

Gabriele Fahr-Becker (Ed.)

The Art of East Asia



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Gabriele Fahr-Becker
(Editor)

The Art of East Asia

Contributing authors are
Gabriele Fahr-Becker
Sabine Hesemann
Sri Kuhnt-Saptodewo
Michaela Appel
Michael Dunn

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Endpaper: design based on a traditional Japanese pattern.

Frontispiece: *Ksatriya* figure, *wayang golek*, pre-1925, Staatliches Museum für
Völkerkunde, Munich

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Project coordinator of the German: Birgit Dunker
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Sabine Hesemann

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* Co-author: Detlef Kuhnt

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Foreword

It is undoubtedly an immense undertaking to portray the arts of East and Southeast Asia within the compass of a single publication; yet the task is also rewarding and hugely enjoyable. The result will, we hope, offer the reader an account that is both fascinating and visually stunning. One of the most fascinating aspects of the subject is the fact that the cultures we will look at display an incredible variety, and yet also share important features. Religions – ranging from the most diverse forms of Buddhism to the Confucianism of China and Zen Buddhism of Japan – play a linking role, most notably in the images of the Buddha, the Enlightened One, and the divinities and spirits that accompany him. Other links were established by migrating populations and by political relationships, and also by the shared conditions of flora and agriculture: rice, for example, is grown as the staple foodstuff in all the countries of East and Southeast Asia. Clearly distinct from India – whose influence is nevertheless marked in many ways – East Asia possesses an art and a culture that form a unique, often conflicting, and yet richly interconnected totality.

East Asia (China, Japan, and Korea) and Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Burma, Laos, and Vietnam) are presented, not with the intention of setting down a definitive, comprehensive account, but with the aim of presenting many of their most outstanding and individual masterpieces. China, whose culture begins with works of art dating back to pre-history and is marked by the often dramatic rise and fall of successive dynasties; Japan, whose traditional art inspired the modern art of Europe and still acts as a source of ideas for Western design; Korea, with

its exquisite ceramics; and finally Southeast Asia – Burma and Cambodia, with the most extraordinary religious shrines in the world, at Pagan and Angkor; Thailand and Laos with their elegant, sumptuously decorated and almost fragile temple buildings; Vietnam, with the imperial city of Hué; and the vast island realm of Indonesia, which stretches from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific, and which, as early finds bear out, once asserted cultural sway over many areas of mainland Southeast Asia. To their joint benefit, all the arts of these lands share a common heritage.

Three separate sections are devoted to arts preeminently East Asian: calligraphy, jade work, and the textiles art of Southeast Asia, all of which stamp the aesthetic profile of East Asia in equal measure.

Because of the richness and variety of the material, the volume is organized in a deliberately heterogeneous manner. In this way, both the diversity and the shared features of East Asian art, as so expertly depicted by the contributors, will become more readily apparent. Adapting individual styles and approaches, the authors provide a range of scholarly yet highly readable texts, supported by hundreds of superb pictures, that will open the door to these supposedly so distant and yet so accessible cultures... cultures that are, in the words of the United Nations, an integral part of the “cultural heritage of mankind.”

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CHINA

“One only admires what one has first learnt to see.”¹

For centuries Chinese works of art have captivated the West; their first appearances in commerce were rare, though in time they were to become ever more sought after and traded. But though the cabinets of curiosities and porcelain collections of European courts housed practical items from Imperial China and much that was thought exotic, collectors seldom took any interest in the art that was most revered in China: painting. Even at the end of the 19th century, the collectors responsible for establishing the largest collections of Chinese art were still more interested in arts and crafts; in 1873 the celebrated French collector Henri Cernuschi brought back “des potiches de bois sculpté, des laques, des céramiques, des bronzes, des ivoires”² (carved wooden vases, lacquer work, ceramics, bronzes, and ivories).

Chinese painting, by contrast, constantly encountered prejudice in the West, beginning with the missionaries of the 16th century who, from a Eurocentric perspective, frequently elevated themselves to the status of arbiters of Chinese art and culture. Chinese painting was poorly regarded because of its “lack of perspective” and was usually completely misunderstood.

It is quite remarkable that the high arts of calligraphy and painting were generally practiced by artists who had been groomed for a career at court or had been educated as officials, and who were therefore members of the elite. From the point of view of European art history, this gives rise to a curious state of affairs: for in China both the producers and consumers of art (the collectors) belonged to one and the same social class, and so they could fulfill both roles at the same time; moreover, they were amateurs, not professionals. Their pictures were not for sale; instead, they formed part of an elaborate social ritual of giving and receiving. Often, painters like Xie He (6th century A.D.) were art critics as well as leading artists, something not

confined to this era alone. There were also, however, painters whose relationship to their clients was no different from that between European artists of the Baroque and the princes, clerics, or merchants who commissioned works from them. The names of these individuals, however, are rather better known than their works.

Quite apart from the “strangeness” of Chinese art, the Western viewer also has to come to terms with a completely different concept of tradition. Forms which had proved their usefulness, or which were thought by the art community to have attained a state of perfection, were copied over the centuries and passed on to successive generations – as can be clearly seen in ceramics, furniture, and painting. For the Westerner, this seems like plagiarism or even forgery. The Chinese painter would counter by saying that he had named his source and perhaps slightly modified it; or that he was in effect expressing his respect for an artistic predecessor; or that his work, which imitated the composition and brushwork of another, was but a study. Trained painters were attentive pupils of past works. They either quoted their forerunners in full (as if quoting a poem), or in part, whether in the depiction of individual objects or the use of a single technical nuance (as if quoting just a few lines of the poem).

Nevertheless, a loyalty to tradition did not prevent new paths from being opened up in art; moreover, it is extremely important when considering Chinese painting to remember that the practice of copying helped to preserve works and styles from the distant past.

There were, however, also “genuine” forgeries: paintings, calligraphy, and art objects intended to fool the collector and so enrich the forger. Forgers found a ready market in art collecting, which in China dates back to the Tang dynasty.

In China calligraphy is at least as highly regarded as painting, if not more so. It is difficult, if not impossible, to convey the art of

中國

writing and its aesthetic, where no previous knowledge of Chinese characters exists, and this explains why, with the exception of specialist literature, Chinese calligraphy has been almost totally ignored by the West. It will scarcely be possible to provide a survey of all the facets of this art form, though we will look at several examples.

By contrast, the applied arts were, and indeed still are, the focus of keen Western interest. Until Friedrich Böttger reinvented the process in the first years of the 18th century, porcelain was a real treasure that European technology was not able to reproduce, and so was sought avidly.

In spite of all the admiration shown for these art objects, much remained hidden from the Western view: the cultural and historical background of motifs and decorative devices; their frequent literary origins; their ritual, religious, and philosophical context; and the way in which they enriched the lives of the Chinese themselves.

Chinese architecture was known from travel accounts which appeared in Europe from the 16th century, although their illustrations appear somewhat absurd compared with the originals. Its striking difference from European architecture led to its appearance as “whimsies” in English-style landscaped gardens. These copies clearly delighted in taking artistic license and therefore varied in their faithfulness to the Chinese original. But one of the most important characteristics of Chinese architecture could not so easily be transplanted: the techniques of constructing in wood. In terms of research into Chinese architecture, this fact creates what might seem a virtually insuperable obstacle: that wooden architecture decays and the oldest preserved structure dates from the 9th century A.D. But this problem is in great measure solved because of the Chinese habit of adhering to tradition: even architectural forms have been preserved for thousands of years through repetition, and some forms can now be reconstructed

using archaeological finds (including small clay models of buildings).

But Chinese artistic traditions do not begin with painting or porcelain; they begin 5,000–6,000 years ago with elaborate pottery, small sculptures, and ritual bronzes. As is the case with other cultures, new material is regularly being unearthed so that our ideas about early Chinese art forms are constantly changing.

Apart from neolithic artifacts (which speak for themselves), the treasures and tomb furnishings of the second and first millennia B.C., and art preserved from later eras, Chinese literature makes some of the most important contributions to our understanding of Chinese art. Chinese manuscripts either fill gaps in our present knowledge or provide clues as to the state of art during a particular epoch. And in order that we learn to see art in the way the Chinese themselves saw it (and still see it) writers who have expressed their opinions on art should also have their say. In addition to the inventories of collections and evaluations of antiquities, written documents are literary texts which convey a keen engagement with painting and calligraphy. It was writers who first made a clear distinction between “high art” on one hand, and “the rest” on the other.

The following chapter is intended as an overview of the art of China, the country with the longest uninterrupted cultural history in the world and should serve as a key to an understanding of Chinese art. The extent of the material may mean that one or other aspect can only be touched upon; the predominant art forms of each epoch, however, will be discussed.

Clearly defined, chronological notions of style as they are used in Western art are alien to China. For this reason, the ordering and development of Chinese art are closely linked to dynastic history. Therefore, Chinese art history begins with the neolithic era, with the art of stone and ceramics.



Watched Over by Gods and Ancestors

The art of early societies developed mainly through the shaping and embellishing of objects that had an important place in the life of the community. In China, early art traditions flourished as part of the cults of gods and ancestors, with exquisite works in jade, ceramic, and metal being produced. The high point of Chinese culture became the ritual bronzes, decorated in relief, which dominated art for more than 1,000 years.

Bronze *fanglei* vessel

*(Detail), Staatliches Museum für
Völkerkunde, Munich*

People of the 2nd and 1st millennium B.C.
made offerings of food and drink to their
gods and ancestors in elaborately
ornamented bronze vessels.



The Neolithic Era: Art in Stone and Ceramics

Two masks
Rock carvings in the Yin Mountains

Within the space of four decades, the image we have formed of Stone Age man has changed dramatically; and many recent finds, like those of the cave paintings in southwestern Europe, are modifying it still further. In modern China, too, archaeological finds are giving rise to a more

coherent picture of neolithic cultures and their chronological and geographical connections.

Until a few years ago it was thought that there were only two great cultural groups in early China: the earlier Yangshao culture (about 4000–2500 B.C.), whose range was from Gansu, through Shaanxi and Henan to Hubei; and the Longshan culture (about 2500–1800 B.C.), from what is today Shandong and northern Jiangsu. This simple scheme, however, has since had to be abandoned.

Complex and very different cultures have been discovered. They were not only distributed throughout the areas traditionally described as being the cradle of Chinese culture, but also beyond them on all sides. The finds have also necessitated a revision of the dates ascribed to other, previously known periods.

The cultures are today named after the locations of their most important finds. To simplify matters, we can speak of two areas into which the majority of these local cultures can be divided: the inland cultures, and the cultures of the east coast. The table on the left shows an overview of our present state of knowledge on the dates and places of the individual cultures and their various subgroups. These subgroupings are often called types. The table could be expanded to include finds from the east of the present Autonomous Region of Inner Mongolia and the Liaoning

Chronology of Neolithic China (ordered by provinces)								
B.C.	Gansu	Shaanxi	Henan	Hubei Shandong	N. Jiangsu/ Zhejiang	S. Jiangsu/ Taiwan	Fujian	
5500	Yangshao	Shianmiaogu Peiligang Proto-Yangshao (6500–5500)			Qinglian'gang	Hemudu 4	Quemöy (ca. 5300–4200)	
5000		Banpo (4865–4290)	Houkang (4135)					
4500								
4000		Miaodigou I (3900)			Yangshao	(North) Huating	(South) Songze (4000–3000)	Dapenkeng (ca. 4300)
3500		Dahecun (3800–3070) Yangshao-Longshan- Transitional phase						
3000		Majiayao (3100–2600)	Miaodigou II (2780)					
2500		Banshan (2400)	Longshan		Qujialing	Liangzhu (3300–2300)	Fengbitou	
			“Shaanxi- Longshan”					“Henan- Longshan”
2000		Machang (2300–2100) Qijia (2150–1780)	Erlitou (2035) Xia? Bronze age					“Henan- Longshan”
1750					Shang	Shang	Hushu Late geometric culture of the East Coast	