

Challenges and Strategies for the Development of Museum Cultural and Creative Products

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Abstract

Driven by both policy guidance and rising consumer demand, the development of cultural and creative products in museums has become a vital channel for the living transmission of cultural heritage. However, the current development of such products generally faces practical challenges, including severe homogenization, superficial cultural exploration, and a one-dimensional approach to design translation. This paper examines the current state and design models of cultural and creative products in museums both domestically and internationally, analyzes their superficial and underlying issues, and, based on a consumer questionnaire survey, systematically analyzes the demand structure and preference characteristics of users regarding these products. The study found that consumers' evaluation of cultural and creative products has expanded from superficial criteria such as "aesthetic appeal" and "souvenir value" to multidimensional indicators including "cultural depth," "practical functionality," and "educational value." Based on these findings, this paper proposes a set of strategies, including establishing a mechanism for selecting cultural elements, strengthening the translation of cultural connotations, and promoting scientific design decision-making, to provide guidance for the high-quality development of museum cultural and creative products.

Keywords: Museum cultural and creative products, cultural and creative products, development challenges, design strategies, user needs

1 Introduction

Today, cultural innovation has become one of the core strategies for national development. The “Several Opinions on Promoting the Development of Cultural and Creative Products by Cultural and Heritage Institutions,” issued by the Ministry of Culture in 2016, explicitly states that efforts should be made to “fully tap into the cultural resources held in the collections of cultural and heritage institutions and develop the cultural and creative industries.”^[1] As vital vehicles for cultural heritage, museums have seen the development of their cultural and creative products emerge as a crucial bridge connecting traditional culture with modern consumption. From a policy perspective, in 2014, the State Council issued the “Several Opinions on Promoting the Integrated Development of Cultural Creativity and Design Services with Related Industries,”^[2] positioning cultural creativity and design as high-end service industries; In 2015, the “Regulations on Museums”^[3] encouraged museums to explore the deeper meanings of their collections for the first time at the legal level; in 2021, the “Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Reform and Development of Museums”^[4] further improved incentive mechanisms; and in 2025, the General Office of the State Council issued the “Several Measures on Further Cultivating New Growth Points to Prosper Cultural and Tourism Consumption,”^[5] explicitly supporting the development of high-quality cultural and creative products. These policies are interlinked, providing legal support and development momentum for the museum cultural industry. From a consumer perspective, in 2024, the national per capita disposable income reached 41,314 yuan, a 28.2% increase from 2020, with the consumption structure shifting from “material-oriented” to “spiritual-oriented.” In 2024, the total number of visitors to museums nationwide reached 1.49 billion, and revenue from cultural and creative products exceeded 3.4 billion yuan, representing a year-on-year increase of 63.7%. However, a survey by China Youth Daily revealed that 55.2% of respondents believed the quality of cultural and creative products was inconsistent, 51.2% pointed to severe homogenization, and 46.9% felt that cultural depth was insufficiently explored. This indicates that, despite policy guidance and high market demand, the development of cultural and creative products by a large number of museums—especially small and medium-sized ones—still faces significant challenges.

Table 1. Museum Cultural and Creative Industry Policy

Time	Policy Name	Issuing Authority	Main Content
2014	Several Opinions on Promoting the Integrated Development of Cultural Creativity and Design Services with Related Industries	State Council	Position cultural creativity & design services as high-end industries; promote culture-design integration.
2015	Regulations on Museums	State Council	First legal-level stipulation to encourage museums to explore their cultural resource connotations.
2016	Several Opinions on Promoting the Development of Cultural and Creative Products by Cultural and Cultural Relics Institutions	Ministry of Culture, National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Finance, National Cultural Heritage Administration	Encourage museums & cultural relics institutions to develop artistic, practical cultural & creative products; support social & capital participation.
2021	Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Reform and Development of Museums	Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, National Cultural Heritage Administration, etc.	Improve incentive mechanisms; allow cultural & creative income for performance rewards; encourage social capital participation.

Time	Policy Name	Issuing Authority	Main Content
2025	Several Measures on Further Cultivating New Growth Points and Prosperous Cultural and Tourism Consumption	General Office of the State Council	Shift from development encouragement to high-quality development; lead industry upgrading.

The international academic community began focusing on the field of museum cultural and creative products relatively early, with research primarily covering areas such as museology, museum marketing, and museum shops. In 1998, Yair et al. ^[6] explored the catalytic role of handicrafts in product development; in 2005, Mottner and Ford ^[7] developed a measurement system for assessing the educational performance of museum shops; and in 2015, Albuquerque et al. ^[8] noted that cultural and creative products serve as a bridge connecting museum collections with the public’s daily life through the translation of cultural symbols.

Domestic research is extensive. Zhou Meiyu^[9] emphasizes culture as the primary core of development and constructs a multidimensional design and development framework; Cheng Hui^[10] systematically identifies industry issues and proposes solutions; Zhang Yao^[11] proposes a “representative selection” transformation pathway; and Chen Lingyun^[12] elucidates the composition of value from the perspective of cultural capital theory.

Against this backdrop, this paper focuses on the practical challenges in the development of museum cultural and creative products. It systematically reviews typical domestic and international cases, conducts an in-depth analysis of the hierarchical structure and root causes of these issues, and identifies user needs based on consumer research, thereby proposing targeted development strategies.

2 A Theoretical Overview of Museum Cultural Resources and Cultural and Creative Products

Museum cultural resources represent the integration and refinement of various cultural elements through the museum’s functions of collection, preservation, and research. They include not only core tangible resources such as artifacts and historic buildings, but also derivative intangible resources such as academic research, educational programs, and traditional crafts. Applying the “Three Levels of Culture” theory, these resources can be categorized into three types: material-level resources, such as tangible artifacts like bronze ware, pottery, and pictorial bricks; intangible-level resources, such as living cultural practices like traditional crafts, oral traditions, and rituals and festivals; and spiritual-level resources, such as deep-seated cultural connotations like value systems, aesthetic awareness, and historical memory. This classification provides a clear resource map for the extraction and transformation of cultural elements. Museum cultural and creative products are cultural consumer goods that combine these cultural resources with creative transformation to embody cultural value, aesthetic value, and practical functionality. Their core characteristics include innovation, commemorative value, diversity, uniqueness, and educational value. Innovation manifests in the creative transformation achieved through modern design language and technological methods; commemorative value connects consumer experiences with the museum’s cultural memory; diversity encompasses a wide range of categories, including stationery, home goods, apparel, and digital products; uniqueness reflects the distinct cultural DNA of different museums; and educational value

is realized through the dissemination of culture and the popularization of knowledge during product use. The realization of these characteristics depends on a scientific transformation pathway from cultural resources to product forms, and the effectiveness of this pathway directly determines the success or failure of cultural and creative product development.

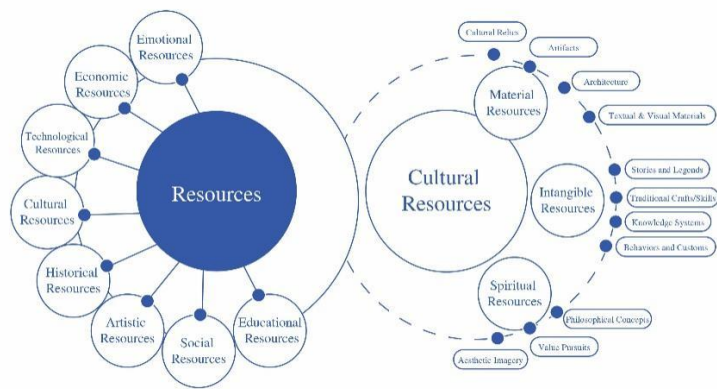


Fig. 1 Structure Diagram of Cultural Resources for Museum Cultural and Creative Product Development

3 Key Challenges in the Development of Museum Cultural and Creative Products

A. Superficial Challenges: Homogenization, Limited Product Formats, and Lack of Creativity

The superficial challenges currently facing the development of museum cultural and creative products are primarily reflected in three areas. First, there is a severe lack of product diversity. A large number of cultural and creative products remain stuck in a simple “pattern transfer + physical item” model, and blind imitation—as exemplified by “cultural and creative desserts”—is widespread. Once the “cultural relics + ice cream” model gained popularity, it quickly triggered blind replication by museums and popular tourist destinations across the country. Whether it be cultural relics, architecture, flowers, or urban landmarks, one can see these elements simply copied onto ice cream cones, with highly convergent design concepts that severely deviate from the original concept of integrating culture into daily life. According to relevant research reports, homogenized categories account for over 65% of domestic cultural and creative products, with more than half falling into the trap of repetitive and imitative designs and product categories. Second, the product formats are monotonous. Due to practical constraints such as limited space in their cultural and creative shops and a lack of professional design teams, many small and medium-sized museums often adopt “low-cost, easy-to-develop” design strategies. Consequently, their products are primarily confined to basic formats like books, academic publications, artifact replicas, stationery, and refrigerator magnets, lacking innovative categories tailored to modern lifestyles. Third, creative expression is lacking, and design language is outdated. Most

designs fail to modernize the cultural significance of cultural relics, often mechanically applying traditional auspicious symbols or retro styles. This approach fails to effectively align with the aesthetic preferences of contemporary young people, and such a mechanical treatment struggles to inspire consumers to make meaningful purchases.

B. Deep-Seated Challenges: Insufficient Cultural Exploration and a One-Dimensional Approach to Transformation

Behind these superficial challenges lie more fundamental, deep-seated issues. On the one hand, cultural exploration is insufficient, resulting in a lack of cultural substance. When transforming museum cultural resources into design language, design teams often focus solely on the “form” and “color” of artifacts, neglecting the historical narratives, craftsmanship, and spiritual significance behind them. This makes it difficult for cultural and creative products to fulfill their core function of cultural dissemination. According to the *2025 China Cultural and Creative Products Industry Consumer Behavior Insights Report, among the main issues consumers perceive with cultural and creative products, “insufficient cultural depth and a pursuit of viral trends” accounted for as much as 40.17%, ranking first and far surpassing other issues such as “excessive markups” and “over-promotion.” At the same time, “enhancing the expression of cultural depth” and “improving product quality and durability” were ranked as the top two most urgent improvement suggestions from consumers. These figures clearly demonstrate that the lack of cultural substance has become the issue consumers feel most acutely. On the other hand, the logic behind design translation is simplistic and lacks a systematic approach. The current product design process relies excessively on individual long-term experience and subjective aesthetic judgments, lacking objective data to support and guide it. This traditional design model directly leads to two core pain points: First, the selection and application of cultural relics exhibit obvious arbitrariness and blindness, lacking a dual consideration of cultural value and market demand; Second, faced with the vast and diverse cultural resources of museums, designers struggle to accurately identify core visual symbols that embody both cultural representativeness and market potential. Simultaneously, they lack clear decision-making criteria for selecting application mediums for cultural and creative products, making it impossible to achieve an effective integration of cultural elements and medium formats. The root cause of these deep-seated challenges lies in the absence of a decision-making process based on objective analysis between cultural resources and design elements.

C. Structural Challenges: Mismatch between Museum Resource Endowments and Development Capabilities

In addition to the superficial and deep-seated challenges mentioned above, the development of museum cultural and creative products also faces a structural dilemma: a significant mismatch between the museums’ own resource endowments and their capacity for cultural and creative development. This mismatch is primarily reflected in the contradiction between the richness of their collections and the limited resources available for development. Large museums, such as the Palace Museum and the National Museum of China, possess extensive professional teams, ample financial support, and mature

supply chain systems, enabling them to systematically organize and continuously develop their vast collections. In contrast, a large number of small and medium-sized museums face a starkly different situation: although their collections are unique, they generally lack professional cultural and creative designers, stable development funding, and effective marketing channels. According to field research conducted for this study, numerous county-level museums in regions such as Liaoning and Inner Mongolia have long been in a state of “having resources but no products.” Cultural and creative development in these institutions is either entirely absent or remains at the level of simple tourist souvenirs, falling far short of the in-depth transformation of their cultural resources. Secondly, this mismatch also manifests as a contradiction between “dispersed cultural narrative focus” and “lack of brand recognition.” Many small and medium-sized museums have not established a widely recognized “crown jewel” or core IP. Their cultural resources are distributed relatively evenly, leaving design teams without clear direction when selecting themes and leading to the dilemma of “being able to do anything but excelling at nothing.” Even when museums intend to advance cultural and creative development, it is difficult to quickly identify the most representative and market-viable core elements from hundreds of artifacts to form an effective product line. Finally, there is a certain tension between the public service nature of museums and the market-oriented nature of cultural and creative products. As non-profit cultural institutions, museums’ core missions are collection, research, and education. The development and sale of cultural and creative products are often viewed as ancillary activities, making it difficult to secure the same level of support—in terms of staffing, performance incentives, and funding—as core operations. This structural marginalization places cultural and creative development in many museums in an awkward predicament: “they want to do it but cannot do it well, and even when they do, it is difficult to sustain.” Overcoming this structural challenge requires coordinated efforts across multiple levels, including policy guidance, talent development, resource integration, and institutional innovation. In particular, it is essential to provide small and medium-sized museums with replicable development tools and decision-making methodologies to lower the professional and resource barriers to cultural and creative development.

Table 2. The Current State of Homogenization

Shenyang Imperial Palace	Xingtai Museum	Jiangxi Provincial Museum	Jinsha Site Museum	Ningxia Museum
				

4 Case Studies of Cultural and Creative Products from Museums in China and Abroad

A. Examples of Cultural and Creative Products from Domestic Museums

The Palace Museum in Beijing is a pioneer in China's museum cultural and creative industry. It has conducted a comprehensive survey of its architecture, cultural relics, and historical archives to establish a cultural resource database. Drawing on the "cute contrast" design concept, it combines solemn court figures with modern design to create IP characters with striking visual contrasts. The Palace Museum's Taobao account has surpassed 10 million followers.



Fig. 2 Beijing Palace Museum Cultural and Creative Products

Drawing on a collection of over 1.4 million artifacts, the National Museum of China has independently developed nearly 5,000 products. By following a systematic workflow and establishing a design resource library, the museum translates cultural relic information into modern design language.



Fig. 3 Cultural and Creative Products of the National Museum of China

As a model for regional museums, the Suzhou Museum has abstracted the architectural silhouette designed by I.M. Pei into minimalist visual symbols, widely applying them to daily necessities such as stationery, accessories, and home goods to create the concept of “The Last Exhibition Hall.”



Fig. 4 Suzhou Museum Cultural and Creative Products

B. International Museum Cultural and Creative Case Studies

The British Museum excels at a “symbolic mapping” strategy, transforming the inscriptions on the Rosetta Stone into modernist patterns to develop a series of products, generating annual revenue of approximately £14.5 million. Drawing on its rich collections of textiles and decorative arts, the Victoria and Albert Museum collaborates with fashion brands to apply Art Nouveau motifs to tech accessories.

C. Summary of Design Models

Based on the above cases, successful models share the following characteristics: First, they emphasize core cultural IP and unique symbols to establish a stable brand identity; second, they integrate products with thematic narratives to create a consistent storytelling experience; third, designs preserve original cultural characteristics while incorporating contemporary aesthetics; fourth, product lines combine staple items with series-based offerings. However, these practices have not been effectively replicated in small and medium-sized museums, where many products still suffer from weak cultural expression and a lack of diversity in adaptation approaches.

5 Development Strategies Based on User Needs

To understand consumers’ genuine needs and formulate effective strategies, this study employed a combined online and offline questionnaire distribution method, targeting the core consumer group of museum cultural and creative products aged 19 to 40. A total of 340 questionnaires were

distributed, with 300 valid responses collected. The survey results show that female consumers accounted for 73.67%, with the 19–35 age group accounting for 88.67% of the total. Students and corporate employees made up over 74% of the respondents, closely aligning with the consumer profiles outlined in industry reports. Regarding purchase motivations, “travel souvenirs” accounted for 70%—the primary purpose—followed by “collection and appreciation” at 44.67% and “supporting cultural heritage” at 43.67%, indicating that cultural and creative products serve both as carriers of emotional memories and as vehicles for cultural dissemination. The price ranges consumers are willing to pay are primarily concentrated between 50 and 100 yuan (34.67%) and under 50 yuan (27.33%), indicating that mid-to-low-priced products remain the mainstream. Analysis of the questionnaire data for reliability and validity showed a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of 0.946, a KMO value of 0.942, and a P-value for Bartlett’s sphericity test of less than 0.001, indicating good data quality. In terms of evaluation dimensions, consumers placed the highest emphasis on “functional attributes” and “cultural and artistic attributes.” Among specific indicators, “educational value,” “structural creativity,” “portability,” and “distinctiveness of museum characteristics” stood out in terms of weighting. This suggests that when purchasing museum cultural and creative products, consumers no longer seek merely “aesthetic appeal” and “souvenir value,” but place greater emphasis on whether the products can convey unique cultural knowledge through practical use, reflect the museum’s distinctive characteristics, and feature designs that are portable and engaging.

6 Conclusion

The challenges facing the development of cultural and creative products in museums are multi-layered and systemic. They include superficial issues such as homogenization, limited product formats, and a lack of creativity; deeper issues such as insufficient cultural exploration and a narrow approach to cultural transformation; as well as structural issues such as a mismatch between available resources and development capabilities. Consumer research indicates that user demands have expanded from “aesthetic appeal” and “souvenir value” to “cultural depth,” “practical functionality,” and “educational value.” Countermeasures should begin with establishing a scientific selection mechanism, deepening the exploration of cultural significance, promoting modern design, and strengthening capacity-building for small and medium-sized museums. Only in this way can museum cultural and creative products truly achieve the creative transformation and innovative development of cultural heritage.

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