

Exploration of the Primitive Aesthetic of Majiayao Culture Painted Pottery

Shaorong Hou, Hongxia Deng*

School of Fine Arts and Design, Lanzhou University of Arts and Science, Lanzhou, Gansu, China

**Corresponding Author*

Abstract: This paper systematically analyzes the aesthetic concepts embedded in Majiayao painted pottery from the perspective of primitive philosophy. Through detailed analysis of the linear rhythm, formal structure, and harmonious composition of the decorative patterns, it reveals the aesthetic principles of “creating vessels with symbolic imagery,” “expressing meaning through imagery,” and “the unity of image and meaning.” Furthermore, it explores the poetic, shamanistic, and ritual-musical aesthetic dimensions reflected in Majiayao painted pottery. The study concludes that Majiayao painted pottery not only represents the pinnacle of prehistoric painted pottery art but also laid the foundation for the traditional aesthetic spirit of the Chinese nation.

Keywords: Majiayao Culture; Painted Pottery; Primitive Aesthetics; Unity of Image and Meaning; Ritual-music Spirit

1. Introduction

Archaeological research indicates that the Majiayao Culture (circa 3300–2000 BCE) of the late Neolithic period represents the pinnacle of painted pottery art development in prehistoric China. Primarily distributed in the upper Yellow River region, including present-day Gansu and Qinghai provinces, this culture is renowned for its painted pottery characterized by intricate motifs, rigorous composition, and fluid lines, reflecting a highly mature aesthetic consciousness and spiritual pursuit among ancient communities. This paper systematically examines the primitive aesthetic features embodied in Majiayao painted pottery from the perspectives of formal characteristics and spiritual connotations.

2. Aesthetic Expressions of Majiayao Culture Painted Pottery

China possesses a profound aesthetic tradition

traceable to the Neolithic Age. During the Majiayao Culture period, the exquisite craftsmanship and complex motifs of painted pottery reveal rich formal beauty. The beauty of Majiayao painted pottery is most directly manifested in the dynamic rhythm of lines, geometric abstraction of patterns, and the meaningful elegance of forms. The aesthetic concepts of the Majiayao people gradually influenced the traditional aesthetics of the Chinese nation. Archaeological evidence shows that Banpo painted pottery was relatively limited in quantity and simpler in design, often employing geometric patterns such as triangles, parallel oblique lines, and serrated curves. Through prolonged development, early inhabitants continuously explored and refined these designs, gradually moving towards formalization and regularization. By the Majiayao period, painted pottery patterns exhibited distinct characteristics of formalization and regularity, presenting an overall fluid and harmonious appearance rich in aesthetic value.

2.1 The Beauty of Lines

"It can be observed from numerous Majiayao painted pottery pieces that early inhabitants achieved mastery in the use of lines. The application and expression of curved lines, straight lines, zigzag lines, intersecting lines, grid lines, spiral lines, smooth lines, and radial lines all reflect a high degree of generalization, abstraction, and aesthetic sensibility." [1] The beauty of lines is a defining feature of Majiayao Culture painted pottery.

Patterns on Majiayao painted pottery predominantly consist of lines; even the few human-frog and bird motifs deviate from realistic representation, likely rendered using tools similar to modern brushes, resulting in softer, more fluid lines. Early bird patterns, for instance, were often semi-realistic, lacking linear elegance. However, by the Majiayao period, bird motifs became highly abstracted, primarily

expressed through lines, with only the head retaining a semblance of the bird's form. These abstracted linear bird patterns, through rotation and mirroring, form dynamically rhythmic designs that balance movement with stability.[2] The beauty of lines in Majiayao pottery is also evident in their rhythm and cadence. Many patterns are dominated by curves, emphasizing a sense of flowing, dynamic beauty. Whether on large Majiayao spiral-pattern jars (Figure 1) or Majiayao concentric circle basins (Figure 2), the motifs exhibit a vivid, rhythmic quality.



Figure 1. Majiayao Spiral-Patterned Painted Pottery Jar



Figure 2. Majiayao Polychrome Basin with Concentric Circles

2.2 The Beauty of Form

The patterns of Majiayao Culture painted pottery exhibit not only elegant lines but also a high degree of formal beauty. During this period, motifs such as birds, frogs, and spirals feature alternating thick and thin lines with strong contrasts. Decorative patterns often extend to the base of the vessel, integrating the entire pottery form and its decoration into a rich, cohesive visual field. Furthermore, simple geometric shapes are arranged through gradation, radial structures, and continuous repetitions (e.g., two-sided continuous patterns), emphasizing variation within unity, symmetry and balance, and rhythm and cadence. The evolution from the realistic and diverse styles of the Banpo and Miaodigou periods to the patterned, regulated, and standardized expressions of the Majiayao period clearly formed a unique system of formal

beauty. This progression towards patterning, rhythmic structure, and regularity shaped the distinctive compositional aesthetics of the Majiayao Culture.

Patterns from early Majiayao water waves, Banshan negative patterns and serrated lines, Machang large concentric circles, fret patterns, rhombuses, to later zigzag patterns all demonstrate excellent balance and symmetry. Extensive use of two-sided continuous repetition and radial compositions centered on dots cover the main body of vessels, creating a harmonious balance between the object and its decoration (Figures 3, 4). Moreover, the repetitive nature of these continuous patterns imparts a rhythmic, almost musical quality to the pottery. This suggests that early humans used repetitive structures to mimic the melodies of nature and life, reflecting an incipient, embryonic musical sensibility in their aesthetic spirit.



Figure 3. Semi-Mountain-Patterned Painted Pottery Jar

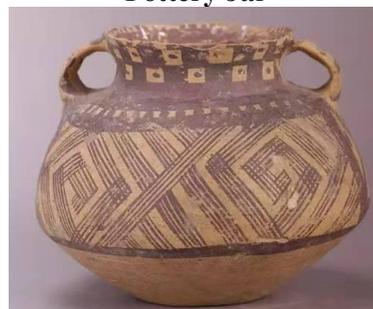


Figure 4. Machang-style Double-Handled Color-Glazed Pottery Jar with Swastika Design

Humanity's love for beauty is innate, and the primitive people of the Majiayao period also possessed this natural inclination. Their reverence for beauty manifested in observing the heavens and examining the earth, drawing inspiration from the natural world. This reverence was expressed through the primitive, unadorned formal beauty evident in their painted pottery creations.

2.3 The Beauty of Harmony

The beauty of harmony is particularly prominent

in Majiayao Culture painted pottery. Harmony is evident both within the patterns themselves and in the relationship between the patterns and the vessel forms. For example, the radial composition centered on a fixed point on a Banshan spiral-pattern jar (Figure 5) creates a unique harmonious beauty. "Radial composition is a typical structural form in Majiayao painted pottery patterns. Early inhabitants often determined a central point for the radial design, from which patterns would emanate to form splendid decorations. Numerous concentric circle and spiral-pattern potteries use circles as their radial centers." [1] Such radial compositions are common in Majiayao painted pottery. Additionally, large jars and urns are often adorned with auxiliary decorations like bands, serrated lines, or water wave patterns, creating a dynamic contrast with the main motifs and contributing to the overall harmonious beauty of the object.



Figure 5. Half-Mountain Spiral-Patterned Polychrome Pottery Jar

In short, the harmony of Majiayao Culture painted pottery is not only reflected in its artistic coherence but also embodies the primitive people's yearning for the free and harmonious unity of heaven, earth, and nature. This free harmony represents the core value of Chinese aesthetics. The relationships between patterns and between patterns and vessel forms in Majiayao painted pottery fully embody the essence of Chinese aesthetic values.

3. Aesthetic Modes of Majiayao Culture Painted Pottery

"Traditional Chinese culture contains a wealth of Chinese aesthetic thought, demonstrating the Chinese nation's spirit of valuing beauty." [3] From the myriad motifs on Majiayao painted pottery, we can glimpse early inhabitants' pursuit and longing for beauty. These patterns showcase their diverse modeling

techniques and compositional skills. Behind this formal beauty lies the spiritual pursuit of these early people. Through semi-realistic, abstract, and semi-abstract motifs, they expressed the aesthetic orientations of the Majiayao period.

3.1 Creating Vessels with Symbolic Imagery

"Xiang' (imagery/symbol) is a core concept with cultural universality that has been applied in aesthetics. The ancient practice of 'observing objects to cast images' emerged within this cultural atmosphere and profoundly influenced the entire history of ancient Chinese aesthetics." [4]

"Shang Xiang Zhi Qi" can also be understood as "valuing patterns" or "valuing motifs." As stated in the Xici commentary of the Book of Changes: "In ancient times, when Bao Xi ruled the world, he looked upward to observe the images in heaven, and looked downward to observe the models on earth. He observed the patterns of birds and beasts and the suitability of the land. Near at hand, he took from his own body; far away, he took from things. Thereupon he first created the Eight Trigrams, to communicate with the virtues of the luminous and spiritual and to classify the conditions of the myriad things." [5] The creation of the Eight Trigrams followed this principle, as did the aesthetic image-making of the Majiayao people—both drew from near (the self) and far (external objects). "Xiang' not only refers to objectively existing forms and phenomena but also involves the simulation and analogy of real-world images, embodying a symbolic meaning in the creative process." [6]

The spirit of "Shang Xiang" reflects early humans' closeness to nature, their observation and contemplation of it, and their derivation of aesthetic pleasure from nature, which they then expressed in specific forms. For the Majiayao people, observing objects to derive images manifested in their perceptions of nature and deities, as well as in the shaping of pottery forms and the painting of motifs. Faced with inexplicable natural phenomena, they sought spiritual solace through symbolic patterns. These patterns transcended mere decoration. For instance, the gourd-grid pattern on a high-low handled jar (Figure 6) abstractly combines the prolific salamander and the multi-seeded gourd, reflecting a desire for human reproduction and representing a form of primitive belief. By observing and contemplating objects, early

inhabitants conceived vessel shapes and pattern styles, using the derived "xiang" to express specific meaning.

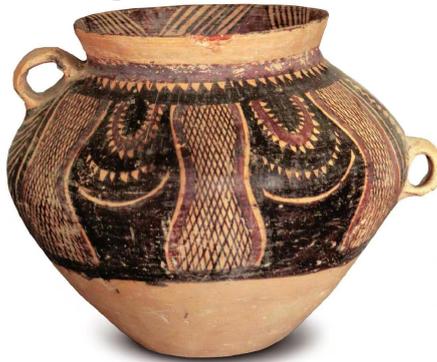


Figure 6. Gourd-Patterned High-Handled Polychrome Pottery Jar

The veneration of imagery reflects primitive humanity's harmony with nature, where artifacts and patterns embody their love, reverence, and celebration of the natural world and daily life. The crafting of objects demonstrates the ancestors' exceptional skills in form creation, abstraction, and formal expression. This "veneration of imagery and craftsmanship" also reveals a fundamental perspective on existence held by primitive peoples. Through this practice, they contemplated life and discovered its true essence.

3.2 Expressing Meaning through Imagery

Painted pottery patterns evoke a profound understanding of the prehistoric civilization's approach to "expressing meaning through imagery." "Even so-called 'abstract' geometric patterns contain content within abstraction and concepts within sensory perception, possessing vast and profound intrinsic meanings." [7] The motifs on painted pottery served not merely a decorative function but also carried deeper significance. Early inhabitants often used "Li Xiang Jin Yi" to express certain views on life.



Figure 7. Machang Man Frog-Patterned Painted Pottery Jar

Their practice of observing heaven above and earth below to derive images was an aesthetic activity reflecting their "Shang Xiang" spirit. The "secret of the melody of things" is embedded in seemingly simple patterns like spirals, zigzag lines, and grids, whose implied meanings are boundless. This act of "establishing imagery" by early humans was not a simple, unconscious behavior but involved a certain depth of thought.

"Drawing from the body at hand and from objects afar" was a crucial step for primitive humans in creating symbols to express meaning. This act of "drawing" inherently involved selection and omission, with the purpose of achieving more effective "symbolic representation of meaning." In the process of "drawing from the body at hand and from objects afar," how to draw was a subject of profound contemplation for our ancient ancestors. In that prehistoric era, life seemed fragile. They yearned for the proliferation of life and the vigor of fertility. Therefore, drawing from the body often meant expressing the differences between men and women or depicting everyday human activities. For instance, the "dots" on the circular dot and spiral pattern painted pottery jar (Figure 3 above) represent frog eggs, the origin of life. Similarly, the human-frog motif on the Machang Man painted pottery jar (Fig. 7) represents the fusion of humans and frogs, embodying the primitive people's hope that humans would possess the same vigorous reproductive capacity as frogs. These are all examples of primitive people observing their surroundings and summarizing their observations to create symbolic representations. Drawing from distant objects primarily expressed the profound mysteries of nature or the unknown world. For instance, the cross-circle pattern \oplus represents the journey from life's beginning to its end: the cross symbolizes the passage of the soul, while the circle embodies the frog motif. Together, they convey the cycle of life and death and the concept of perpetual reproduction. Additionally, the gourd-shaped pattern embodies primitive people's longing for the gourd's abundance of "seeds" (children), another form of establishing symbols to convey meaning.

All primitive painted pottery motifs can, through aesthetic decoding, reveal themselves as "significant forms." When faced with the vast and boundless phenomena of nature, early

humans perceived countless mysteries within the "myriad images," explored the relationship between themselves and the surrounding world, and endeavored to select specific meaningful patterns to "express meaning through imagery." The spiral patterns, fret patterns, zigzag lines, etc., found on Majiayao pottery, while seemingly simple, contain profound implications. "Expressing meaning through imagery" vividly reflects their inner world.

3.3 Unity of Image

"Meaning" and "form" have never been separate entities. Without "form," "meaning" loses its purpose; without "meaning," "form" becomes mere 'form'—a meaningless "form" that holds no value whatsoever. The diverse forms and exquisite patterns of Majiayao painted pottery represent far more than mere artistic expression; they embody the fusion of form and meaning. Each vessel conveys reverence for nature and life itself. This profound respect finds visual expression through specific patterns and motifs, serving as the very means to manifest meaning through form.

The richly varied patterns adorning Majiayao painted pottery were by no means random scribbles by primitive people. These designs embodied the emotions, thoughts, and concepts of their creators. By carving diverse patterns onto pottery, they fused symbolism and meaning into the decorative motifs of Majiayao painted pottery. The abstract swirl patterns, diamond motifs, and meander designs of Majiayao pottery all exhibit distinct "symbolic imagery." Whether concrete dance motifs or abstract zigzag lines, each carries profound symbolic meaning. Particularly the dot-and-swirl patterns mentioned earlier reflect an exploration and pursuit of life. The dots symbolize the origin of life—the "egg"—while the spiral pattern expresses the yearning for life's eternal cycle. The entire dot-spiral motif reveals the ancient people's profound desire for life's perpetuity. Circular dot-spiral patterns (curved line patterns) appear extensively across various pottery types, including pointed-bottom spiral-patterned painted pottery bottles, flat-bottomed spiral-patterned pottery bottles, circular dot-spiral painted pottery jars, and circular dot-curved line painted pottery basins. These decorations are all concrete expressions of the unity of form and meaning.

A defining feature of traditional Chinese

aesthetics is the unity of concept and form. Concept represents the Chinese people's understanding of beauty—though beauty resides in form, it transcends mere appearance. When creating patterns, ancient artisans consciously transformed form into concept, thus achieving unity of concept and form. The image-meaning unity represents the inner manifestation of beauty, while the form embodies its outward, intuitive expression. This unity elevates beauty to a realm of transcendence. The semi-abstract bird, frog, and fish motifs found in primitive painted pottery are not mere imitations of nature but rather expressions of "full intent"—using form to convey meaning and convey a certain concept. The image-meaning unity thus became an aesthetic category, gradually forming the aesthetic spirit of the Chinese nation.

4. The Spiritual Aesthetic Value of Majiayao Culture's Painted Pottery

The traditional Chinese conception of space embodies this notion of the world extending infinitely from the center to the four directions, from the imperial capital to the frontier lands. From the perspective of modern science, this spatial or worldview possesses a distinctly non-objective character. Yet it is precisely this non-objectivity that forges its poetic and aesthetic qualities. [8] The circular dot swirl patterns, circular dot ripple patterns, diamond patterns, and most other motifs repeatedly discussed in the preceding text—found in Majiayao painted pottery—all exhibit characteristics of spreading outward from the center to the four directions. This is, in essence, an expression of spiritual aesthetics.

4.1 Poetic Aesthetics

The large circular patterns and sawtooth designs on Majiayao Culture painted pottery represent primitive ancestors' reverence for thunder, sky, clouds, and rain. "However, the conceptual significance conveyed by the painted pottery art of the Banshan-Machang Culture extends beyond mere worship of natural phenomena like thunder, lightning, clouds, and rain as deities. It also encompasses the poetic philosophical contemplation of the cosmos and nature held by people at that time." [9] This also signifies that the painted pottery patterns of the Majiayao period were imbued with poetic aesthetic qualities.

Tagore and Zong Baihua regarded the "secret

melody of things” as the beautiful spirit of Chinese culture. This “melody of things” refers to nothing other than the cosmic music born from the temporalization of space. [8] A defining feature of the artistic expression in Majiayao Culture's painted pottery patterns is repetitive composition—extensive use of two-dimensional continuous repetition, and radiating patterns centered on dots. Whether it be dance patterns, water ripple patterns, spiral patterns, zigzag patterns, or diamond patterns, each design on the pottery possesses rhythm, striving to express a melodic beauty remarkably similar to the rhythmic beauty found in musical melodies.

Another distinctive feature of Majiayao painted pottery patterns is their rotating, flowing aesthetic. This visual fluidity not only conveys dynamic beauty but also embodies a deeper harmony between movement and stillness. This fusion of motion and tranquility resembles the rhythm in music, imparting a melodic beauty to people, much like the romantic poetic sentiment found in modern poetry. Moreover, the interplay of solid and void is a key expressive technique in Majiayao painted pottery patterns. Whether in swirl motifs, circular designs, or zigzag patterns (Fig. 8, Fig. 9), these elements are rendered through stark black-and-white contrasts and the fusion of solid and void forms. This approach conveys a vivid charm, highlighting the poetic wisdom of ancient artisans.

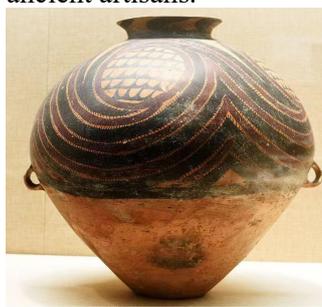


Figure 8. Large-Circle Patterned Polychrome Pottery Jar



Figure 9. Sawtooth-Patterned Hanging Arc-Decorated Painted Pottery Jar

4.2 The Aesthetics of Witchcraft

As early as primitive society, witchcraft to some extent also embodied a certain artistic aesthetic. Examples include witchcraft dances and witchcraft patterns. These witchcraft aesthetics represented a spiritual realm of primitive people at that time. The well-known painted pottery basin with dance patterns unearthed at Sunjiashai in Qinghai is precisely an expression of witchcraft aesthetics. “The dance patterns on Majiayao-type painted pottery were not mere leisure activities after labor, but ritualistic ceremonies imbued with primitive religious significance. People danced in unison to ward off evil spirits, pray for blessings, and ensure fertility and prosperity.” [10] Though they lacked scientific understanding of life and knew little about reproduction, they yearned for prosperity and abundance. They hoped to invoke blessings through shamanic dances, wishing for the flourishing of life. Such shamanic practices often manifested in dance-like forms, and these dance-like rituals also possessed primitive aesthetic characteristics.

During the Majiayao period, the cognitive abilities of primitive humans were relatively limited. Faced with life itself and the mysterious natural world, they felt both ecstatic joy and profound fear. Amidst this complex interplay of emotions, they utilized various natural elements to express their exploration of the unknown and seek solace for their souls. Analysis of the abundant patterns and motifs on primitive painted pottery reveals that these decorations were not merely artistic expressions; they likely reflected characteristics of a primitive religion. “To decipher the primordial information carried by painted pottery as an artistic symbol and to unravel the mysteries of this cultural phenomenon requires the combined efforts of multiple disciplines. The reason is simple: in the eyes of primitive peoples, painted pottery was never created as art. In reality, it served as ritual vessels and sacred objects for religious worship and shamanic practices.”[11] Regardless of ethnicity, shamanism has always been part of human culture, as evidenced by the abundance of shamanic motifs in prehistoric rock art and cave paintings.

From the bird and frog motifs of the Banpo, Miaodigou, and Majiayao periods, to the frog-like patterns of the Banshan and Machang periods extending into the Qijia and Sibag

cultures, and the sun-like designs of the Banshan and Machang periods, all may represent the worship of sun and moon deities manifested in painted pottery patterns. The enduring continuity of this pair of pottery motifs itself demonstrates that it is not a random phenomenon, but rather connected to the beliefs and traditional concepts of a people. “[12] These patterns and designs are, in fact, the ancient people's sensory perception of the world, using "form and meaning" to express the true significance of things, to achieve intimacy between humans and nature, and to convey the mystery of human life and existence. They are the authentic expression of primitive humanity. Primitive humans felt profound unease toward the deepest and most universal forces, projecting their inner fears and anxieties onto certain patterns to seek spiritual solace. Through shamanic symbolic thinking, these ancestors often found the sublime and sacred in the minutest details. The dance patterns repeatedly mentioned in the text, unearthed at Sunjiazhai on Qinghai Lake, exemplify this. That minute, short line—identified by numerous archaeologists as a phallic symbol—embodies primitive ancestors' yearning for fertility and represents the culmination of an early aesthetic practice. This shares a remarkable similarity with modern humans' tendency to discover intriguing beauty in the smallest of things.

4.3 Aesthetics of Ritual and Music

The harmonious spirit of ‘ritual’ and ‘music’ embodies the unity of heaven and humanity.[13] As previously discussed, the harmony of patterns on Majiayao Culture painted pottery and the primitive people's use of imagery to express intent both manifest this unity. Moreover, these patterns also reveal certain emotional desires of early humans. Human aesthetic emotions encompass the most primal desires. These emotional urges are innate expressions of humanity. Joyful sounds bring pleasure, while discordant noises cause distress. Thus, regulating human emotions requires order and rhythm. As discussed earlier, the patterns on Majiayao painted pottery predominantly feature repetition, a compositional technique that effectively conveys rhythm and cadence. This rhythm and cadence serve to soothe the human spirit. Thus, in a certain sense, the rhythmic and melodic musicality of Majiayao painted pottery patterns represents the nascent stage of primitive ritual music. The orderly and harmonious beauty

generated by the composition of these patterns embodies the harmonious interdependence of ritual and music.

In primitive society, painted pottery served not only practical purposes but also carried significance related to life. Ritual-music culture originated from primitive sacrificial ceremonies. Archaeological materials reveal that these ceremonies fulfilled the emotional needs of early inhabitants. Some Majiayao Culture painted pottery was used as daily utensils, while other pieces served as burial objects. Daily utensils were often related to food and drink, such as basins with dance patterns and jars with rhombus patterns. The concept of "Rites" (Li) was realized through these different food vessels facilitating communication between heaven/earth and humans/deities, embedding the genes of Chinese ritual-music civilization within these everyday objects. Additionally, archaeologists have found that late Majiayao Culture Machang-type painted pottery was often used as burial goods, reflecting a form of primitive social ritual system. Even in primitive society, burial goods were not accessible to everyone. Therefore, their existence indicates, to some degree, an early form of social ritual-music institution.

Moreover, Majiayao Culture dancing figure pottery basins appear in various forms, including the figurative example from Shang Sunjiazhai and more concise versions, such as one housed in the Qinghai Provincial Museum. Whether as symbols of shamanistic for blessings or depictions of real riverside dance scenes, these dance motifs were accompanied by a certain sense of rhythm. Therefore, Majiayao Culture painted pottery exhibits China's most ancient ritual-music aesthetic characteristics and laid the groundwork for the formation of the traditional Chinese ritual-music system.

5. Conclusion

The primitive aesthetic connotations embodied in Majiayao Culture painted pottery profoundly influenced the traditional aesthetics of the Chinese nation. From the Majiayao-type spiral-pattern pointed-bottom bottles to the Machang-type rhombus-pattern jars, we can clearly observe that Majiayao painted pottery reflects not only practical utility but also aesthetic spirit, with both perfectly integrated. By analyzing the patterns of Majiayao painted pottery, we can gain insight into the spiritual

thoughts and aesthetic consciousness of that era. These extraordinary artifacts not only mirror the wisdom and artistic expressiveness of early inhabitants but also symbolize prehistoric human aesthetic activities, aesthetic thought, aesthetic awareness, and cultural taste.

The aesthetic consciousness reflected in Majiayao Culture painted pottery reveals to us the primitive society inhabitants' pursuit of aesthetic spirit. This fully demonstrates that during the Majiayao period, early humans had transcended basic material needs and begun pursuing richer spiritual lives. The motifs on Majiayao painted pottery are exquisite, and the artistic beauty of the vessel forms significantly improved. With the considerable development of artistic beauty and aesthetic factors in Majiayao painted pottery, primitive aesthetic consciousness was also notably enhanced. The primitive aesthetic spirit contained within Majiayao Culture painted pottery patterns held an important position in prehistoric civilization, exerted a far-reaching influence, and nurtured the traditional Chinese aesthetic spirit.

Acknowledgments

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