

General Features of Chinese Art

Primary aim: **vitality** rather than verisimilitude (appearance of truth) or illusionism. "A myth records that a great Chinese painter drew a horse with such vigour that his drawing jumped off the paper. The story of the ancient Greek painter who depicted cherries so illusionistically that even the birds were deceived and came to peck at them neatly expresses an essential difference between attitudes to the arts in the East and West." (H & F 58)

When people are depicted, the emphasis is on "human **personality** rather than on human form." (H&F 233)

Three main kinds of **sculpture** in Chinese history:

- pre-dating Confucianism and Taoism: clay and later, bronze **vessels for offering food and wine** in the rituals of ancestor worship, often either in the shape of amazing combinations of animals or decorated with zoomorphic forms. These sculptural forms and their decorations tend to be **energetic, rhythmic linear patterns** which are "**expressive rather than descriptive, an embodiment of energy rather than thought.**" (H&F 88)
- **Buddhist sculpture** derived from Indian Buddhist forms. Smile sometimes on face, not seen on Indian sources. Facial type looks more east Asian. 'Traditional' Buddhist imagery almost completely disappears after about the 13th century, when the dominant form of Buddhism becomes Chan (Zen) Buddhism, which says there is no Buddha except the Buddha within, and that introspection is the path to enlightenment. At this point, landscape painting becomes exceptionally important.
- **Tomb sculptures** placed in tombs to honor the dead. Many were animals, especially horses. Usually made from clay with bright polychrome glazes.

Pottery: "The pure forms and smooth cool jade-like textures of bowls, vases, and other vessels in porcelain...were preferred" to statuettes. (H&F 246) **Porcelain**: a high quality, fine-grained form of China made from kaolin, a rare white clay. Reaches its high-point during the **Ming Dynasty**, when white porcelain was decorated with a brilliant **cobalt blue** glaze. Figures on the vases, etc. retain the traditional vitality, energy, linearity, and expressiveness, and the complex designs complement the forms on which they are painted. The exceptional quality of this porcelain explains why beautiful dinnerware is today referred to as 'China.'

Architecture: "The **pagoda** is the only exclusively religious building type evolved by the Chinese." (H&F 251) Evolved from India's Buddhist stupas. Whereas Western architects place most emphasis on the wall, Chinese architects have focused on the superstructure--the roof.

Use of **line** in paintings is **elastic** and **expressive**, capable of communicating 3-dimensional form (depicting volume without need of shading) as well as character and personality. Brush-strokes respond to the weight and movement of the things they

portray, "now thick and fat, now sharp and tight, now trembling with the lightest possible flick of the brush." (H&F 233)

Admiration for **calligraphy** (considered in China the highest form of art): probably derives from earliest use of writing on oracle bones in rituals **worshipping ancestors**. Again, use of line in calligraphy is **expressive**.

Admiration for **jade**: a) precious material which had to be imported and b) so hard that it could not be carved. Could only be shaped/decorated by being rubbed with abrasives. Comes to represent the opposite of the bamboo in Taoist thought: bamboo bends without breaking, and jade breaks without bending.

Nature paintings: "[T]he art of landscape painting acquired in China an importance it has been given in no other civilization." (H&F 248)

- on silk, either in the form of hangings or in long scrolls which are intended to be unrolled (from right to left) and viewed about a foot at a time. The latter simulates the experience of wandering through nature, central to Taoism and Zen
- most are **imaginary landscapes**, "but rendered with an intimate understanding of nature such as comes only from observation as sharp-eyed as it is loving....[They are] intended to represent the **essence of nature** and not simply views of natural beauty." (H&F 248)
- called in Chinese *shanshui*, 'mountain-water' pictures, depicting water--symbol of the *Dao*--and mountains, from which water flows.
- landscape forms are created almost exclusively with brush-strokes of ink (reflecting importance of calligraphy), with only small amounts of color added as accents. BUT not strictly linear in the Western sense: "washes and dabs of ink are freely used and long brush-strokes have no hard confining uniformity." (H&F 249)
- no one single vanishing point, but multiple vanishing points, as if to suggest wandering through the landscape and seeing it from a variety of angles
- little use of linear perspective, which might lead the eye into the distance too rapidly, preventing meditative/contemplative viewing
- no organizing 'frames' or 'perspective boxes': "[N]ature is not measured and classified....The asymmetry of growing things, the ceaseless and random movements of nature...--these forbid all enframements, rigid regularities, beginnings and ends." (Gardner 450)
- little use of atmospheric perspective: "Distance is indicated by clearly defined planes separated by banks of mist, against which the nearer objects are silhouetted." (H&F 249)
- no shadows, no strong sense of a unified light source. Effect is more contemplative, focusing on nature's essence, rather than on a specific time and place.
- intended to be pored over in minute detail (reflecting importance of meditation and contemplation of nature in both Taoism and Chan [Zen] Buddhism)