

FOLK CRAFT HERITAGE OF CHINA



FOLK STONE CARVING



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FOLK STONE CARVING

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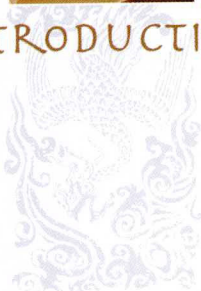
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INTRODUCTION



A Brief History

Stone carving is an artwork carved out of limestone, sandstone, granite, marble and the like. Created with astonishing skill, Chinese stone carvings are artistically appealing, highly functional as well as decorative, revealing distinctive national features and regional variations. The human head sculpture unearthed in the Cishan Culture ruins of Wu'an, Hebei Province, dates back to the Neolithic period thousands of years ago. The pair of stone nude figures of the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 25), unearthed in Shijiazhuang, capital city of Hebei, is the oldest extant large stone sculptures in China today.

Buddhism was introduced into China during the Eastern Han Dynasty (AD 25-220). As Buddhist art flourished, religious stone carving underwent rapid development. Artworks in the Yungang Grottoes and Longmen Grottoes represent the peak of



Petroglyphs: Helanshan Mountain,
Gansu Province



Petroglyphs, Gaolan Island, Zhuhai,
Guangdong Province



Engraved decorative pillars,
Han Dynasty, Baigong Temple, Zhongxian County,
Chongqing Municipality

Chinese stone carving during this period. The pair of stone lions in front of Wushi Temple in Jiaxiang County, Shandong Province, is the oldest graveyard stone lion sculptures in China. Both lion sculptures are true to life, with their manes clearly visible. The group sculptures at the mausoleum of Huo Qubing (145 or 140-117 BC), a general of the Western Han Dynasty, are a telling example of Han-dynasty stone carving. Rather than being lifelike depictions, these sculptures showcase the animals' vigor and vitality by capturing their most lively moments, highlighting their intrinsic structure with an emphasis on rhythm.



A tiger sculpture at Huo Qubing's Mausoleum, attributed to the Western Han Dynasty



An ox sculpture at Huo Qubing's Mausoleum, attributed to the Western Han Dynasty

Ancient Chinese stone carvings are mostly found in grottoes and tombs built in various dynasties. With the large number of works from the Six Dynasties period (222-589), Tang Dynasty (618-907) and Song Dynasty (960-1279) available today, researchers are able to easily probe the development of the art of stone carving in China. After the Song and Yuan dynasties (1271-1368), the themes of stone carvings became more secular and diversified. Folk stone carvings, artistic stone carvings and stone carvings for use in buildings gradually entered the mainstream. By the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1911), apart from stone carvings used in buildings, carved miniature Buddha statues, ornaments and seal handles also enjoyed widespread popularity. These exquisite artworks featured various subjects of great artistic value.

From the perspective of usage, Chinese stone carvings fall into many different categories, including tomb carvings, religious carvings, architectural carvings, and decorative carvings. In terms of the type or origin of the materials, they may be classified into Juhua stone carvings, Qintian stone carvings, Shoushan stone carvings, and Quyang stone carvings.



Major Varieties and Schools

Artworks made of stone from various sites and exhibiting distinct styles make up the many different schools of stone carving.

Shoushan Stone Carving

Shoushan stone carving originated in Shoushan, Fuzhou Province. Stones produced in this area are solid, tough and colorful. White Shoushan stones are as pure as jade, whereas yellow ones are choice materials for high-quality seals. Shoushan stone carving dates back to the Southern and Northern Dynasties (420-589). Carvings of this school are mostly seal handles, ornaments

and miniature Buddha statues, depicting a wide range of subjects such as flowers, birds, animals and human figures. The main skill used is hollow carving, complemented by other techniques such as sculpturing, line engraving, and relief. Sculptors of the Shoushan School typically conceive their works in light of the shape, texture and color of the stones they use.



A petroglyph from the Han Dynasty



A petroglyph from the Han Dynasty



+



A column base from the Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534), Datong, Shanxi Province

Qingtian Stone Carving

Qingtian stone carving originated in Qingtian County, Zhejiang Province, a region that had been recognized for its excellent stone products by the Song Dynasty. In the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), stone carvings from Qingtian were mainly seal handles. Later, during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911),

its decorative carvings gained popularity. Craftspeople belonging to the Qingtian School are good at creating works of art based on the natural color and shape of the raw material.

Quyang Stone Carving

Quyang County in Hebei Province is rich in white marble, a top-grade construction material. In the Yuan Dynasty (1206-1368), craftspeople in Quyang carved stone steps, balustrades and frieze panels, gate bearings, pedestals of Buddha's statue, stools and incense burners for the imperial palace, as well as stone bridges and tomb objects. Many famous structures from the Ming and Qing dynasties, such as the stone carvings of the Forbidden City in Beijing, were the fine works of Quyang artisans.

Juhua Stone Carving

Juhua (chrysanthemum) stone carving originated in Liuyang, Hunan Province. Juhua stones are known for their natural white, chrysanthemum-shaped patterns. In the Qing Dynasty, local craftspeople used Juhua stones to make stationery



A piece of stone carving featuring a deer, attributed to the Han Dynasty, in Shandong Province





A horse sculpture, attributed to the Tang Dynasty, in the Qianling Mausoleum in Xianyang, Shaanxi Province

ware, such as ink stones, writing brush containers and vessels for washing writing brushes. Later they began to carve small ornaments such as stone vases. Their works feature skillful carving and a distinctive style.

Seal Handles

Seals used in ancient China were mostly topped by handles. With a tassel going through the hole in the handle, a man could carry his seal about. Ancient seals

and bronze stamps before the 3rd century BC had animal-shaped handles. By the Ming and Qing dynasties, when stone seals became widely popular, the art of seal-handle carving was flourishing. The handles took the shape of various animals, such as tigers, dragons, lions and tortoises, all intricately carved and true to life.

Huizhou Stone Carving

Many architectural ornaments in residences and ancestral temples, as well as on gateways and bridges in Huizhou, are carved out of limestone and granite produced in the area. The carvings mostly depict China's natural splendor, featuring delicate carving skills and meticulous designs.

Hui'an Limestone Carving

Hui'an, Fujian Province, is a major producer of limestone. Craftspeople in Hui'an and nearby Quanzhou carve limestone Buddha statues, and also pillars, beams, doors and windows, as well as column bases used in buildings and architectural ornaments. Their works are exquisitely carved with vivid designs.

Baihua Stone Carving

The raw materials – Baihua or "white flower" stones – are brown, dark green and white stones from Guangyuan, Sichuan Province, a region that has a long tradition of stone carving. For example, the Thousand-Buddha Rock Sculpture, a large stone

sculpture of the Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534), was found there. Since the Qing Dynasty, craftspeople in Guangyuan have been producing small decorative carvings out of colorful Baihua stones. Their works are characterized by a unique, elegant stance.

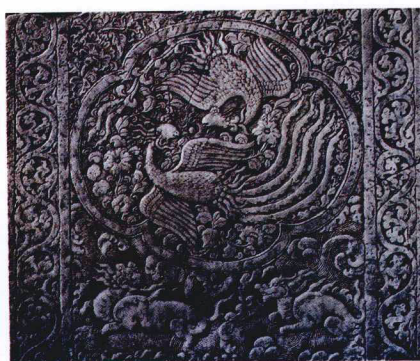
Coal Carving

The raw materials for this type of carvings are black stones found in open coal pits in Fushun, Liaoning Province. Complex coal carvings unearthed in the ruins in Xinle, Shenyang, date back to the Neolithic period over 7,000 years ago. This time-honored art exhibits are simple, unsophisticated in style.

Major Themes

Most Chinese stone carvings depict humans, animals, birds and flowers in a realistic manner, with the following three main themes:

1. Auspicious designs composed of images of pines, cranes, dragons, phoenixes, lions and horses, symbolizing good fortune, happiness and longevity;
2. Ancient heroes, characters from dramas and operas, mythology and the daily life of the common people, e.g., generals of the Yang family in the Song Dynasty, and fishermen, woodsmen, peasants and scholars; and
3. Mascots and auspicious animals, believed to be able to drive away evil spirits, e.g., lions, phoenixes, qilin (or



Phoenixes and qilin



A stone lion from the Han Dynasty, Shandong Province





A painted Buddha statue of the Six Dynasties (222-589), Qingzhou, Shandong Province

kylin, an ancient auspicious legendary animal with a horn and scales all over), elephants, deer, bats, cranes, tortoises, and the 12 zodiac animals of Chinese astrology – mouse, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog and pig.

Distinctive Features

The time-honored art of stone carving has maintained its unique national and regional characteristics and artistic styles over the past thousands of years. Its main features can be summarized as follows:

1. Chinese stone carvings were created firstly to meet people's practical needs, and secondly to satisfy their spiritual and aesthetic needs. There was a perfect combination of practicality and aesthetics.

2. The carvings reflect genuine and spontaneous sentiment, and are rich in rural charm. With strong color contrasts, exaggerated figures, well-balanced designs, seamless incorporation of themes into refined forms, they have carried on traditional Chinese aesthetic concepts, ideals and spiritual pursuits.

3. The artisans were skilled at reproducing the images of their minds' eyes, by



A musician of the Tang Dynasty



A musician of the Tang Dynasty

combining objective description and abstract representation.

4. The themes of Chinese stone carvings were closely related to primitive culture, which worshipped ancestors, totems, spirits and fertility. Many stone works are regarded as "living fossils" of prehistoric civilization.

5. Most carvings depict natural images, through which craftspeople convey common aspirations. For example, different ethnic groups tend to use similar ways to express wishes for good fortune.



A stone carving featuring images of a dragon and clouds, attributed to the Ming Dynasty, Beijing

6. Chinese folk art exhibits the following common characteristics in terms of creation philosophy, design principles and representational approaches:



A Buddha statue of the Song Dynasty, Chongqing

a. As skills were handed down from generation to generation, Chinese folk art became more standardized, with fixed designs and conventions.

b. Chinese artists went beyond formal likeness; instead, they were able to transform objective objects into subjective symbols, by using their imagination. They could even create works of art based on visual illusions.

c. In terms of layout, the artisans transcended the boundaries of two-dimensional space to create three-dimensional or multi-dimensional

