

Chinese Arts – Ancient Period

Introduction China's geographic position far from ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and the Indus River civilizations allowed for its culture to evolve largely independent of most others in the ancient world. Many of its earliest art forms, religions, language(s) and other cultural markers were not found elsewhere. In later periods (the classical and post-classical epochs), the cross-pollination of culture and knowledge occurred with some regularity as China discovered other peoples and Chinese culture was, in turn, discovered by others. Buddhism, gunpowder, Chinese characters, and the magnetic compass are all examples of the free flow of ideas into and out of China. Still, Chinese culture is unique for its continuity and the scope of its influence. In particular, Confucianism was and remains a powerful religious and philosophical force in East Asia and beyond. Chinese characters spread to Japan, Korea, and Vietnam and led to the development of the orthography of all these languages. Chinese notions on aesthetics, lithography and beauty have long been the standard for one quarter of the world's population. In short, Chinese culture is among the richest and most transcendent ever to be produced.

Early Different Cultures. The geographic area of modern China is vast and allowed for the creation of a number of different identifiable cultures in the neolithic period. Of the dozen or so known early cultures, three stand apart. First, the culture of the Wei River Valley (where it meets the Yellow River at the great bend) is perhaps the most well-known among scholars. Several archaeological sites have been explored in modern Shaanxi, Henan and Shanxi provinces. This culture is called Yangshao, so named because it is the contemporary village closest to the first digs. The Yangshao culture is considered to be extremely important because the earliest known monarchy, the Xia Dynasty, which spanned the late neolithic and early Bronze ages, is known to have been located in this area. The Xia Dynasty (2100 BCE-1600 BCE), was thought for many years by scholars to be more myth than verifiable kingdom. In the past few decades, however, it has become clear that this, one of the cradles of Chinese civilization, also birthed the first historical state. A second important early culture spans the Yangtze delta region, extends from the coast inland for at least 150 miles, north as far as Jiangsu province and south as far Zhejiang province. It is believed that there was a great deal of cross-pollination of technology, agriculture and culture between these two early groups, although the way of life in an area with abundant rainfall, moderate climate, and extremely fertile land was quite different than life on the semi-arid northern Chinese plain. During the Shang Dynasty (1600 BCE-1046 BCE), these two unique cultures expanded, intermingled and essentially created northern Chinese culture. The third culture is much further south and is understood to be the cradle of the still distinctive southern Chinese culture. Archaeological sites showing markers for this culture have been found in the coastal provinces of Fujian, Guangdong and Guangxi and the island of Taiwan. Vietnam also lays claim to this, the Dapenkeng culture, but the Chinese are not enthusiastic about acknowledging the possible connection.

PREHISTORY—The Neolithic Age (10,000-2000 BCE)

The Arts. There is scant evidence of many of the art forms as we know them today. Music, story-telling, painting, drama and the like almost surely existed but have disappeared from the human record. However, jade figures and ceramics remain. It is believed that a distinctive artistic tradition emerged in the 5th millennium BCE and is associated with the mastery of jade. Jade is a hard, semi-precious stone that is strong enough to hold its shape but soft enough to carve without chipping or flaking. It is semi-transparent. Color ranges in hue from emerald green to white to dark brown. Jade in the neolithic period was mined in the modern provinces of Anhui and Jiangsu, but can be found in many other places in China and all over the world. Artists in the neolithic period carved jade for items of jewelry such as earrings, pendants, necklaces, hair ornaments and bracelets. Figures of humans and animals have also been found. Of particular note, some carvings appear to resemble a dragon. Other ceremonial items have been uncovered such as jade axes and blades, and *cong*, a square tube (4-12 inches tall) with a circular center. The significance of *cong* is unknown. But given its ubiquity was likely associated with religion.

BRONZE AGE (2000 BCE-600 BCE)

The Arts. Bronze Age art forms were also in evidence in China. Craftsmen, potters and sculptors were generally well advanced for the time, particularly in bronze metallurgy. Craftsmen fired colorfully-decorated pottery. Motifs sometimes consisted of geometric patterns and/or human and animal designs. Pottery ran the gamut between richly adorned, ceremonial items to those used in everyday life. Bronze itself, being very, very expensive is not as ubiquitous as pottery in the archaeological record. It is believed that only the elites were able to possess it.

Nonetheless, bronze castings reveal a very high level of sophistication and artistry. Some items that have been discovered are very large, thick and heavy. This indicates that the craftsmen were able to maintain consistent temperatures in the casting and cooling processes.

IRON AGE (1000 BCE-500 CE)

The Arts. The Arts in Iron Age China are best exemplified by the Terra Cotta Warriors, which constitute a very small portion of the burial complex of the First Emperor, Qin Shihuangdi (259-210 BCE). There are believed to be several terra cotta armies, each of which was to protect the emperor in the afterlife, but only one has been partially excavated. The one area which has been partially excavated encompasses more than 7 acres and is composed of 3 vaults. In the vaults are at least 8000 statues of soldiers, hundreds of horses, chariots and other war implements all situated in battle formation. The statues are approximately life sized, made of clay, painted, with none of the warriors' faces the same. Indeed, many archeologists believe that each of the warriors, which are anatomically correct and lifelike, represent a different person. It took 700,000 laborers from all over the emperor's kingdom more than 36 years to complete the complex.

Sculpture. The skill and sophistication of the sculptors, artists and laborers compares favorably to their counterparts in the Roman Empire. Each of the elements of the production process required the considerable expertise of 5-6 disciplines: sculptors, painters, smithies, metallurgists, chemists and the like. Each of the Terra Cotta Warriors was produced in three different phases. First, the legs were solid clay and had to be fired and cooled slowly and carefully in order to diminish cracking. Second, the torso was hollow and composed of cord-like sections of clay laid upon each other until completed. It was also fired and cooled using a different method than the legs. Third, the heads were hollow like the torso but were sculpted individually. Perhaps more impressive than the skill shown by the artisans was the organizational skill exhibited by the logisticians who provided the resources necessary to sustain the work force and the materials needed to complete the job. And then, of course, when the First Emperor died, all of this remarkable display was covered over and forgotten for approximately 2200 years.

A UNESCO World Heritage Site. The confluence of a shared concept of the afterlife (religion), the skill of the sculptors, painters and artisans (culture), and the organizational skills of the imperial household (government), provided the world with one of the most important cultural sites in the history of mankind. Only one very small portion of the First Emperor's necropolis has been excavated. In due course, the Chinese government might see fit to open the actual tomb of the First Emperor. If what remains undiscovered is as impressive as what has already been discovered, this UNESCO world heritage site will be rivaled in importance only by the great pyramids of Egypt.