
In presenting a history of Chinese art from its Neolithic roots until the end of the Imperial régime in 1911, these two magnificently-illustrated volumes fulfill an urgent need; for hitherto-available works of similar scope, dating mostly from the Fifties and Sixties (though in some cases cosmetically updated since), all suffer from tremendous methodological inadequacies, and their authors have paid, at best, token attention to the enormous quantities of new material uncovered by archaeological excavations in China since the middle of the century. To have competently integrated this new evidence and to have accordingly redefined the scope of art historical inquiry, especially with regard to the early periods of Chinese cultural history, is the principal merit of the book under review.

Convinced that the task of writing a full synthesis of Chinese art history lies at present beyond the capability of any individual, the editor assembled a team of seven scholars. Though providing a splendid model with her own pivotal chapter on the Qin and Han dynasties, Pirazzoli-t’Serstevens refrained from streamlining those of her collaborators, merely adding the briefest of introductions. Inevitably, thus, the book’s nine chapters are somewhat uneven in both focus and quality, but they are generally successful in documenting the artistic production of their respective periods, and, for the most part, they also manage to convey a sense of the esthetic and intellectual excitement of studying Chinese art. As reflected by the absence of footnotes and of Chinese characters, the two volumes (continuously paginated, with a table of contents only in vol. 1, and the bibliography and appendixes for the entire book in vol. 2) are ostensibly directed at the general reader; even so, the level of presentation in most chapters is quite sophisticated, and the text, though clearly-written, can be fairly challenging.

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Mid-twentieth century treatments of Chinese art history, drawing their material mostly from Western museum collections, have been following the engrained habits of the discipline and subdivided their universe into painting, sculpture, and architecture, relegating everything else to the so-called “minor arts.” This mode of classification, of dubious usefulness even in its original Western contexts, has been shown sorely inadequate, in the Chinese case, by the archaeological finds, which provide invaluable new opportunities for understanding artistic activity in its wider spatial, social, ideological, and religious environments. It has become imperative, therefore, to treat objects in all media on an equal footing as manifestations of a contiguous “visual culture,” a procedure that is bound to bring to light all manner of connections and crosscurrents, as shown many times in the book under review. The reader will come to realize, minimally, that jade, metal, ceramic, lacquer, and textile production were, in China, anything but “minor arts,” but that, quite on the contrary, the respective workshops (and workshop traditions) constituted the principal dynamo in the creation and maintenance of a distinctively Chinese visual language, iteratively generating fundamental esthetic values as well as the techniques through which these values found their most immediate and consistent expression.

Aside from forcing a reconsideration of the “canon” of works selected for presentation and of the hierarchical relationships among them, the archaeological discoveries pose anew some contentious questions that have permeated all branches of art history for decades. Since the idealistic notion that works of art “speak for themselves” has fallen by the wayside, how much context must a responsible art historian provide so that an innocent reader can place and appreciate specific objects? How is one to do justice to the fact that artworks were generated by, as well as for, individuals belonging to vastly different parts of society? And to what degree, and with what caveats, is it legitimate to use visual objects in themselves as historical evidence when textual documentation is lacking or insufficient? These and other questions are especially urgent in a book directed at an audience that must be assumed to be ignorant even of the basic facts of Chinese history. They do not have clearcut solutions, however, and the chapters of the work under review exemplify a variety of compromises conditioned by the peculiarities of the subject matter as much as by authorial disposition.