

# The Evolution of Illustration Design in Food Packaging

Linlin Wang

Wuhan Textile University, Wuhan, Hubei 430000, China

**Abstract.** Illustration art plays a crucial role in packaging design, and it has undergone significant changes in form and technique with the continuous development of society. Meanwhile, as an indispensable part of the social market economy, packaging design has evolved significantly with the progress of human society, continually expanding and enriching its scope. Illustration art has been widely applied in various design products. This article provides a detailed overview of the history and characteristics of illustration design and, through the analysis of domestic products, discusses the changes in modern illustration design in the field of food packaging. It emphasizes the reasons for the evolution of illustration design in food packaging and the importance of its expressive methods.

**Keywords:** Illustration Design; Food Packaging Design; Evolution.

## 1. Historical Origins of Illustration

### 1.1. Definition of Illustration

The term "illustration" can be traced back to the Latin word "illustratio," which means "to illuminate." Initially, illustrations were primarily used to illuminate texts, often found in the form of book illustrations. The purpose of illustrations was to assist and complement written texts, making them more accessible to readers who were not proficient in reading, such as illiterate or limited-literacy individuals. The concept of illustration has not yet been uniformly defined in scholarly circles. It is a concept that has evolved over time, and people from different periods have had varying interpretations of what constitutes illustration. As time progressed, the forms of illustration evolved, giving rise to many new forms of illustration, thereby complicating the definition of illustration. However, regardless of how the form of illustration may change, its fundamental purpose remains constant. As a distinctive art form, illustration exists to convey specific information or emotions.

### 1.2. Development History of Illustration

The origins of illustration can be traced back thousands of years. Some artifacts with inscriptions and reliefs show that the ancient Babylonians began using illustrations on stone tablets about a millennium ago. Western scholars widely believe that the earliest surviving illustrated book is the visual narrative inscribed on papyrus in ancient Egypt around the 15th century BCE, such as the "Book of the Dead." However, according to some interpretations, visualized hieroglyphics were the precursor to illustration, and this concept has a long history in China as well. David Bland, an illustration theorist and historian, pointed out in "A History of Book Illustration" that ancient Chinese hieroglyphics were also expressed in a visual reading format, and illustration played a significant role in textual expression. Moving into the medieval period, illuminated manuscripts became popular in Europe, resulting in many exquisite works such as Celtic manuscripts, with "The Book of Kells," "The Lindisfarne Gospels," and "The Book of Durrow" being among the most famous examples.

The Golden Age of Illustration began in the 1950s and 1960s, primarily in the United States. During this period, illustrators started incorporating painting techniques and styles into their illustrations. Many illustrators were professional artists, and their work became more artistic. Additionally, influenced by abstract expressionism, illustration gradually shifted from representational to abstract styles. It wasn't until the 1970s that illustration returned to a more realistic style, especially in the field of commercial illustration. Illustrators began focusing more on visual communication and

meeting market demands. During this period, illustrated advertisements and magazines became widely popular. From the 1990s onwards, with the proliferation of computer technology, digital illustration gained prominence. The advent of computer drawing tools made illustration production more efficient and versatile. This era also saw the emergence of many emerging illustrators who combined computer technology with traditional hand-drawing techniques to create unique works. Illustration found extensive use in the internet age, including online advertising, website design, and mobile applications. Entering the 21st century, illustration design began to integrate into multimedia fields, including animation, gaming, virtual reality, and more. Illustrations of different styles are widely used across various media and platforms, providing creators with greater creative freedom. In summary, the development of illustration reflects changes in society, technology, and artistic styles. From manual drawing to digital production, illustration has continuously innovated and evolved, becoming an indispensable part of fields such as advertising, publishing, and media.

## **2. Evolution of Food Packaging Design in China**

Throughout millennia, human society has been in a continuous state of evolution, accumulating extensive cultural knowledge. Every aspect of development is characterized by change, and the inheritance and development of ancient cultures are palpable in modern society. Food, being a fundamental necessity, has always played a central role in human society. Consequently, food packaging is an integral part of human social and practical life. Due to the limited cultural depth during the early stages of human development, the predominant characteristic of most food packaging was utility. However, as food packaging design evolved, aesthetics gradually became a focal point. This shift reflects the rich and dynamic development of human culture. From ancient packaging to the modern era, packaging design has transitioned from primarily utilitarian to an emphasis on aesthetics.

The Ming and Qing dynasties represent the pinnacle of packaging design in China. Various artistic techniques, including color painting, carving, calligraphy, and more, were employed to create exquisite works of art. Auspicious elements such as bats, deer, fish, and others were widely incorporated into the designs. Despite modern packaging being influenced by the West, ancient Chinese aesthetic elements have been retained to meet the aesthetic demands of contemporary consumers. This preservation embodies the unique charm of Chinese culture and has become a major design trend in modern food packaging.

### **2.1. The Prototype of Food Packaging**

During the Shang and Zhou periods, human culture was in its early stages of development, and people had a relatively simple worldview characterized by reverence for nature. Consequently, the culture of that time primarily used natural elements as the main form of expression, with the natural attributes and characteristics of animals and plants being extended as symbols. Due to the limited technological advancements of that era, food packaging and containers were mostly crafted from materials such as wood, bamboo, and metal, particularly bronze. Joyful or auspicious elements were often presented through techniques like wood carving, inlaying, painting, and casting.

Archaeological excavations have revealed that during the Shang and Zhou periods, joyful patterns encompassed various elements, including clouds, rain, dragons, phoenixes, and other symbolic imagery. These patterns conveyed the joyful emotions and wishes of the people in both religious rituals and daily life. For instance, the earliest inscriptions of dragon motifs appeared on bronze vessels, which were primarily used for decorating ritual objects and represented the ancient Chinese cosmological belief in the unity of heaven and humanity.

However, due to the societal constraints of that era, such food packaging, resembling cauldrons and tripods, was mainly used in ritualistic contexts rather than in everyday life. Nevertheless, during the Shang and Zhou periods, China witnessed the emergence of the rudimentary use of auspicious elements for food decoration and packaging.

## 2.2. The Golden Age of Food Packaging

During the Ming and Qing periods, China's feudal society reached its zenith in terms of technology and culture. Food packaging during this era was brimming with rich traditional auspicious elements. Additionally, paper, which had been invented in China since the Han Dynasty, became widely popular during the Ming and Qing periods, providing diverse materials for food packaging. The ways in which auspicious elements were expressed gradually became systematic and included patterns, homophonic representations, and textual explanations, enriching the forms of packaging design. Among these, the homophonic nature of Chinese characters provided a rich possibility for creating diverse expressions, allowing for the direct representation of good wishes through words.

For example, some homophones of everyday items could signify auspicious meanings, such as "ping" (平) representing "safety," bats and Buddha's hand representing "fortune," magpies representing "joy," osmanthus and longan representing "wealth," lilies and cypress trees representing "hundred," and so on. Auspicious Chinese characters could also be presented in different calligraphic styles, such as "shou" (寿) and "xi" (喜). This method of conveying good wishes directly through words found wide application during the Ming and Qing periods. For instance, the character "shou" (寿) had been stylized and used as an auspicious symbol, and similarly, "shuang xi" (双喜) represented double happiness and auspiciousness. These vibrant auspicious elements represented people's aspirations for a better life, reflected the accumulation of cultural characteristics over many years in China's feudal society, and were a unique cultural refinement of China.

## 2.3. Modern Trends in Food Packaging Design

As society has progressed and time has passed, modern food packaging design has adapted to contemporary technological advancements. However, traditional cultural elements continue to be reflected in modern food packaging design. Especially, the auspicious elements that reached their peak during the Ming and Qing dynasties play an indispensable role in modern food packaging design. These traditional elements not only enrich the artistic forms of packaging but also inherit the cultural characteristics of China's feudal society over the years, representing people's ongoing pursuit of a better life.

Despite the influence of Western culture on the shapes of modern food packaging, Chinese people do not entirely abandon their traditional culture due to the significance of regional culture. In modern Chinese food packaging design, we often see design elements from the Ming and Qing dynasties, such as colored paintings, carvings, calligraphy, and decorative arts, being used to create a unique ambiance. Additionally, common decorative motifs like bats, deer, fish, magpies, and plum blossoms are still favored by the Chinese, highlighting their distinctive cultural identity. This approach is essentially a latent inheritance and expression of ancient auspicious elements in modern food packaging design. Therefore, it can be concluded that ancient Chinese auspicious culture continues to significantly influence the mainstream trends in modern Chinese food packaging design. This is because it represents the traditional aspirations of the Chinese people for a better life and aligns with their psychological needs in their domestic lives.

Food packaging concepts have existed in ancient China since time immemorial. One of the simplest examples is the use of oiled paper to wrap food. In ancient and early times, the primary purposes of food packaging were food protection and convenience for transport, sometimes accompanied by basic textual and graphic markings. Prior to China's economic reforms and opening-up policy, the country experienced slower economic development, limited exposure to international innovations, and relatively lower living standards. Consequently, people had modest expectations for food packaging. It was only during the period of economic reform and opening-up that significant changes occurred in the way food was packaged in China. Text and graphics gradually became more elaborate, though the overall design quality remained relatively low, without undergoing a qualitative leap or significant development. The concept of food packaging had existed in China for a long time, but true innovation and improvement started to emerge during the era of economic reform and opening-up. Food

packaging became a way to showcase the economic development of different eras and also reflected the evolving aesthetic preferences of the people. With the rise in economic standards, the functionality of food packaging also evolved. It was no longer merely about protecting food and facilitating transport; modern technologies were introduced to enhance the functionality of food packaging.

China's opening-up policy facilitated international exchanges, and foreign products began to flood into the Chinese market. Relatively affluent consumers started to purchase and consume international products in their daily lives and diets. The level of sophistication in food packaging became a significant indicator for judging the quality of food products. This led to domestic food manufacturing companies with strong capabilities investing more resources into food packaging design.

Driven by this trend, domestic food packaging design in China has gradually grown and strengthened. With the advent of the information age, people have more diverse and convenient ways of accessing the world, and different groups have displayed varying aesthetic preferences. In a fiercely competitive market, food packaging designers need to innovate and seek new elements and inspiration to meet the aesthetic demands of different consumers. This may include drawing inspiration from different cultures, fashion trends, materials, and paying attention to market feedback.

As Chinese society and culture have been widely disseminated, people's aesthetic standards for graphics, illustrations, and colors have also improved. This has prompted food packaging designers to reexplore the relationship between illustration design styles and food packaging, as well as modern aesthetics. A series of changes demonstrates that food packaging design has gone through a long historical process, reflecting the evolution of China's socio-economic development and cultural exchanges. In different eras, food packaging is not merely a means of product packaging; it serves as a convergence point for culture, aesthetics, and technology, showcasing societal diversity and innovation.

### **3. Current Status of Illustration in Modern Food Packaging**

Today, in a market flooded with countless products, consumers are faced with an abundance of choices, making it crucial for manufacturers to vie for their attention. To make their products stand out in the fiercely competitive market, packaging design has become paramount. The success of product packaging is closely tied to the alignment with consumers' aesthetic sensibilities, directly influencing product sales. In the realm of food packaging design, the role of illustrative art is indispensable. It serves purposes such as conveying product information, highlighting unique product features, and capturing consumers' attention.

With the advancement of digital media, illustrative art has witnessed an enhancement in its visual impact, showcasing a greater diversity of artistic styles. This has injected fresh vitality into food packaging design. Illustration is a visual language, and its integration with food packaging design not only signifies the fusion of art and commerce but also contributes to enhancing the aesthetic appeal and commercial value of food packaging.

In today's fiercely competitive food market, an increasing number of companies are placing a strong emphasis on food packaging design, thus recognizing illustrative art as a pivotal element in packaging design. Emphasizing the use of illustrative art helps bolster a product's brand image and strengthens its competitiveness in the market. Therefore, the effective utilization of illustrative art to enhance a product's brand image and elevate its market competitiveness is a topic that packaging designers need to delve into deeply.

#### **3.1. Growing Market Demand**

With the improvement of the national economy and the increase in people's disposable income, there has been a growing demand for food. This includes not only an increased demand for traditional foods but also a desire for more diverse, healthy, and high-quality food products. This trend is also reflected in food packaging design, where packaging is no longer just about protecting the food; it must also

serve additional functions such as attracting consumers, conveying product information, and reflecting brand values.

To meet the continuously growing demand for food, food manufacturers and packaging designers need to innovate continually, introducing new products and packaging designs. This may involve developing new food recipes, introducing new flavors and tastes, and using innovative packaging materials and design elements. Additionally, factors like health, sustainability, and environmental friendliness play significant roles in food packaging design, as modern consumers are more concerned about these issues. In conclusion, with the continuous development of the national economy and the improvement of people's living standards, the diversity of food demand and the quality requirements continue to increase. This poses greater challenges to the food production and packaging design industries while also providing them with more opportunities. Therefore, food companies and packaging designers need to closely monitor market trends, innovate constantly, and meet the ever-evolving consumer demands.

### **3.2. "Aesthetic" Packaging Gains Popularity**

As time progresses, the younger generation has become the main consumer demographic. Their consumption values differ from those of their parents, placing more importance on novelty and the uniqueness of packaging aesthetics. With the rise of Chinese cultural confidence, domestic trends, often referred to as "Guochao" (Chinese trends), have gradually gained popularity among young people, becoming a new way for them to express their attitudes. Even traditional Chinese heritage food brands are gaining traction among young consumers, especially products that incorporate Chinese elements and employ innovative packaging, which aligns better with their tastes. Sometimes, when making purchasing decisions, young consumers prioritize packaging design. Therefore, customized and co-branded packaging designs cater to the psychological need for uniqueness among young consumers and have become the preferred innovation approach for many traditional food brands.

### **3.3. Diversification of Packaging Materials**

In recent years, to enhance food safety and reduce environmental pollution, an increasing number of players in the food industry are opting for naturally-derived high-polymer materials to manufacture biodegradable packaging materials. Some cities even mandate the use of such eco-friendly packaging. Consequently, many beverage containers are not just made from paper cups; even the straws are crafted from paper materials to further reduce plastic pollution. This trend reflects the emphasis on the sustainability and eco-friendliness of food packaging materials, as well as the pursuit of a healthier and more sustainable future.

## **4. Reasons for the Evolution of Illustration Design in Food Packaging**

### **4.1. Overall Improvement in Domestic Standards**

China, as a rapidly developing nation, has made significant progress in politics, economics, and culture. Alongside this societal development, the design industry within China has been steadily growing and now holds a pivotal market position. Since the inception of economic reforms and opening-up policies, numerous foreign products have flooded into the Chinese market, influencing the stylistic approaches in domestic food packaging design.

Simultaneously, the living standards of the Chinese people have consistently risen, leading to elevated expectations regarding food packaging. The traditional approach of using simple illustrations solely for product identification no longer suffices to meet the visual and psychological needs of modern consumers. This is especially true during the ongoing pandemic control measures, as many people opt to stay indoors, thus making food packaging play a more critical role online. Packaging must capture consumers' attention and stimulate their desire to make purchases.

As a result, a plethora of diverse food packaging styles has emerged, with illustration design being widely and diversely employed to cater to ever-evolving market demands. The innovation and diversity in illustration design help products stand out, attracting more consumer attention and purchases. This also reflects the flexibility and creativity of the design industry in adapting to the requirements of a new era.

## **4.2. Diversification of Consumer Groups**

In the fiercely competitive marketplace and with the unique characteristics of various consumer groups, illustration design in food packaging adapts to different consumer needs. Different age groups and consumer preferences lead to varying concerns and requirements when purchasing food products. This diversity in consumer demographics results in fluidity and diversity in food packaging design, catering to the expectations and preferences of different groups.

Elderly consumers typically prioritize value for money and practicality when choosing food products, and they tend to have lower packaging requirements. They focus more on the quality and price of the food itself. Therefore, when designing packaging for this demographic, the emphasis may lean towards conveying the quality and value of the food.

On the other hand, working professionals and younger consumers prioritize their psychological and visual needs. They are inclined to purchase products with attractive and creative packaging because packaging design can reflect their personality and lifestyle to some extent. For this group, packaging designers often use more creative and artistic illustrations to capture their attention and meet their emotional needs.

To address the diverse demands of different consumer groups, designers need a holistic perspective. They must understand the consumption habits and psychological characteristics of various demographics and skillfully incorporate different forms of illustration into food packaging design. This approach leads to a variety of products in the market to satisfy the needs and preferences of different consumers. The diversity in food packaging also reflects the flexibility and creativity of design, providing consumers with more choices and promoting innovation and competition.

## **4.3. Need for Brand Image**

The application of hand-drawn illustrations in food packaging merges art with commerce and serves as an effective branding and marketing tool, positively impacting both the brand and consumers. Here are some key advantages: 1. Uniqueness and Artistry: Hand-drawn illustrations inject a unique artistic atmosphere into packaging design, making products stand out in the market. Each hand-drawn illustration is one-of-a-kind, which can grab consumers' attention and convey the product's distinctiveness. 2. Emotional Resonance: Hand-drawn illustrations often trigger emotional resonance with consumers. The emotions and stories conveyed through artwork can establish an emotional connection with consumers, aiding in building brand loyalty. 3. Brand Storytelling: Hand-drawn illustrations help in telling the brand's story. They can convey the brand's values, history, and mission, allowing consumers to gain a deeper understanding of the brand and fostering trust. 4. Visibility and Recognition: Exquisite hand-drawn illustrations can enhance a product's visibility and recognition. Consumers may choose to purchase because of the packaging's attractiveness or notice the product on supermarket shelves more easily due to its distinctiveness. 5. Enhancement of Brand Value: By incorporating artistic elements into packaging design, brands can elevate their perceived value among consumers. Consumers are more willing to pay a premium for products with artistic value. 6. Eco-Friendly: As previously mentioned, biodegradable packaging materials and environmentally friendly design are increasingly popular. Hand-drawn illustrations can align with this eco-friendly trend and convey the brand's commitment to sustainability. In summary, hand-drawn illustrations in food packaging design not only enhance the visual appeal of products but also communicate the brand's core values and stories, making significant contributions to brand success and consumer satisfaction.

This fusion of art and commerce is especially meaningful for attracting different types of consumers, particularly those who value aesthetics and emotional connections.

#### 4.4. Need for the Inheritance of Ethnic and Regional Cultures

China is home to fifty-six different ethnic groups, each with rich cultural traditions. Illustrators often integrate illustrations with ethnic cultures and use them on corresponding food packaging, imparting deeper cultural meanings to these products. This practice enriches the form of illustration and highlights the local characteristics of food packaging.



Fig 1. Pictures from Baidu

For example, Tang Bing Jia's "Long Live Gift Box" (Image 1) incorporates Tang Dynasty craftsmanship and design, with red and gold as the primary color scheme, cleverly reflecting the style of the Tang Dynasty. The cover illustration incorporates Tang Dynasty cultural elements such as clothing from the Tang Dynasty era and patterns from Dunhuang, allowing consumers to immerse themselves more deeply in the etiquette and traditional culture of the Tang Dynasty. This design not only conveys the brand's natural qualities but also evokes people's respect and love for the natural environment. By integrating ethnic and regional cultures into food packaging through illustrations, brands can connect with consumers on a cultural level, making products more relatable and resonating with diverse cultural backgrounds. This approach not only showcases the richness of China's cultural diversity but also appeals to consumers who value and appreciate these cultural nuances.

For instance, this traditional brand mooncake gift box (Image 2) integrates classic Guangdong architectural elements like "qilou" (arcaded buildings) to highlight the brand's regional characteristics, giving people a sense of familiarity and warmth. The overall use of fresh orange tones, in harmony with the characteristics of the mooncakes, evokes consumers' feelings of anticipation for the festival's beauty. Additionally, the highly fashionable illustrations align with the aesthetic preferences of younger consumers. Another version of the gift box (Image 3) adopts a traditional layered jewelry box design, with simple geometric shapes that provide consumers with a strong visual impact. This effective combination not only showcases rich regional and ethnic cultural heritage but also better represents ethnic and regional characteristics.



Fig 2. Pictures from Baidu



Fig 3. Pictures from Baidu

Many illustrations with strong ethnic and regional styles are abstracted and transformed to better reflect these cultural elements, infusing illustrations with ethnic vitality and showcasing unique ethnic styles and charm. Therefore, besides elements and colors, the distinctive ethnic culture has become an important means of expression in ethnic illustration design.

Indeed, against the backdrop of the continuously developing tourism industry, specialty foods from tourist destinations have become a significant factor in attracting visitors. The application of ethnic and regional illustration elements can inject more cultural depth and artistic value into the packaging design of these specialty foods. This trend not only enriches the appearance of specialty foods from tourist destinations but also enhances visitors' awareness and experience of the local culture, thereby increasing their appeal and competitiveness.

By conducting an in-depth analysis of the artistic characteristics and value representation of ethnic illustration elements, designers can better incorporate them into the packaging of specialty foods from tourist destinations. This can not only highlight the regional characteristics of the food but also strengthen the brand image, making it easier for visitors to remember and identify. Furthermore, such designs contribute to the preservation and promotion of culture, infusing new vitality and attractiveness into the regional culture of tourist destinations.

In summary, the application of ethnic illustration elements in the packaging design of specialty foods from tourist destinations is a promising new trend. This design approach can highlight local culture, attract tourists, and boost sales. This trend is expected to continue to evolve and can provide strong support for the development of the tourism industry and the preservation of regional culture. It not only meets consumers' demand for art and culture but also enhances the visibility and attractiveness of tourist destinations, holding significant importance for the promotion of local economy and culture.

## 5. Conclusion

The core of packaging design should always be to meet the needs and expectations of consumers. Consumers are the ultimate users of products and packaging, so their sensory experiences and psychological feelings are crucial. Packaging designers need to understand the psychology and aesthetics of consumers to ensure that the design can pique their interest, stimulate desire to purchase, and align with brand values.

Hand-drawn illustration, as a highly artistic and visually appealing design form, indeed holds significant allure. It can be customized based on the product's characteristics and brand philosophy, adding uniqueness and personalization to packaging, thus making the product stand out in the market. Furthermore, hand-drawn illustration offers a richer range of styles and techniques, allowing for better communication of information and emotions and the establishment of deeper emotional connections with consumers.

In summary, packaging design should be consumer-centric, and hand-drawn illustration, as a widely appealing and creative design element, can inject more artistry and personality into packaging design, enhancing a product's competitiveness in the market. Therefore, its application in modern packaging design is receiving increasing attention.

## References

- [1] Sun Yuzhou. A Study on the Impact of Story Marketing on Consumer Loyalty in Multinational Enterprises. (MS. Jiangsu University 2021), p.23.
- [2] Z.W. Zhang, J.N. Wang: Crane Design Manual (China Railway Press, China 1998), p.683-685. (In Chinese).
- [3] Liu, Wenqian. Application of Ethnic Illustration Elements in Packaging Design of Specialty Foods in Tourist Places. *Western Leather*. 2021,43(19). p. 02.
- [4] Lei Lei. Analysis of the artistic expression of hand-painted illustration design. *Art Technology*. 2018, 31(07). p. 01.
- [5] Jingyi Zhang. The Application of Allegorical Representation in Commercial Packaging Design. (MS. Tianjin Polytechnic University, China, 2022), p. 26-30.
- [6] Qu Pei Pei. On Color Associativity in Modern Food Packaging Design. (MS. Qilu University of Technology, China, 2019), p.56-58.
- [7] Gong Ximeng. Analysis on the Application of Illustration Design in Product Packaging under the Background of Visual Culture. *Light Textile Industry and Technology*. 2021,50(05), p.02-04.