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The History and Art of
**Chinese
Seals**

Sun Weizu



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by Sun Weizu



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The World of Ancient Seals and Special Features of Chinese Seals

Section 1 Overview of Seals in the East and the West in Antiquity	20
Definition of Seals	20
Seal Systems at Their Early Stage in the East and West	23
Section 2 Properties and Forms of Chinese Seals	34
Forms of Chinese Seals	34
Independence and Stability of Seal Characters	43
Expansion of Seal Functions	45
Section 3 The Chinese Art of Seal Engraving	49
Formation and Characteristics of Engraving Art	49
Aesthetics of Engraving Art	54



Intents

The Origins and Early Development of Chinese Seals – The Pre-Qin Dynasty Period

Section 1	Uses of Seals Recorded in Ancient Writings	62
	Origins of Seals	62
	Use and Use Methods of Seals	63
	Statutory Position of Official Seals and Their Management	67
Section 2	Early Forms and Origination Path of Seals	71
	Nature of Bronze Seals Unearthed from the Yin Ruins	71
	Transition of Properties of Die and Seal	75
	Disappearance of Original Function and Emergence of Official Seals	80
Section 3	Regional Seal Styles during the Warring States Period	83
	Seal Families of Various States	84
	Artistic Features of Seals in the Warring States Period	96

Intents

Formation of a Unified Feudal Dynastic Rule and the Establishment of Qin and Han Seal Systems – The Qin and Han Dynasties

Section 1	Centralized Authority and the Political Elements of Qin and Han Official Seal Systems	102
	Conferring Official Positions and Seals, Totalitarian System	103
	Institutionalized Administration of Official Seals	109
	Role of Seals in Ethnic Relations	112
Section 2	Toward Standardized Forms – Official and Private Seals of the Qin Dynasty	117
	Qin Seals Established a New Form Pattern	117
	Conflict between Refinement and Randomness in Seal Text	121
Section 3	Artistic Laws of Han Dynasty Seals	128
	A New Stage in Esthetics	128
	Mainstream Styles and Categories	142
	Artistic Creativity of Han Seal Forms	148
Section 4	Academic Discussions on Seals of the Qin, Han, Wei and Jin Dynasties	153
	New Historical Materials Concerning Qin and Han Official Seal Systems	153
	Fixed Historical Details	158
	Characters on Xi and Yin and Scholarly Puzzles	164

From Following Convention to Abandoning Restraint – The Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties

Section 1	Continuing Han Seal Tradition	168
	Separate Regimes, Converging Seal Standards	168
	Reconstruction of the Seal System	174
	Improvement in Standards	179
Section 2	Evolution of Calligraphy and Changes in Seal Styles	185
	Settling for Partial Control and Holding Ground	185
	Fusion and New Styles	193
	The Fun of Freedom and Boldness	199
Section 3	Division of South and North, Brevity and Boldness	201
	From Stamps on Clay to Red-ink Imprints on Paper	201
	Vigorous Style of the Northern Dynasty	204
	Southern Dynasty: The Dying Glow of the Qin and Han System	214

Reforming the Seal System and Re-establishing Order – The Sui, Tang and Five Dynasties

Section 1	Boom Time Reform – the Sui and Tang Seal System	222
	Cause of Emergence of a New Seal System	222
	Imperial Seals of the Sui and Tang	229
	White Paper and Red Ink – Seal Imprints on Tang Art	233
Section 2	Refinement and Populist Tendency	241
	The New Style of Official Seals of the Sui and Tang Dynasties	241
	<i>Kai</i> Standard Script Seals of the Five Dynasties	244
	Stylistic Differences in Tang Dynasty Private Seals	248
Section 3	The Eastward Spread of Han and Tang Seal Styles	252
	The Sui and Tang Seal System and Official Seal Forms of the Nara Period	252
	China's Ancient Seals and Seal Style of the Silla Era	257
	The Forms and Casting of Nara and Silla Seals	261

Stylistic Diversification – The Liao, Song, Western Xia, Jin and Yuan Dynasties

Section 1	System Awareness and Cultural Personality	264
	The Song Dynasty Role Model	264
	Rationality and Order of Official Seals	269
	Cultural Characteristics of the Intellectual Seal System	274
Section 2	Seal Forms and the Merging of Plural Cultures	282
	The Establishing and Sinicization of the Liao, Western Xia and Jin Seal Systems	282
	Yuan Dynasty Official Seals in Phags-pa Script	289
	Private Seals in Ethnic Languages	297
Section 3	Folk Seal Styles and Individualism of Scholar Seals	303
	Origin and Popularity of Monogram Seals	303
	Song and Yuan Religious Seals	308
	Back to the Past and Change – Esthetic Values in Song and Yuan Private Seals	312

Ancient Seals – the End of an Era – The Ming and Qing Dynasties

Section 1	Towards Complexity – The Hierarchy of Ming and Qing Official Seals	320
	Rigid Hierarchy of Ming Official Seals	320
	Qing Official Seals with Parallel Chinese Characters and Manchu Script	333
	Official Seals of Ming and Qing Insurgent Peasant Regimes	344
Section 2	Retrospective Esthetic – Private Seals at Court and among Commoners	347
	Private Seals in the Ming and Qing Courts	347
	Stylistic Orientation of Private Seals in the Seal Cutting Trade	359
Section 3	The Rise of Epigraphy and the Collection and Study of Seals	367
	The Collection and Cataloging of Seals	367
	Seal Scholarship in the Ming and Qing Dynasties	372
	Creating and Distinguishing Fake Seals	375

The Rise of Scholar Seal Engraving Art – Seal Engraving Schools of the Ming and Qing Dynasties

Section 1	The Age of Stone Seals and the Rise of Seal Engraving Art	386
	Beginning of the Stone Seal Age	386
	The Cultural Connotations and the Theory of Seal Engraving Art	391
	Systems of Seal Engraving Technique	399
Section 2	Styles and Lives of Seal Engravers of the Late Ming and Early Qing	405
	Boom of Scholar Seal Engraving in the Late Ming	405
	The Cultural Activities of Late Ming Seal Engravers	416
	Seal Engraving in the Early Qing – Following the Old Ways and Seeking for Changes	421
Section 3	The Proliferation of Seal Engraving Schools in the Qing Dynasty	427
	Seal Circles in the Mid-Qing Years	427
	The Rise and Remains of the Zhejiang and Deng Shiru Schools	437
	Individuality in the Late Qing	448

Intents

Classics and Apriorism

– Seal Engraving in Recent and Modern Times

Section 1	Historical Background in the Early Modern Age	460
	Preservation of Bronze and Stone Seals, the Development of Sigillography	460
	Association and Dissemination	463
	Responding to the Market – Refined and Popular Tastes	466
Section 2	City Life and Artist Groups	472
	Shift of Seal Engraver Groups to the Cities	472
	The Economic Life of the Seal Engravers	474
	An End to the Golden Years	477
Section 3	Continuation of Classical Style and Emergence of New Schools	481
	Remnants of the Late Qing Schools	481
	New Ideas and New Groupings	488
	The Passing on of Seal Engraving Art and the New Types of Seal Groups	498

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Author's Preface

People usually regard Chinese seals as an artistic phenomenon, but they are primarily, in my opinion, an institutional device deeply involved in the political and economic activities of Chinese society. This dual identity entails a very different research and analytical approach from that used in the study of other art forms such as calligraphy and painting. Compared with the development of seals in other parts of the world, the particularity of Chinese seals is that they gave birth to the art of seal engraving, a form created by men of literature and art that could work in association with calligraphy and painting. Therefore, for a fuller exposition of the development of Chinese seals and interpretation of seal works, we must not only pay attention to the external elements, but also go deep into political, economic and cultural elements as well as provenance. Direct elements include the evolution of characters and changes to seal systems, whilst indirect elements have to do with social stability or disorder, political reforms, economic prosperity or decline, ethnic conflict or integration, and changes in cultural fashion over the course of some 3,000 years. Only by understanding all this information in depth can we touch the special character and soul of Chinese seals, find the internal agent causing artistic styles to change, and illustrate why Chinese seals have continued being used and developed right to the present day, whilst early seal systems in other regions stopped or disappeared.

Based on this thinking, I believe that, in order to explain the general history of Chinese seals, we must change the long-standing situation whereby the study of ancient seals and the study of seal engraving have different research approaches and discourse systems: we must interpret the historical