wildly popular with consumers. The highlight of these watches lies in their appearance, which combines Po-phase flowers, highly favored in the Tang Dynasty (618-907) as a symbol of auspiciousness, and the artistic concept of Maurits Cornelis Escher, a famous Dutch printmaker. This watch is a limited edition and, thanks to its combination of Chinese and Western styles, was soon sold out after being put on the market. Hou was thus inspired by this experience: “Excellent intangible cultural heritage works are not those thrown into museums for exhibition, but those that live up to modern aesthetic level and modern life,” he said.

Hou believes that the gauge for a successful intangible cultural heritage item is foremost that this item can produce value and bring profits. “If consumers are not interested in such works and inheritors can’t earn a living by doing the job, then these works are valueless and the heritance is worthless,” he said. For a business to attract young successors to join, it must be lucrative, and this is also the way to address the current shortage of innovation capacity and talents in this cultural area.

(1100 words)

旧工艺，新价值

侯雪是国家级非物质文化遗产项目“金漆镶嵌髹饰技艺”代表性传承人。每当提到在北京故宫博物院修复文物时，他都会自豪地说：“当油腻的污垢被擦拭干净时，那些器皿就在我面前闪耀着光辉。我感觉自己好像回到了古代，与我的祖先交谈。”他还说：“有幸修复这些珍贵的古代器皿是我一生的荣幸。”

**“意外的工作”**

侯雪在位于北京的北方工业大学主修艺术设计。侯雪说：“当时，我希望能在报纸或期刊公司找到一份美术编辑或设计师的工作。”机缘巧合下，他遇到了柏群——国家级非物质文化遗产项目金漆镶嵌髹饰技艺代表性传承人。他邀请侯雪参观了一场宫廷艺术展览。

展览中优雅简约的屏风、优美的柜子以及其他作品吸引了侯雪，更重要的是，他对这些精湛的工艺品感到惊讶并留下了深刻的印象。触摸着这些过去专供皇室使用的家具和器皿，侯雪觉得自己在做梦：他能感觉到制作这些物品所涉及的工艺被很好地保存了下来。侯雪说：“这些器皿给我留下了深刻的印象，所以当柏老师问我是否愿意学习这种工艺时，我毫不犹豫地点头。这次参观展览改变了我的职业目标。”

中国的漆器可以追溯到大约8000年前。金漆镶嵌是其中重要的一部分，曾为历史上的皇室家族所专有。北京是多个朝代的古都，也是漆器的主要生产基地。

漆器工艺的逐渐发展历时约700年，历经北京所属的元、明、清三个朝代，为其现代发展奠定了基础。1911年清朝灭亡时，曾在皇家工坊中工作的许多工匠被迫开始在普通社会中出售他们的产品。他们促成了北京八大手工业的兴起，包括玉石雕刻、象牙雕刻和漆器雕刻。北京的金漆镶嵌艺术和风格，以及其传授和传承的方式，都源于明清时期的皇家工艺。

在柏群的推荐下，侯雪于2009年正式加入北京金漆镶嵌有限责任公司，以学徒的身份进入金漆镶嵌工艺制作的“生产车间。他每天早上4点起床，以便在早上8点到达工作岗位，晚上乘坐公交车回寝室。夏天，工作坊里酷热难熬，而冬天则寒冷刺骨。

经过数年的潜心学习和实践，侯雪获得了许多荣誉和称号。他说，虽然意外地从事他目前的工作，但这却给他带来了一个将珍视终身的职业。

**尊敬与工艺**

2014年至2016年，侯雪在故宫博物院工作，主要针对故宫博物院馆藏珍品漆器进行文物保护性修复与仿复制文物研究工作。这是一段艰苦甚至有些折磨的经历，但也是一个强化他工艺技能的宝贵机会。

“例如，在修补文物上因时间推移而磨损的蓝色时，我们需要涂抹七到八次漆，颜色从浅到深，以达到颜色饱和。此外，对同一件作品的修复必须在同一时间、同一地点和同一天气条件下进行，以避免修复部位与旧部位出现色差，” 侯雪解释道。

他说，这些看似简单的步骤需要高水准的专业水平和对每件古代器皿的了解。文物反映了某个历史时期的审美水平。即使在今天，它们仍然具有魅力和吸引力，因为它们是优秀的中国文化和流传了几个世纪的一流工艺的具体体现。“我对古代工艺和智慧的崇敬与日俱增。”

如果按照功能分类，北京金漆镶嵌可以分为不同的类别，如器皿、家具、屏风、匾额和壁画装饰等。在故宫博物院，大多数漆器家具和器皿都是以金镶形式制作的，包括太和殿的龙椅，皇宫内几乎所有的床、桌子和盥洗箱。侯雪对其公司与故宫博物院的长期合作感到自豪。他说：“这是因为我们继承了这项工艺的最佳技能，同时在这个坚实的基础上进行创新。”

**融入现代社会**

北京金漆镶嵌有限责任公司有着66年的历史，是保护和传承金漆镶嵌髹饰技艺的重要平台。侯雪能够在这个技术领域中得到个人发展，很大程度上得益于良好的代际学习模式。当柏群的父亲、第五代传承人柏德元还在世时，他就经常强调在传承传统工艺技能的基础上，进行合理和有效的创新至关重要。柏德元所说的创新是指针对时代需求的创新，以及恢复和复制失传多年的古老技艺。

2022年初，该公司与当地的博物馆和文化组织合作推出了手工制作的腕表，受到消费者的热烈欢迎。这些腕表的亮点在于其外观，它结合了在唐代（618-907年）作为吉祥象征而深受欢迎的宝相花，以及荷兰著名版画家莫里茨·科内利斯·埃舍尔的艺术理念。这款腕表是限量版，由于结合了中西方风格，在上市后很快就被抢购一空。对此，侯雪受到了启发:“优秀的非物质文化遗产作品不是那些被投放到博物馆展览的作品，而是那些符合现代审美水平和现代生活的作品。”

侯雪认为，衡量一个成功的非物质文化遗产作品的标准，首先是这个作品能够产生价值和带来利润。他说：“如果消费者对这些作品不感兴趣，传承人也不能靠这个工作谋生，那么这些作品就没有价值，传承也是毫无意义的。” 一个企业要想吸引年轻的后继人加入，必须要有丰厚的利润，这也是解决目前这个文化领域创新能力和人才短缺的途径。