



# ChangShana's

## Artistic Characteristics for Application in The Contemporary Era

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### Abstract

This study aims to explore the artistic characteristics of Chang Shana and their application in contemporary design and education. Specifically, it investigates: (1) how Chang Shana's early experiences shaped her artistic ideals and cultural identity; (2) the innovative features of her floral sketches as expressions of traditional aesthetics; and (3) her educational philosophy's role in preserving and transforming Chinese traditional art. Employing qualitative methods—including literature analysis, comparative case studies, and field research—this study systematically examines Chang's lifelong engagement with Dunhuang art and her integration of traditional elements into modern design practices. The findings reveal that Chang Shana skillfully fuses Dunhuang motifs and natural inspirations to construct a unique aesthetic language, which she applies across artistic creation, decorative design, and art education. Her work exemplifies how traditional culture can be revitalized and innovatively adapted in the contemporary context. Based on the results, the study recommends incorporating her model of "inheritance and innovation" into modern art curricula, interdisciplinary design practices, and cross-cultural educational exchanges to promote cultural confidence and sustainable aesthetic development.

**Keywords:** Chang Shana, Dunhuang Art, Art design, Art design education, Contemporary

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## Introduction

Chang Shana is an artist deeply rooted in Dunhuang culture since childhood, and she has dedicated her entire career to the research, protection, and creative application of Dunhuang art. Throughout her lifelong artistic pursuits, Chang Shana has systematically studied the murals and decorative patterns of the Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes, gaining extensive experience and developing profound insights. Her design works, whether in pattern design or architectural decoration, consistently reveal the influence of Dunhuang culture, demonstrating the integration of traditional patterns with modern artistic expression.

Against the backdrop of contemporary cultural revitalization, this study focuses on the application of Chang Shana's artistic characteristics in the modern era. By analyzing her unique ability to draw inspiration from Dunhuang patterns and natural forms, this research aims to explore how traditional Chinese culture can be preserved, inherited, and creatively transformed to adapt to the needs of modern society. This is especially significant given the rapid modernization and global cultural exchanges of today, which present both opportunities and challenges for the preservation of traditional artistic heritage (Lin, 2014; Zhao, 2022).

While previous studies have examined Chang Shana's artistic achievements and contributions to Dunhuang art preservation, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding the systematic analysis of her methods of pattern transformation and her pedagogical strategies in integrating cultural heritage into design education. Existing research often emphasizes biographical narratives or focuses on her stylistic accomplishments without critically analyzing the mechanisms through which she bridges traditional and contemporary aesthetics. Furthermore, little attention has been paid to how her teaching philosophy and artistic practices serve as a model for incorporating traditional cultural values into modern interdisciplinary design education.

Therefore, this study seeks to address these gaps by (1) examining how Chang Shana's early life shaped her artistic values; (2) analyzing the formal and symbolic transformation of Dunhuang motifs in her floral and decorative works; and (3) evaluating her educational contributions within the framework of cultural transmission. By doing so, this research not only contributes to the documentation of an iconic figure in Chinese art history but also offers insights into the broader discourse on design innovation and cultural sustainability.

### Research Objectives

1. To explore how Chang Shana's early life and Dunhuang experiences influenced her artistic ideals and cultural identity.
2. To analyze the characteristics and aesthetic values of her floral sketch works as an expression of traditional art innovation.
3. To investigate her educational practices and their role in promoting the inheritance and transformation of Chinese traditional art and design.

## Literature Review

Chang Shana (1998) reflected on her personal experience of studying art education in the United States in her article *Seeing the gap and looking to the future*. She highlighted the differences between Chinese and Western art education systems, particularly in curriculum design and talent training. Through comparative observation, she advocated for integrating Chinese traditional culture into modern design education, promoting a model that both inherits and innovates. Her insights provide a crucial foundation for understanding how global perspectives can inspire the transformation of Chinese art and design education.

Zhu En (2001), in *The Praise of Nature — Chang Shana's Art and Artistic Journey*, systematically reviewed Chang Shana's lifelong artistic path. Zhu emphasized that her works are deeply rooted in the aesthetic appreciation of nature and traditional Chinese patterns, especially the Dunhuang murals. Zhu argued that Chang Shana's floral sketches not only inherit the essence of tradition but also reveal an innovative spirit, thus becoming a representative paradigm of the contemporary transformation of traditional art.

Zhu Gang (2017) curated *Blooming Dunhuang: Chang Shana Art Research and Application Exhibition*, which presented a comprehensive review of Chang Shana's decades of creative practice. Zhu systematically displayed how Chang Shana integrated Dunhuang decorative elements into modern design language, demonstrating the practical value of traditional culture in contemporary society. This exhibition, along with its academic interpretation, highlighted Chang Shana's important position in bridging traditional art and modern design.

Huang Xin and Wu Wei (2023) explored Chang Shana's educational philosophy in their paper *The Exploration of Chang Shana's Design Education Thought as the "Decoder of Dunhuang Patterns"*. They analyzed her emphasis on systematic pattern education and her methods of balancing imitation with innovation in design education. The authors pointed out that Chang Shana's teaching concepts have greatly influenced the current educational model in China's arts and crafts discipline and provided valuable references for cultivating culturally confident designers.

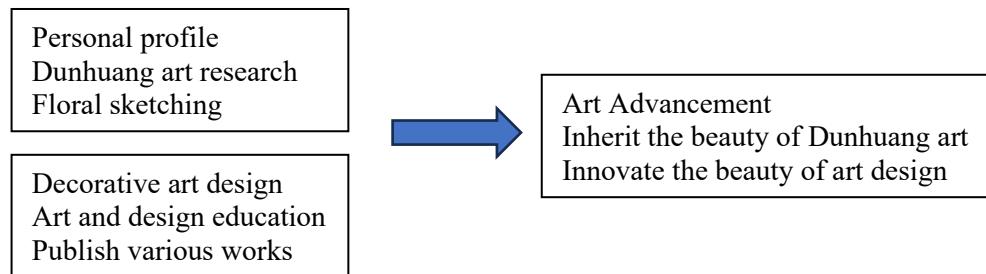
Liu Yuanlong (2017) published *Chang Shana: Blooming Flower of Dunhuang* in which he portrayed Chang Shana as a symbolic figure representing the revitalization of Dunhuang art. Liu highlighted not only her artistic achievements but also her dedication to cultural heritage and educational reform. He argued that Chang Shana's lifelong commitment to combining traditional elements with modern practices is a testament to the vitality of Chinese cultural identity in a globalized context.

## Conceptual Framework

This study focuses on systematically exploring Chang Shana's artistic practice and educational philosophy in alignment with the three stated research objectives. The framework is structured around three key dimensions: floral sketching, decorative design, and art and design education. These dimensions were conceptually selected based on their strong representation of Chang Shana's lifelong work and their relevance to cultural inheritance and contemporary application.

Floral sketching reflects her reinterpretation of traditional Chinese aesthetics through natural forms, highlighting her innovative visual language. Decorative design focuses on her transformation of Dunhuang patterns into modern design, illustrating her role in bridging tradition and modernity. The educational dimension examines her teaching philosophy, emphasizing how she integrated traditional culture into design education to promote cultural continuity.

The guiding principle of this framework is the creative transformation of traditional culture, drawing from both heritage preservation and contemporary design theory. By analyzing these three interconnected aspects, the study aims to demonstrate how Chang Shana's work offers a model for revitalizing traditional culture in modern art and education.



**Figure 1** Conceptual Framework

## Research Methodology

This study adopts a literature analysis approach as its first step. By systematically reviewing relevant academic papers, interviews, and exhibition catalogues on Chang Shana's art and educational philosophy, the research aims to build a theoretical foundation for deeper investigation. Special attention is paid to studies on Dunhuang decorative pattern applications, flower sketching techniques, and traditional pattern teaching methods. Core references such as *The Blossoming Dunhuang: Research and Application Exhibition of Chang Shana's Art* and *Exploration of Chang Shana's Educational Thoughts on Dunhuang Patterns* are critically examined to summarize common viewpoints, identify gaps, and outline contrasting perspectives in the existing scholarship.

Second, this study employs case study analysis focusing on representative artistic projects by Chang Shana. These include her transformation of Dunhuang motifs in design, her flower sketching works, and her participation in landmark public projects such as the decoration of the Great Hall of the People and the sculpture celebrating Hong Kong's return. By applying visual analysis, color analysis, and compositional analysis, the study explores these works from the perspectives of artistic language, cultural symbolism, and creative concepts. In addition, it traces the evolution of her creative practice across different historical periods and socio-political contexts, thereby revealing the practical value and educational implications of her legacy in contemporary Chinese art and design.

Third, field research is carried out to complement textual and case-based findings. The research includes visits to key institutions closely related to Chang Shana's career, such as the Dunhuang Academy, the National Art Museum of China, and the Central Academy of Fine Arts. By attending relevant exhibitions, observing teaching achievements, and interviewing teachers, students, and researchers, the study collects first-hand evidence on how Chang Shana's design concepts are currently inherited, disseminated, and innovated. Observations on the display environments, craftsmanship restoration levels, and audience responses are documented to validate the results of the literature review and case analysis.

Finally, the study adopts a comprehensive triangulation strategy to ensure scientific rigor. By cross-verifying insights from literature analysis, case study analysis, and field research, the methodology strengthens the reliability of its conclusions. Through triangulation, the research compares consistencies and differences in data, uncovers underlying cultural logic and societal demands, and distills the essential values of Chang Shana's artistic and educational practices. This integrative approach is intended to offer theoretical and practical reference points for the integration of traditional Chinese culture into contemporary art and design education.

## Results

### 1. Chang Shana: From Dunhuang Roots to Modern Design Excellence

#### 1.1 The Life of Chang Shana

Chang Shana, named after France's Saône River, was born in 1931 during her father Chang Shuhong's studies in Europe. In 1935, a chance encounter with the *Illustrated Catalogue of the Dunhuang Caves* profoundly changed their family's destiny, inspiring Chang Shuhong to return to China to protect these cultural treasures. In 1937, the family fled war-torn China back to Dunhuang, where in 1943 Chang Shuhong led artists to conserve the Mogao Caves. Young Chang Shana received a strict and comprehensive education: copying murals, reciting French, reading Chinese and Western classics, all under harsh desert conditions, which cultivated both her resilience and artistic skill.

Despite personal hardships, including her mother's departure and family financial struggles, she devoted herself to mural copying, completing works like *Transformation of the Western Pure Land*. In 1946, her talent was recognized at the Lanzhou Father-Daughter Exhibition, where she was encouraged to study abroad. After two more years immersed in Dunhuang, she carried forward the legacy of her father with unwavering passion.

In 1948, Chang Shana began studying in the United States, sponsored by Ye Lihua, taking with her hundreds of mural copies. In Boston, she honed sketching, anatomy, and art history, all built upon the strong foundation of her Dunhuang training. She even held a New York exhibition of apsaras that amazed audiences. However, as news of New China's birth spread, she chose to give up her degree, worked in a ceramics factory to buy a ticket home, and returned in 1950 with deep affection for her country.

Back in China, she helped exhibit Dunhuang treasures, which caught the eye of Liang Sicheng and Lin Huiyin. Recommended to teach at Tsinghua University, she soon expanded her influence by innovating traditional crafts and eventually joining the Central Academy of Fine Arts. There she systematized Dunhuang ceiling motifs into textbooks and took part in major decorative projects. Later, she led teams on the Great Hall of the People, applying Premier Zhou's philosophy of "use the old for the new."

As president of the Central Academy of Arts and Crafts from 1983, she advanced design education by creating new disciplines and promoting industry-academia integration, while also leading projects such as the 1997 *Ever-Blooming Bauhinia* for Hong Kong's return. Moreover, she actively engaged in international exchanges, forging partnerships in Japan, France, and the United States, broadening Chinese design education's global reach. Her lifelong dedication to Dunhuang research, from patterns to pigments and color studies, safeguarded and reinterpreted these world-class heritage elements for new generations, demonstrating openness and integration along the Silk Road.

#### 1.2 Characteristics of Chang Shana's Flower Sketches

Flowers, in Chang Shana's hands, embody not only nature's vitality but also a lifetime of artistic reflection. Her flower sketches reveal five notable characteristics:

**Delicate brushwork:** She conveys subtle textures of petals and leaves with precise lines and shading, giving her flowers a sense of life and breath. Works like *Rose* and *South Snake Vine* highlight this refined detail, expressing gentle observation and artistic rigor.

**Fresh, harmonious colors:** Chang Shana favors light, transparent hues, skillfully blending shades to build depth and a sense of airiness. From pale pinks in *Rose* to layered greens in *Orchid with Crane's Vision*, her color transitions enhance realism and poetic feeling.

Simple composition: She removes superfluous background elements to focus purely on floral shapes, using negative space strategically. Works like *Bai Chunzi* leave large blank areas to emphasize the flower's presence, following a “less is more” aesthetic with strong modern sensibility.

Unique perspective: Her work dignifies humble, ordinary plants — potato blossoms, wild chrysanthemums, clematis — through delicate lines and gentle color contrasts, reminding viewers of the resilience and quiet power of often-overlooked species.

Profound emotion: Chang Shana's flower paintings are not merely decorative but carry reflections on life and nature, celebrating vitality and perseverance. Paintings like *Mountain Dandelion* or *Cactus* metaphorically echo courage and wisdom, resonating with traditional Chinese cultural ideals of moral integrity and harmony.

Overall, Chang Shana's floral sketches harmonize traditional Chinese brush technique with modern design ideas, blending emotional depth, subtlety, and a universal humanism. Over decades of practice, she built a personal artistic language rooted in nature yet transcending time, inspiring viewers to discover beauty, resilience, and cultural meaning within even the smallest flowers.

## 2. Chang Shana's Artistic Creation and Contemporary Application

In the 21st century, under globalization, design should both serve and derive from life, and revitalizing traditional Chinese culture has become a key trend. Studying Chang Shana's artistic philosophy helps explore how traditional culture and nature can be organically integrated into modern design, inspiring public respect for Chinese heritage and natural beauty. Modern design concepts from abroad have inevitably influenced aesthetic values in China, sometimes leading to superficial imitation. Chang Shana advocates “inheriting before innovating,” with designers deeply understanding and flexibly applying traditional elements to revitalize patterns and infuse them with new life.

Through her deep study of Dunhuang murals and nature, Chang Shana highlighted that traditional inheritance must be both broad and profound. Dunhuang art embodies rich patterns across dynasties, while nature provides endless sources of color, shape, and texture. Modern design, she argued, should not only pursue aesthetic refinement but also address the practical needs of everyday life while reflecting advances in science and technology and a spirit of the times.

### 2.1 National Tradition in Design

Chang Shana creatively embedded Dunhuang patterns into her design work, helping to showcase Chinese identity. For example, the “Peace Dove Silk Scarf” incorporated motifs from Sui Dynasty caisson ceilings for the 1952 Asia-Pacific Peace Conference, while the “Ceramic Peace Dove Large Plate” translated decorative patterns into everyday utensils. Likewise, the “MEGA ROYAL MOLLY Dunhuang Series” and “BE@RBRICK Building Blocks Bear” drew from Dunhuang imagery to popularize traditional culture globally. These projects bridge the ancient and the contemporary, stimulate younger designers' interest, and expand cultural consumption choices.

### 2.2 Decorative Color in Design

The brilliant color system of Dunhuang murals, rich with auspicious reds, tranquil blues, and dignified golds, is a vital part of Chinese aesthetics. Chang Shana emphasized that studying these color systems can enrich modern design's cultural depth and artistic value. For instance, the jewelry design “Prosperous Splendor” uses Dunhuang-inspired enamel colors with pearls to recreate a sense of grandeur and opulence, while the “Dunhuang Impression”

design reinterprets pearl-string motifs with modern gilding and enamel, evoking a sense of historic elegance and vitality.

### 2.3 Decorative Patterns in Design

Chang Shana showed that the flexible yet structured composition methods of Dunhuang patterns provide essential inspiration for today's design. A classic example is the ceiling of the Great Hall of the People's dining hall, referencing Cave 31's caisson ceiling while adapting to a milky-white, pink, and gold color scheme to match modern architecture. In anti-counterfeiting design, the "Dunhuang Commemorative Ticket" applied line patterns and cultural symbols, merging security technology with the beauty of ancient murals to create both practical and artistic value.

### 2.4 Nature-Inspired Design

Chang Shana believed nature is an endless wellspring of creativity. For example, the "Eternally Blooming Bauhinia" sculpture draws inspiration from Hong Kong's bauhinia flower, with petals shaped to appear in dynamic bloom, symbolizing vitality and prosperity. In the Party History Exhibition Hall project, her design integrated "Red Boat Spirit" motifs to visually connect party history, symbolism, and dedication. In these works, Chang Shana demonstrated how to transform natural elements into powerful cultural symbols, achieving harmony between tradition, innovation, and modern living.

Chang Shana's lifelong philosophy — combining national heritage with the vitality of nature — provides a sustainable roadmap for contemporary designers. By absorbing traditional essence and blending it with modern lifestyles, they can build design works that not only inherit precious cultural heritage but also resonate with the aesthetic values and needs of contemporary society, enriching daily life and extending Chinese culture to the world.

## 3. Chang Shana's Art Design Education and Tradition Transmission

Chang Shana was not only an accomplished artist but also a leading educator who dedicated her life to integrating traditional Chinese art into modern design education. From an early age, she immersed herself in Dunhuang murals under the guidance of her father, Chang Shuhong, emphasizing active imitation, rigorous composition, and figure proportion studies, which laid a solid technical foundation. She later passed on this methodology to students, advocating that imitation is more than copying — it is a path to truly understand traditional skills and aesthetics. She led projects such as the *Research on Decorative Patterns of Dunhuang Through the Ages*, requiring students to analyze, document, and reinterpret patterns, encouraging them to innovate on the basis of authentic tradition.

Chang Shana's educational philosophy stressed combining practice with theory. She frequently took students to Dunhuang to observe original works and appreciate their artistic value in context. This experiential approach aimed to strengthen cultural confidence and aesthetic appreciation.

In pattern education, she firmly believed that traditional patterns should remain core curriculum, rather than being replaced by "three major components" courses of composition, color, and form after the 1980s reforms. She argued that patterns embody distinct cultural language and must be preserved to cultivate designers with a truly Chinese identity. Collaborating with colleagues like Wen Lianchang, she promoted studying color relationships from nature — such as butterflies, flowers, and birds — applying these insights to redesign traditional patterns with contemporary perspectives.

Dunhuang patterns were her particular focus. She guided students to reproduce their characteristic colors and forms with precision, and then to creatively recombine them,

balancing fidelity and innovation. This approach nurtured both respect for tradition and design imagination.

Chang Shana also actively advanced international academic exchange. Between 1987 and 1998, she led delegations to Japan, France, Singapore, and the United States, building partnerships with top institutions like Tokyo University of the Arts, the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs, and the Massachusetts Institute of Art. These exchanges deepened understanding of foreign art education systems, and inspired new models linking education with industry needs. For example, she admired how French schools integrated graduation projects with enterprise requirements, and encouraged applying similar methods in China to meet market expectations.

She broadened her vision through visiting major museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where she gained insights on how art can convey political, historical, and cultural narratives. These global experiences enriched her teaching and leadership in Chinese art education.

In response to China's growing economy, Chang Shana promoted industry–university–research integration. Supported by national policy, she helped the Central Academy of Arts and Crafts establish technology development departments, environmental art companies, and specialized design institutes. In 1992, the college founded the Institute of Industrial Design and the Decorative Arts Research Institute, building a platform for students and teachers to apply knowledge practically and serve society. The Environmental Art Development Center, founded in 1994, operated independently, handling interior design, architectural decoration, and production, and became a pioneer in blending artistic creation with industrial application.

Chang Shana believed that design must root itself in both tradition and nature to achieve vitality. She emphasized that traditional patterns should evolve by adapting to modern materials, techniques, and living needs, expressing contemporary cultural identity while maintaining heritage. As global cultures pursue unique regional styles, even standardized products now look for a cultural language — patterns provide this emotional connection.

Throughout her career, Chang Shana championed a teaching approach that respected traditional culture while courageously exploring modern methods. She viewed tradition not as static, but as a dynamic resource to inform present-day innovation. Her legacy has profoundly influenced Chinese art and design education, inspiring generations of designers to integrate heritage with modern creativity. Whether through mural replication, modern applications, or global exchanges, Chang Shana's vision and dedication have left an enduring mark on the future of Chinese art.

## Discussion

Currently, research on Chang Shaona has achieved certain results, with Liu Yuanlong (2017) describing her as the “blossoming flower of Dunhuang,” highlighting how she transformed Dunhuang's cultural spirit into modern art and design, thus demonstrating a successful integration of tradition with innovation. This view supports this study's focus on how Chang Shaona inherited and reimagined traditional cultural elements in contemporary creative practices, confirming the consistent understanding of her role in modernizing Dunhuang art.

Similarly, Wu Weishan (2019) affirmed Chang Shaona's unique contributions in design education, emphasizing her efforts to incorporate Dunhuang artistic elements into teaching, thereby preserving traditional Chinese aesthetics while cultivating innovative talents. This perspective also aligns with the current research, which aims to explore how Chang Shaona's

educational philosophy can serve as a valuable reference for cultivating culturally confident and creative designers today.

However, both studies tend to focus more on her biographical achievements and broad artistic influence, without deeply analyzing the mechanisms or pedagogical methods through which Chang Shaona's philosophy can be systematically applied in current art education and modern design. This reveals an inconsistency between existing literature and the needs of this research, which intends to further clarify and interpret the pathways, tools, and frameworks through which Chang Shaona's legacy can inspire future design practices and strengthen cultural transmission.

In this way, the present study seeks not only to expand on the appreciation of Chang Shaona's artistic and educational contributions but also to provide practical strategies for contemporary designers and educators to integrate traditional cultural elements more effectively in their work, building on but also going beyond the previous literature.

## Conclusion

Chang Shaona's artistic career represents a profound and vivid reflection of the inheritance and innovation of Dunhuang art. Having grown up among the Mogao Caves, she developed an intimate understanding of Dunhuang art through her practice of mural copying, skillfully integrating the vivid colors, fluid lines, intricate compositions, and classic motifs into modern design. Notably, she infused the banquet hall of the Great Hall of the People with traditional lotus motifs and a harmonious palette of gold and red, merging historical elegance with contemporary style. Through her innovative approach, she refined and adapted traditional elements to fit modern aesthetics, employing contemporary technologies and materials to realize these visions. In her home decor works, she blended classic floral motifs with minimalist modern sensibilities, achieving both beauty and practicality while retaining the soul of traditional culture. Throughout her artistic journey, Chang Shaona upheld the principle that art is rooted in life and should serve life, as seen in her abundant floral sketches that celebrate nature's beauty and emphasize environmental harmony. As an educator, she dedicated herself to merging traditional arts with modern design education, promoting the integration of theory with practice and encouraging innovation. By leading student field trips and introducing courses on Dunhuang art and traditional patterns, she cultivated generations of talented designers who have earned recognition both in China and abroad. Her efforts have revitalized Chinese art and design education with new vitality. Moreover, as an active participant in international cultural exchanges, Chang Shaona has significantly enhanced the global visibility of Chinese traditional culture, building bridges for cross-cultural dialogue through her exhibitions and educational collaborations. In sum, her achievements have had a far-reaching impact, offering invaluable inspiration for the continued advancement of Chinese art and design.

## Recommendations

Building on the research findings, several practical recommendations are proposed to enhance the application of Chang Shana's artistic philosophy:

### 1. For Educational Institutions and Curriculum Developers

Universities and art colleges are encouraged to integrate Chang Shana's approach—combining traditional cultural elements with modern design—into their teaching models. Her emphasis on experiential learning, pattern-based training, and cultural identity can be

incorporated into course content and studio projects to deepen students' understanding of heritage-based design. Curriculum developers may also draw upon her methods to design modules on Dunhuang art, floral sketching, and cultural pattern transformation, thereby cultivating both technical proficiency and cultural confidence among students.

## 2. For Cultural and Creative Organizations

Museums, cultural foundations, and creative industries can apply insights from Chang Shana's work to innovate cultural products that blend tradition with modern lifestyles. Her philosophy provides a reference for product design, exhibition curation, and cultural branding strategies that highlight Chinese aesthetics and historical depth.

## 3. For Urban Development and Public Aesthetic Planning

Urban development agencies and public art planners may consider drawing inspiration from Chang Shana's public artworks—such as the Eternally Blooming Bauhinia—to enhance city visual identity and promote cultural continuity. Her ability to translate symbolic natural elements into architectural ornamentation offers a model for improving aesthetic environments in public spaces, museums, government buildings, or cultural districts.

By applying these strategies, institutions across sectors can not only promote the sustainable transmission of traditional culture but also reinforce local identity and enrich contemporary design practices with historical depth and artistic sensitivity.

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