



# FOLK BRICK CARVING



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*Compiled by Lan Xianlin*



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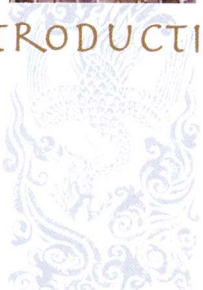
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# INTRODUCTION







Brick carving is an art form widely applied in architectural decor in China. Using brick as the basic material and based on pottery and the art of stone carving, it features both the exquisite and the simple, imbuing a harmonious ambience on brick buildings. This form of art may be traced back to the 7th century BC, and has been perfected step by step in both craft and content through the ages.

## History

Brick carving originated out of early production and application of bricks, and evolved during its course. There were three main types of bricks in ancient times: square, strip and hollow. Square bricks were mostly decorated with motifs and usually used for paving floors. Strip bricks, also known as small bricks, were used for building water channels and for lining tomb chambers in earlier times. Only gradually did they begin to be used for building houses. Hollow bricks were mostly oblong in shape and hollow inside, mostly used for lining tomb chambers. Ancient bricks left over from cultural ruins are of great value in studying the development of the art of brick carving, as they are all engraved with the year of manufacture in addition to auspicious words or designs.



Square brick with rinceau motifs, Warring States Period (474-221 BC), unearthed in Fenghuangtai, Shandong Qingzhou City Museum collection



Hollow brick incised with dragon design, Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC), Shaanxi Provincial Museum of History collection



Brick with image of greeting guests, Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220), Shaanxi Provincial Museum of History collection





Square brick with lotus design, Tang Dynasty (618-907), Shaanxi Provincial Museum of History collection



Square brick with peach design, Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220), Handan City Museum collection, Hebei Province



Bricks carved with images of warriors, Song Dynasty (960-1279), Shaanxi Provincial Museum of History collection

Bricks were used as building materials in China a long, long time ago. The bricks unearthed from the ruins of the late Zhou period (1046-256 BC) in Shaanxi show that bricks appeared in China in around the 8th century BC, when they were used for paving floors. Strip and hollow bricks appeared in the 7th to 3rd centuries BC, when brick carving also appeared as evident in such motifs as 米 (rice), rope and fret.

In the 2nd century BC, a type of very solid brick, popularly known as the "lead brick," came into being in Lishan during the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC), with the clay containing all types of minerals, which reinforced the bricks after being fired. During this period, decorative motifs were engraved on the basis of impressed molding. These motifs included rope, fret, circle, rhomb, S and cloud. The hollow bricks with dragon designs unearthed from Xianyang, the capital of the Qin Dynasty in Shaanxi, featured robust and in-depth composition and exquisite workmanship. They are the finest of the carved bricks of the Qin Dynasty.

With the perfection in shapes, brick carving also developed greatly. Such motifs as geometric designs, animal designs, auspicious words and





combination of other designs appeared in the square, strip and hollow bricks unearthed from the ruins of the 2nd century BC to 2nd century AD. In fashion during this period was the use of the carved bricks and stones in mausoleums, especially during the Eastern Han period (AD 25-220). Such carved bricks are mainly found in Sichuan and Henan provinces. Following the tradition of impressed molding, the workmanship became even better than in previous dynasties. Subjects covered were more practical, with content including legends, labor, life, environment, natural landscapes, historical stories and personal biographies. The composition was well designed with appropriate density, and the images lively.

Carved bricks used to line tomb chambers in the 5th to 6th centuries were often painted in colors, with the subject matter of the designs covering literati, musicians and warriors as well as myths and religious tales. The application of carved bricks was extended to building Buddhist pagodas during this period. Glaze appeared as early as in the 11th century BC, brought in from the western regions, and had not been used in architecture until this period.



Brick carved with a dancer, Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127), Shaanxi Provincial Museum of History collection.



Long bricks carved with the date of manufacture, Jin Dynasty (265-420), Qingzhou City Museum collection, Shandong Province





Brick carved with a design of  
a lady offering tea to another lady,  
Northern Song Dynasty,  
Shaanxi Provincial Museum of  
History collection

From 7th to 10th centuries, bricks began to be used for the outer coverings of city walls, indicating the increase in output. During this period, carving was done on bricks after they were molded, which made the works more exquisite and more three-dimensional. During the Tang Dynasty (618-907), bricks with floral designs caught on in the paving of floors. Historical data reveals that the front part of the North Hall of the Tang-dynasty Cabinet Building was paved with bricks involving such floral designs as lotus

and honeysuckle, which could be laid in continuous lines to make the floor more beautiful. Of the floral bricks of that period extant today, those in the Daming Palace and at Dunhuang are the most valuable. The carved bricks used to build the Xiuding Temple in Anyang, Henan Province, are the best examples of the period. There are more than 3,440 of them, with 72 designs including attendant maids, children, blue dragon, white tiger and Buddhist and Taoist figures.

Full brick structured buildings appeared from the late 10th century to the late 13th century. There was also major progress in the carving of bricks. The book *Methods and Style of Building* standardized the process of brick carving. The full carving method replaced the original impressed molding or carvings based on impressed molding. In addition, brick carving acquired the symbolic significance of grades, with standards for different grades. The carved bricks of the Song Dynasty (960-1279), unearthed in Yanshi of Henan Province, recorded the daily life of women, with the figurines carved with superb workmanship and in such innovative styles craftsmen made the figurines more vivid and expressive. The carved bricks lining the chamber of the Tomb of Dong in Houma, and the Tomb of Jin in Jishan in Shanxi Province, represent the highest level of brick carving in the 12th to 13th centuries, featuring bold shapes and well-laid out conception, including content such as the tomb's owner, servants, tales of piety, warriors, flowers, birds and animals carved in alto-relievo.





Screen wall, Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), Songjiang, Shanghai

Toward the end of the 14th century, carved bricks began to decorate such high-grade buildings as princely residences and temples. After the 16th century, stone carving and glaze replaced carved bricks in decorating high-grade buildings, with carved bricks downgraded. Such carved bricks, however, were extensively used in small residential houses. As the economy flourished, and with social stability, carved bricks were to be found everywhere. With the renewal of brick carving methods, the craft became more refined and its subject matter extended more widely, thus bringing about a golden age in the art of brick carving. After the 14th century, brick carvers were divided into different schools, such as Huizhou brick carving, Suzhou brick carving, Guangdong brick carving, Hezhou brick carving, and Beijing brick carving.

Influenced by baroque and rococo in the 18th to 19th centuries, building decoration became more elaborate. Toward the end of the 19th century, decorative carving grew stronger and the craft tended to become more minute and complicated, often seen in door heads, gable-wall heads, front-porch walls and screen walls. Stucco



Architectural brick carved with two gold fish, Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), Guangzhou

sculpture, an art form derived from brick carving, also emerged and gained great popularity in the coastal areas south of the Lingnan Mountains, making the local architecture more bright and colorful. Glaze became so dignified that it became a signature of imperial architecture and, outside the imperial family, could be used only in temples.

At this time, the variety of decorative motifs on carved bricks was also enriched. They included human figures, deities, auspicious birds and animals, flowers, grasses, mountains and rivers, utensils, silk motifs, and symbols. Brick carving also adopted the most popular forms, such as the use of metaphor, comparison and homophonic sounds to convey good wishes and fortune. For instance, the peach was used to represent long life; the peony to represent nobility; the pomegranate to express good wishes for more children; and the sheep was used to express piety. Plum, orchid, bamboo and chrysanthemum were used as similes for noble virtues; lotus was used to express cleanliness; the bat to homophonically signify happiness; deer homophonically to imply earnings; the chicken for its sound as luck. The themes of decorative brick carving fell into three major categories: wishes for happiness and fortune; the promotion of good morality and ethics; and exorcism of evil and disaster. The first category was the most widely applied, as a totality for happiness, earnings, long life, good tidings and wealth. All these are expressed in simple artistic language: the concerns of people for the value of life, their wishes for the rise of families, their pursuit of wealth and a happy life, and for their own social status. The subjects reflected the traditional way of thinking of the common people, their cultural concepts and their moral codes.





## Brick Carving Process

Brick carving is the art of bricks. Bricks are made of clay adobe fired at high temperatures, featuring resistance against wear and moisture, and for easy workability. There are green bricks, red bricks and tiles for flooring, depending on the raw material used and the ways of firing. Stucco sculpture is a derivative of brick carving. Glaze is a process in contrast to brick carving.

The process of the folk art of brick carving involves *shaohuo*, *shao*, chiseling, emboss and stucco emboss.



Screen-wall brick carving, Yangjiafu,  
Weifang, Shandong Province

*Shaohuo* is a most ancient process. Clay is molded into an abode by sculpturing or impressed molding and then put into a kiln for firing. It features ease in working, and low cost. However, the level of this process is low and rough.

*Shao* is a type of carving on the basis of firing work. It is more time consuming. Yet the finished products have sharp edges and clear layers, suitable for close-up viewing.

Chiseling mean applying a chisel directly on the brick. It has a variety of methods, and the products are expressive.

Emboss is a sub-system of brick carving, using emboss and engraving techniques.

Stucco emboss is a method of mixing fine lime with fibrous plaster which is sculptured into a shape on the surface of bricks, mostly in shallow bold relief. The method is mostly used to decorate screen walls, eave walls, gable walls, doors and windows and roof ridges, featuring fresh styles and simplicity.







Brick carved with rinceau design,  
Guangdong guild hall, Luodai,  
Sichuan Province



Garden architectural brick carving,  
Jiading, Shanghai



Peony screen-wall glaze, Longxing Temple,  
Zhengding, Hebei Province



Theatrical figures, stucco sculpture,  
Guandi Temple, Dongshan, Fujian Province



Glazed animal, Jingzhou,  
Hubei Province



Stucco sculpture on door head,  
Zhongxian County, Chongqing



## Regional Styles of Brick Carving

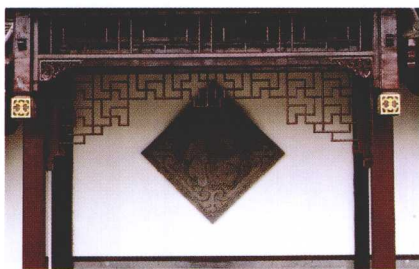
Brick carving is widespread in China, especially in Beijing, Tianjin, Shandong, Shanxi, Shaanxi, Anhui, Jiangsu and Guangdong. Brick carvings in different places feature different styles, and have evolved into different schools of the art. The most famous are Huizhou brick carving, Suzhou brick carving, Guangdong brick carving and Hezhou brick carving.

Beijing brick carving. Beijing, serving as a capital for several dynasties, was noted for its tight control by the feudal patriarchal system. Glaze and color paintings could only be used

to decorate imperial palaces, temples and other large structures. Brick carving developed only among the common people for decorating houses. It was widely applied in enclosed courtyard houses. Beijing brick carving had its heyday during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). The craft was mature and carving methods included bold relief, openwork and line engraving. Subject matter covered mainly flowers, with strict styles, composed and bold, mainly used to decorate screen walls, door heads, eave walls, and front-porch walls.



Peony, brick carving,  
Baiyunguan Temple, Beijing



Brick carving of Chinese character "fu"  
(happiness), Shi Family Compound,  
Yangliuqing of Tianjin

Tianjin brick carving. Tianjin used to be a major seaport of China in the 17th to 20th centuries, where all the rich merchants and nobilities gathered. In order to show off their riches, they vied with one another to build luxurious houses decorated with carved bricks. The brisk market demand stimulated the development of this trade. Tianjin brick carving is refined, featuring circular carving, relief carving and line



engraving. Subject matter included quite stylish figures, auspicious fowls and animals as well as flowers. The carving is minute and complicated in style. At the beginning of the 19th century, brick carvers Ma Shunqing and Ma Shaoqing (father and son) created a new method. By piecing and plastering, they succeeded in making brick carving more stratified, suitable for large brick works.



Door brick carving,  
Weixian County, Hebei Province

Weixian brick carving. This is a type of carving popular in the Weifang area of Shandong Province. It stresses arrangement, conception and exaggerated shape. Designs mainly feature auspicious animals and flowers. The style is bold and simple, with strong local color.

Shanxi brick carving. Shanxi brick carving had its glorious prime in the 12th to 13th centuries. It reached its heyday by the mid-1700, when the society was stable, economy prospered. Rich merchants, particularly from Anhui and Shanxi, began to build their magnificent houses by using the best materials. It was most popular in the central part of Shanxi, where merchants gathered. Shanxi brick carving belongs to the northern school of art, featuring skill, exquisite craft, rich conception, and complexity. Subject matter mostly concentrated on happiness, earnings, long life, good tidings and wealth. It was mainly used to decorate screen walls, door heads, eave walls, steps, pediments and roof ridges.



Front-porch wall brick carving,  
Dingcun Village of Xiangfen, Shanxi Province

