

Foreword

Emerging from one of the oldest civilizations, Chinese sculpture has thrived for thousand of years. Through time and cultural developments, Chinese sculpture has taken different paths in different regions and cannot be easily categorized. It develops as times change and culture evolves.

The development of sculpture is often closely allied to historical context. The life of sculptural arts is typically bound with the prosperity of a country.

Take Chinese sculpture as an example. Sculptures characterized by stateliness and ritualism emerged during the Shang and Zhou dynasties (1600–221 BC); pieces full of majesty and cohesion surfaced during the Han (206 BC–AD 220) and Tang (618–907) dynasties; the Wei, Jin and Northern and Southern dynasties (265–589) produced Buddhist images full of religious influence and spirituality; pieces from the Song Dynasty (960–1279) are exquisite and moderate; while the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1911) produced colorful, secular sculptures.

Chinese sculptural art first emerged in the Neolithic Age (10,000–4000 BC). The simplest sculptures correlate closely with early witchcraft, such as stone arrangements and clay and pottery sculptures representing women found in the graves of primitive man. They suggest a relationship between sculpture and the beliefs of primitive man. They were generally made of clay, jade or stone and their form combines human-shaped figures and practical wares. These sculptures displayed the primary nonrepresentational characteristics of Chinese sculpture.

Bronze casting techniques gradually replaced pottery techniques. Similar to primitive society, the sculptural arts of



CHINESE SCULPTURE

the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BC) began to take shape. Works from this era are rare. Bronze sculptures were mainly used to strengthen spiritual beliefs during the Shang and Zhou dynasties, when belief in spirits and deities and compliance with a ritualistic system were popular. Ferocious and formidable bronze sculptures from the Shang and Zhou dynasties generate a sense of intimidation. Artistically, the most important achievement was the highly ornamental patterns on such sculptures, reflecting exquisite bronze casting and their unique expression of Chinese characters.

The idea of China as a universal underlying imperial concept began during the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC), which produced breathtakingly brilliant sculpture. The most significant achievement is the Terracotta Warriors and Horses in the Mausoleum of Emperor Shihuang. The magnificent sculptures have a lot of character, fully displaying unique Chinese techniques and the ambition of the Qin Dynasty.

Following the development of excellent techniques during the Qin Dynasty, sculptural arts of the Han Dynasty show new styles and themes—the romance and humanity of the culture of the Chu Kingdom and the grand features of the culture of the ancient northern people. The former style is mainly demonstrated by pottery sculptures such as the “Woman Dancer” and the “Story Teller.” The latter is shown on large stone sculptures including the stone carvings in front of the Tomb of Huo Qubing.

Buddhism was introduced to China from India during the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220) and became popular among both emperors and common people during the Wei and Jin dynasties (265–420) due to the prosperity of metaphysics and the loss of influence of Confucianism and Taoism. The development of the religion led to an increasing number of Buddhist images, a factor that was also influenced by social unrest, regime change



FOREWORD

and poor standards of living during the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420–589). Large works in grottoes and the construction of Buddhist temples took Chinese sculpture into a new and important stage. The Buddhist statues in the Gandhāra style were prevalent in the early stage of Chinese sculpture, which was influenced directly by Buddhist statues in India. Before long, local Chinese culture adopted similar styles and Buddhist statues with Chinese characteristics emerged gradually.

Grotto construction started during the fourth century and thrived between the fifth and the eighth centuries (between the Wei and Jin dynasties and the Tang Dynasty). The quantity and scale of the Buddhist statues grew despite a movement to exterminate Buddhism during that period. After the eighth century, enthusiasm for grottoes started ebbing away as culture evolved, regimes changed and temple construction thrived. Many of the grottoes and Buddhist statues still in evidence today were made between the fourth and eighth centuries. The Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang (Gansu), Maijishan Grottoes in Gansu, Yungang Grottoes in Datong (Shanxi) and Longman Grottoes in Luoyang represent the key sculptural styles of the time. Such grottoes preserve the evolving styles and characteristics of Chinese sculpture between the Wei and Jin dynasties and the Tang Dynasty.

As time progressed, Buddhism became more integrated with Chinese culture and beliefs. There has been reciprocal influence between Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. The colored sculptures in the Jin Temple (Shanxi) and Dazu Stone Carving in Sichuan fully embody the combination of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. It was from this time that Buddhist statues displayed a calmness and maturity, reflecting a combination of various kinds of culture.

Besides a belief in Buddhism, emperors of various dynasties also attached great importance to the construction of their tombs.



CHINESE SCULPTURE

Many important sculptures outside tombs have been found since the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 25). The basic forms of tombs were well established by the Wei and Jin dynasties. The scale of tombs reached a peak during the Sui and Tang dynasties (581–907). Some sculptures evoked auspicious animals that could protect people against evil spirits, such as stone beasts, *tianlu* (an animal with a single horn) and *bixie* (which has two horns). These became symbols of dynamic spirits and were placed in imperial tombs after the Wei and Jin dynasties.

The pottery tomb figurine is also a profound part of Chinese sculpture. Various pottery tomb sculptures and sculptural beasts—from the terracotta warriors and houses of the Qin and Han dynasties to the tri-color glazed pottery of the Tang Dynasty—embody the characteristics of their times, such as the elegant and clear appearance of Wei and Jin Period pieces and the plump beauty of pieces from the Tang Dynasty.

Chinese sculpture began to decline during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Generally speaking, even religious sculptures became mediocre. In spite of this, some great masterpieces appeared, especially painted clay sculptures. The Shuanglin Temple in Pingyao and the Qiongzhu Temple in Kunming have in their collections some of the most brilliant clay sculptures from the Ming and Qing dynasties. The Shuanglin Temple is famous for the Guanyin and Weituo statues and more than 2,000 vivid figures. The Qiongzhu Temple is known for the 500 Arhat statues, a perfect combination of religious and secular art. The development of painted clay sculptures was connected to prosperity in arts and crafts during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

As one of the key art categories, classical architecture is closely related to the sculptural arts. Architectural styles and art forms changed a lot from the Qin and Han dynasties to the Ming and Qing dynasties. Although the splendid palaces of the Qin and



FOREWORD

Han dynasties have turned to ashes, surviving eaves tiles and large hollow bricks still display the power of the mighty Qin. Eaves tiles decorated with four patterns associated with four deities and Chinese characters, along with stone sculptures are representative sculptural achievements of the Han Dynasty and define the stylistic progress of Chinese sculpture.

The architectural sculpture on palaces from the Sui and Tang dynasties show the cultural inclusion and confidence of the times. The Great Wild Goose Pagoda in Xi'an, a well-preserved Buddhist pagoda, is truly the best of the line-carving works from the Tang Dynasty. Architectural sculpture during the Yuan Dynasty (1206–1368) is a mirror of culture and the national strength of the times. Sculptures often have strong outlines but lack spirit and cohesion. Architectural relics from the Ming and Qing are profound. The Imperial Palace in Beijing represents the level of achievement of architectural sculpture. It pays equal attention to ornamental and practical functions and is even more exquisite than examples from previous dynasties.

Sculptural examples from folk architecture are also very important and mainly include brick sculptures and woodcarvings, which are close to folk culture. The smart *Muhura* and simple “Big Afu” are full of the vitality of folk life.

Entering the twentieth century, traditional religious sculpture was in a stage of decline in China. Although small-sized folk sculpture was still flourishing, it failed to become mainstream. Since the Xinhai Revolution (1911), the art of Chinese sculpture has experienced distinctive changes and development. The introduction of the Western style of sculpture was accepted by some fine arts schools. The European classic and academic idea of sculpture gradually grew in China. From around the May 4th Movement in 1919 to the 1930s, more young people went to learn sculpture in the West. After these people returned home,



CHINESE SCULPTURE

most were engaged in arts education. Their efforts promoted the development of modern sculpture in China.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, great changes have taken place in sculptural art. Different fine arts colleges and universities set up sculpture departments and sent students to study in the Soviet Union. Between the 1940s and 1970s, there appeared serial sculptural works that were full of revolutionary passion and Soviet influence. These works not only represented great changes in the way of sculpting, but, more importantly, their changes in form reflected the formation of new political values. To date, China's modern sculpture demonstrates a variety of schools and concepts, reflecting a pluralistic society and culture.

Chinese sculptural arts have developed their own style over time and have managed to display aesthetic features and cultural concepts unique to ancient China. The development of Chinese sculpture parallels the history of ancient Chinese culture and aesthetics. It is a visible witness to cultural fusion and exchanges between Han Chinese and other Chinese peoples as well as between China and foreign cultures.



Beginnings of Chinese Sculpture

Pottery and Jade Sculptures in Primitive Times



CHINESE SCULPTURE

Chinese sculpture is one of the oldest art forms in the world. The oldest examples date back to the Neolithic Age. During the 1990s, an 8,000-year-old stone sculpture of a dragon, which is around 20m in length, was unearthed. It is believed to be the earliest large stone sculpture ever discovered in China.

Chinese pottery sculptures first peaked during the Neolithic Age. By this time, people had mastered potting techniques. Most sculptures from that time are made from pottery, wood, stone or bone and represent human and animal forms. Surviving sculptures are mostly made from pottery or jade. As with those of other early civilizations, these vivid sculptures were made mainly to meet the needs of primitive religion and hunting, but they clearly display the early abstract characteristics of China's formative arts. Our knowledge of this period is based largely on archaeological finds. Each discovery helps us to understand ancient civilization and sculpture better.

Pottery sculptures in primitive times

Primitive pottery sculptures were made soon after the emergence of potting techniques. They had mostly practical functions. The “pottery pot” is most common. It is often designed with a human face or human head at the top, or shaped like an animal. In fact, such designs are also very common in other early cultures, such as ancient Persia and India. In ancient China, pottery sculptures fell into one of three types: animal shapes; circular or relief sculptural ornaments with animal or human form as part of an article (such



Pottery boar-shaped cooker, the Neolithic Age.



BEGINNINGS OF CHINESE SCULPTURE

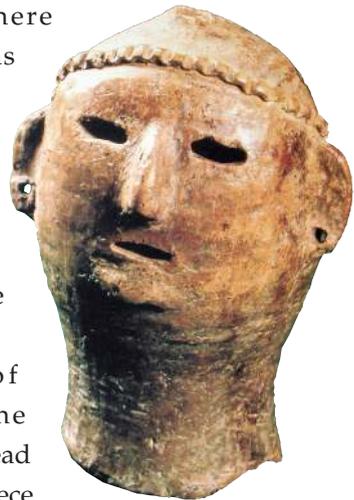
as a cover, knob or surface); and single animal or portrait sculptures such as nude female sculptures or hand-shaped sculptures. The last usually had obvious primitive religious features.

Pottery figure sculptures

Famous Neolithic Chinese pottery includes pieces from the Yangshao, Majiayao and Dawenkou cultures. Many excellent ornamental sculptures have been well preserved, including a lively 12.5cm pottery piece of a maiden's head unearthed in Gaositou, Lixian County, Gansu Province. It is made of orange yellow clay by means of simple techniques. It belongs to the Banshan branch of the *Yangshao* culture and it is often mentioned in university courses on the history of Chinese arts. The features of the face are simple, with three hollow ovals representing the eyes and mouth. Her ears and nose are also simple. Her face is relaxed and full of pleasure. The sculpture gives the impression of sincerity and simplicity.

At the top of her head there are thin ornamental ribbons similar to plaits, which reflect the habits of early people. The head is not an independent sculpture work. It is cleverly done, with circular carving as part of the mouth.

The unique quality of pottery designed with the sculpted figure of a human head is visible on another masterpiece of Banshan type in *Yangshao*



Pottery maiden's head, the Neolithic Age.



CHINESE SCULPTURE

culture, which is a pot with a mouth in the form of a head. The pot was unearthed in Luonan, Shaanxi. It is a well-preserved 23cm pot of red clay with a sculpture of a human head. The eyes and mouth are also hollow holes. The hollows leave behind some shadows that enhance the expressive forces of the sculpture and produce an open feeling of “enlightenment” and “ventilation” bringing the sculpture to life.

The *Yangshao* culture left behind many similar works. The sculpture of a human face unearthed in Chajiaping, Tianshui City, Gansu, was also originally the top of a mutilated piece of pottery. The life-size female face is part of a large 25.5cm high and 16cm wide article. She has a narrow and flat forehead, beautifully thin, long eyebrows and eyes, reflecting oriental beauty. Her eyes are small and her nose is straight. Her cheekbones are prominent and her face wide. She is smiling, with her lips slightly parted. She is a typical feminine Asian image. This type of sculpture, with apparent sexual features, was probably linked to popular goddess worship. Such worship was full of the warmth of living and the pleasures of life. The sculpture is very different from the religious images that surfaced during later society. These ferocious and intimidating images are discussed in the following chapter.



Pottery human face, the Neolithic Age.

Some primitive pottery has colorful paint. Typical examples are pieces combining portraits and sculpture with beautiful patterns. The black patterns on the cover of a piece of Banshan-type

