

## **Art of China 1700 B.C.E. – 220 C.E.**

For the Chinese, man is not dominant in nature, but a part of it, living in balance and harmony with all things natural. The basic principle that underlies all aspects of Chinese culture that of harmonious balance (yin-yang), is exemplified in its art. What the Chinese artist records is not a single visual event, but an accumulation of his experience with the beauty of nature. Even in times of conflict, art represented the peaceful balance that the Chinese people strived to achieve. We will see how Chinese philosophies manifested themselves in the artistic fields of sculpture, metalwork, pottery, painting and calligraphy.

### ***Sculpture***

The Chinese sculpted jade as early as the Neolithic times, around 5000 BCE. At this time, before the invention of metal tools, sculptures were created by rubbing abrasive minerals against the stone. As technological advances resulted in the efficient use of tools, jade sculpture became more intricate. Jade was, and still is, thought to have a spiritual quality.

Many stone figures have been found in tombs, from small figurines to the life-size terra cotta army entombed with the first Qin emperor. These large sculptures are typical of early Chinese sculptural style--rough and sturdy. Later pieces exhibit a more refined, graceful style

### ***Metalwork***

The era of the Shang and the Zhou dynasties, from 1700-256 BCE, is generally known as the Bronze Age of China. Bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, was used to fashion weapons, parts of chariots, and ritual vessels. Iron appeared in China toward the end of the period, during the later Zhou dynasty.

The earliest Chinese bronzes were made by the method known as piece-mold casting—as opposed to the lost-wax method, which was used in all other Bronze Age cultures. In piece-mold casting, a clay model is made of the object to be cast, after it dries, more clay is applied around the model to create the mold. The mold is then cut in sections to release the model, and the sections are reassembled after firing

to form the mold for casting--pouring in molten bronze. If the object to be cast is a vessel, a core has to be placed inside the mold to provide the vessel's cavity. The piece-mold method was most likely the only one used in China until at least the end of the Shang dynasty. An advantage of this rather cumbersome way of casting bronze was that the decorative patterns could be carved or stamped directly on the inner surface of the mold before it was fired. This technique enabled the bronze worker to achieve a high degree of sharpness and definition in even the most intricate designs.

### ***Pottery***

The earliest known ceramic art produced in China dates from Mesolithic times (c.10,000-5,500 BCE) and consisted of utilitarian earthenware, hand-made (by coiling) and fired in bonfires. Decoration was achieved by stamping, impressing and other simple methods. However, based on archeological excavations at Xianrendong, in Jiangxi province, it seems that early Chinese potters soon began to produce a range of delicate, polished and colored vessels for more ceremonial purposes. By 3000 BCE, these Stone Age ceramics exemplified a craftsmanship and elegance which was quite exceptional for the time.

Scientific, political and social developments in the Bronze Age during the Shang and the Zhou dynasties, from 1700-256 BCE, led to a number of changes in pottery production. Ceramicists experimented with techniques of high-fired glazing. As prosperity increased and new cities arose, a new market emerged for the replacement of vessels and other objects cast in bronze to be made instead from cheaper clay, especially for home or funerary use. This expansion of the ceramics industry led to the development of a mass-production process involving a clearer division of labor and facilitating greater use of lacquer ware, molds, stamps and more elaborate methods of decoration.

### ***Calligraphy***

Calligraphy is considered the highest or purest form of artistic expression. Both verbal and visual communication can be achieved with a single Chinese character. By looking at the character for mountain, which resembles one central peak surrounded by two smaller peaks, one can see the visual relationship of the characters to their meaning. Beautiful calligraphy is often incorporated into a painting. The artist may include a poem or story that harmonizes with the style of the brushstroke, an explanation of the inspiration behind the painting, or a dedication to the patron. Calligraphy can also be added to a painting by someone other than the artist--a friend, a connoisseur, or a collector. Criticism or approval from other painters, or an emperor, may be added over the years, providing a source of historical and social information for later art historians.

The artist seals the work with his signature in the form of a **chop**. The seals were originally sculpted out of clay (5th century BCE) and were used as a measure to guard important documents. Eventually, seals were used to denote power and authority in the provinces of China. When individuals began personalizing their seals, artists realized the impact of their decorative aspect and began to incorporate them into their compositions. From the 16th century onwards, collectors and inscription writers added their seals to those of the painter himself. These additional seals show appreciation and ownership. Seals have helped to authenticate paintings and chart the history of those who owned the work, telling when and where it was exhibited, as well as who had admired it during these periods. Although the main purpose of the seal is to identify the work, it also adds interest by virtue of its own intrinsic merit. It plays an important part in the composition and is an integral part of the work of art.

The influence of Chinese art upon other cultures has been profound. It has extended to the Muslim countries and, since the 14th century, has affected the art of Western Europe as well.

### ***Chinese Brush Painting***

The style of Chinese ink painting developed slowly from early dynasties (especially after the invention of paper during the Han dynasty), reaching its first zenith during the Song Dynasty (960-1279 CE). The tools, the same today as in ancient times, are neither numerous or complicated and are called the "four gems of the study"; brush, ink, paper and inkstone. The execution is the complicated part. An artist trains both mind and body, perfecting his technique and attitude to allow himself to paint freely. Using simple, yet elegant linear brushstrokes, the painter simplifies his experience of nature into a calm understated work.

While Western paintings are usually prepared on canvas or wood and intended for framing and placement on a permanent place on a wall, Chinese paintings are commonly made on a scroll of silk paper that is easily rolled up and stored and carried. They may then be viewed for as long or short a time as one desires. Another interesting difference between Western and Far Eastern art is the appearance of calligraphy and chops as part of the picture. The calligraphy and chops may appear as part of the original work by the artist, or as commentary and history of ownership placed there later by an admirer or owner. Not only is the poetry and type of signature different in western art, but the concept of "adding" notes and ownership seals to a valuable piece of art is difficult for a Western art collector to understand.

Subject matter is usually limited to landscape, birds and flowers and portrait painting. The composition centers on the concept of balancing the opposing forces of **yin** and **yang**, thus creating harmony and insight into nature. The teachings of Lao tse (father of Daoism or The Way) teach that life, nature the known and unknown were dominated by strong, opposing, yet related forces. When balanced with each other, harmony resulted. Night and day, cold and hot, young and old, birth and death are all examples of the balancing of the yin (feminine, negative, water, emptiness) and yang (masculine,

positive, mountains). The Chinese word for landscape literally translates to “mountains and water,” a strongly opposed but complementary pair of yin and yang. The balancing of the yin and yang within each composition meant that most Chinese paintings appear calm and stable, even when asymmetrical.

Western paintings, like photographs, tend to present images of landscapes from a fixed point of view with a mathematically constructed illusion of recession of recession, or perspective, which makes space appear to recede toward a single “vanishing point.” Chinese landscape paintings use a moving perspective based on the notion of three distances (near, middle, and far) which allows the eye to move between various pictorial elements without being limited to one fixed or static point of view. The viewer is encouraged to ramble through the landscape image. Another difference between Western and Chinese painting is that the Chinese culture sees man as part of nature, not dominant in nature. The artist depicts man in harmony with all things natural.

## ***Vocabulary***

**Calligraphy**—The art of writing letters and words in ornamental style. The Chinese refer to it as the most precious possession and greatest gift.

**Chop**—A carved seal used with red ink to stamp the artist’s signature. Later admirers and owners may also stamp a painting with their own chop.

**Dynasty**—A form of continuous leadership or rule under one family. China was ruled by dynasties from 2200 BCE until 1911 C.E.

**Oracle**—A source of wisdom or message believed to be from a god.

**Symbol**—Something that stands for or represents something else.

**Stylized**—A simplified or symbolic representation of a form; not realistic.

**Yin-Yang**—The principle from Daoism which states that nature is full of opposing forces which are necessary to each other in order to achieve balance and harmony. Essentially they are opposites, or contrasting features occurring in nature and life, such as sun and moon, light and dark, rough and smooth.