SOME COMMENTS ON A CATALOGUE OF
SELECTED OBJECTS OF CHINESE ART IN THE
MUSEUM OF DECORATIVE ART,
COPENHAGEN

BY

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In fairly recent times the Museum of Decorative Art in Copenhagen has extended its activities to comprise interest in products from overseas countries. It seems a sound development for a museum of applied art to cater for the ever growing interest in what went on in the outside world. Inspiration was here at hand to influence the European or, in a narrower sense, the Danish home market. Despite Denmark's geographical location on the outskirts of Civilization, waves of foreign impulses were felt throughout her history. Also it seems logical that the Copenhagen Museum of Decorative Art should have a predilection for Chinese products. Chinese artisans were specialized to guarantee quality without ever forgetting that "Industry without art is brutality"¹.

A Catalogue of Selected Objects of Chinese Art in the Museum of Decorative Art Copenhagen has recently been published². André Leth is the author responsible for this publication which is of a very high technical standard. Indeed, in itself it is a choice piece of craftsmanship worthy a museum of applied art. The reader has every reason to expect the contents to equal the exquisite look of the book. In the Preface it says, "For the convenience of the Danish visitors to the collections the catalogue is preceded by a short historical introduction, not translated into English" (p. 7). As the undersigned happens to be a native of

¹ Coomaraswamy, Ananda K.: *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, p. 101. New York 1956.

² Leth, André: *Kinesisk Kunst i Kunstindustri Museet. Catalogue of Selected Objects of Chinese Art in the Museum of Decorative Art Copenhagen 1959*.

back to Eastern (Late) Chou, especially to the Chan-kuo period (ca. 480—221 B.C.). By that time the area concerned was part of the Ch'u state of which it has been said, "Though the area of Chu covered only central and southeast China, its arts and crafts reflected the high development achieved by Chinese civilization as a whole at that time"¹. Most amazing of the objects uncovered at Ch'ang-sha are some wooden carvings of which the preservation of a "double-headed grotesque animal ritual piece" and some "wooden effigies and also the lacquered cranes and serpents in the Cleveland Museum of Art, means the insertion of a new chapter in the history of sculpture in the Far East, for it predates by almost a thousand years any genuine attempts at sculpture in wood that have remained to this day"². Even a painting on silk was found in 1949 "in a tomb of the Chou period, at Mt. Ch'enchia in the southeastern suburbs of Changsha"³.

We pass to the historical section to direct our attention to the most prominent survivals of the early periods: the bronzes. We feel obliged, however, to comment upon the author's statement that sericulture must have been known in Shang time since silk remnants have been found in the Shang tombs (p. 10). Indeed, this is undeniable, but it is equally true that an artificially half-cut cocoon of the *Bombyx mori* was unearthed at the neolithic site Hsi-yin-ts'un in Shansi "which seems to indicate that sericulture was probably well-established in the late Neolithic time"⁴. Further, the correct date of the initiation of scientific excavations undertaken on a large scale by *Academia Sinica* should be established to 1928 instead of 1932 (p. 16).

As for the earliest bronzes ("Yin"), these are explained to mark the culmination of a long previous evolution and to have had forerunners several hundred years older than the ones concerned. Moreover it is said: This assumption is supported by the

¹ Hsia Nai: Arts and Crafts of 2300 Years ago, p. 31. China Reconstructs. Vol. III. No. 1. January—February 1954.

² Cox, John Hadley: An Exhibition of Chinese Antiquities from Ch'ang-sha, pp. 4—5. March 26 to May 7, 1939. Gallery of Fine Arts. Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

³ The Great Heritages of Chinese Art. Illustrative Plates, First Set, Plate XII, Fig. 34.

⁴ Cheng Tê-K'un: op. cit., p. 84.

prehistoric Chinese legends in which an art of bronze casting is recorded long before the Shang dynasty (p. 17). We are somewhat surprised that uncertain legendary material should be considered to support any assumption as long as actual proof is at hand. Such proof has existed since 1950 when the perhaps "most sensational archaeological discovery in China since the war has been [made] of sites of the Shang-Yin Dynasty earlier than those of An-yang"¹. The most important of these sites are two groups in "the department of Hui Hsien, and below and around the city of Chêng-chou"². The bronze *chüeh* beaker shows the difference between the An-yang and Chêng-chou stages inasmuch as it occurs in a rather clumsy shape at Chêng-chou as compared with the more elegant An-yang form: "The bottom of the *chueh*-cup is flat instead of rounded . . . with two small, crude "horns" at the base of the spout instead of large mushroom-shaped ones, set further back. The crudeness of the decoration is also obvious"³. No doubt, "The excavations at Chengchow show us the magnificent technique of the Shang craftsmen at an earlier and more rudimentary stage"⁴ than the late Shang period.

We consider it due now to leave the Danish introductory remarks to pass on to the part of the Catalogue translated into English. Having just touched upon the *chüeh* beaker it seems convenient to consult the catalogue on the one specimen reproduced of that type of bronze vessel (No. 14). To explain the background of the peculiar form of the *chüeh*, reference is made to various scholars. In Note 3 (Li Chi, cit. in William Willetts, *Chinese Art I*, London 1958, p. 149) the author mixes up two different scholars when saying, "Some have regarded the bronze as a further development of a small clay cup supported on three tapering bamboo sticks". As far as we understand from Willetts' work, Li Chi stands for the theory of a pottery shape in explanation of the form of the *chüeh*, whereas the archæologist Kuo Pao-chün is responsible for the ideas of "three bamboo rods tied to the

¹ Hansford, S. Howard: Pre-Anyang, p. 21. *Oriental Art*. Vol. IV, No. 1, 1958.

² *ibid.*

³ Hsia Nai: Workshop of China's Oldest Civilization, p. 21. *China Reconstructs*. Vol. VI, No. 12. December 1957.

⁴ *ibid.*

appropriate. It is, for instance, said that: From literary sources it is known that bronze mirrors were used in China right since the beginning of the bronze age. As far as we know, the first reference in Chinese literature to a metal mirror occurs in *Tso Chuan* written around 400 B. C. in which a "girdle mirror of the queen's" is mentioned: "Tso-chuan, Chuang 21st year, Couvreur p. 176 (narrative of the year 673 B. C.): *Wang i hou chi p'an kien yü chi* 'The king gave him a girdle mirror of the queen's'"¹. The *Tso Chuan* builds, however, "upon various earlier sources, and we have here a clear testimony to the existence of toilet mirrors carried in the girdle in early Ch'un-ts'iu time"², i. e. ca. 722—486 B. C. Furthermore, the Danish catalogue text reads: the earliest almost unknown mirrors were square. Later the circular form was taken into use (p. 21). Again we cannot agree with the author.

The early square mirrors are rare, but it seems an exaggeration to say that they are "almost unknown". Without taking any special interest in these mirrors, we know that in any case there exist half a dozen of them. An initial category of the early mirrors predating Karlgren's style groups has adequately been called the "two-layer type"³. One specimen of this group is to be seen in the Buffalo Museum of Science and is square, "like nearly half of the known examples" and is dated to around 500 B. C.⁴. It should be added that the square mirrors did not vanish; at least, some samples are known from T'ang time.

The Catalogue No. 37 illustrates a Late Han (or is it perhaps rather a post-Han?) mirror of the so-called *Hsi-wang-mu* type. The goddess and her consort *Tung-wang-Fu* (*kung*) are distinguishable by their crowns: "Hers has three softly rounded

¹ Plumer, Jens Marshall: Design and Technique in Ancient Chinese Bronze Mirrors (An Exhibition at the Rackham Building 1941. The Inst. of Fine Art. University of Michigan). — Karlgren, Bernhard: Early Chinese Mirror Inscriptions, p. 13. The Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities Stockholm. Bulletin No 6. Stockholm 1934.

² Karlgren, Bernhard: *ibid.*

³ Salmony, Alfred: Chinese Metal Mirrors. Origin, Usage, and Decoration Fascicle No. 4. The Magazine of the Buffalo Museum of Science, Buffalo, New York. April 1945, Vol. 25, p. 38.

⁴ *ibid.*

projections, while his has three more aggressive-looking spikes, thus recalling the *yin* and the *yang* of which the divine couple were considered as personifications"¹. The quotation shows the Taoist character of the mirror (No. 37) whose symbols are expressive of the troubled times represented by the "divine couple", and the "hope of a happy and contented life after death", represented by the chariot driving². To further emphasize the Taoist idea of the *yin* and *yang* forces, the Azure Dragon and the White Tiger (Leth's "beast of prey") are represented "as opponents signifying East and West, Spring and Autumn"³. We do not by any means imply that the Catalogue should have given all this information. But we do feel that the author could have been expected to recognize the "beast of prey" as the symbolic tiger, especially because he mentions the dragon and even Hsi-wang-mu and her consort.

This leads us to the Catalogue No. 49: "Earthenware tomb tile, Han". The motif on this tile is described as: "a man engaged in fight with a writhing dragon. The man is wearing a pointed cap and a cloak and carries a trident-like weapon in each hand". Again how misunderstood. Everybody familiar with the background of Han art will at once recognize the scene as a very peaceful one referring to the doctrine of *Yin-yang Wu-hsing*, i. e. the Two Forces and the Five Power-Elements of Nature. This theory permeates all Han thought, "and its influence in the shaping of Han art was indeed tremendous"⁴. What is really taking place in the scene depicted is "a winged "fairy", or heavenly being, approaching a winged dragon very much like a man reaching for his horse"⁵. As for the "trident-like weapon" we venture to interpret it as some kind of plants to feed the dragon by. The triangular shape of the presumed leaves seems so like the conventional way of the time of reproducing foliage, while the S-curved line conforms to a stem. According to the *Ying-yang*

¹ Cammann, Schuyler: Significant Patterns on Chinese Bronze Mirrors, p. 48. Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America. IX. 1955.

² *ibid.*, pp. 48—49.

³ *ibid.*, p. 49.

⁴ Cheng Te-K'un: *Yin-Yang Wu-Hsing* and Han Art, p. 163. Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies. Vol. 20, June 1957, Numbers 1 and 2.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 181.

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Wu-hsing doctrine the universe was conceived as being divided into two spheres: The Human World surrounded by the Lands of the Immortals and by Heaven above. "Drawing on this background, the Han artist made clear distinctions between the men and animals around him and the creatures from other worlds. The latter are always provided with wings to enable them to travel freely from one territory to another or to Heaven. The earthly beings walk on foot, ride on horse-back, drive a chariot, or use a boat; the heavenly beings fly on winged horses and dragons, and their dignitaries sail in "cloud-chariots" drawn by winged dragons, horses, or birds . . . It was a Han ambition to be able to enjoy association with the heavenly figures, to keep an equilibrium in Nature, and to achieve immortality"¹. With this long quotation the meaning of the tile should be clear enough. To call the tile "a tomb tile" seems highly disputable. In our opinion there is no doubt that the tile was meant for one side, the east side, of a funerary stove model.

In the next paragraph (Catalogue No. 50), which in the headline also announces a "tomb tile", we find the following remark: "It is likely that the tile has been cut out of a larger whole, a still larger tile or a mortuary model of an oven". A note refers to: Jansé, *Briques des Han*, 1936, pl. XXVI, la ff. According to the Catalogue this second tile shows "a man wearing an amply folded tunic and a cap. Armed with a spear he fights a tiger leaping to attack with open jaws". Apart from the fact that the man does not wear an "amply folded tunic" but simply trousers, the tiger motif together with the afore-mentioned dragon call forth the memory of a funerary stove in the Buffalo Museum of Science² on which four panels are decorated with the four deities, the *ssu-ling*, of the four quarters (like the one quoted in Jansé's work). The two long sides of that stove have decorations almost similar to those of the specimen in the Copenhagen Museum of Decorative Art, although the tiger is being fed instead of opposed. It should not

¹ Cheng Te K'un: *Yin-Yang Wu-Hsing and Han Art*, p. 180. *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 20, June 1957, Numbers 1 and 2.

² Salmony, Alfred: *Early Chinese Ceramics as Funerary Offerings*. Fascicle No. 7, pp. 84—85. *The Magazine of the Buffalo Museum of Science*, Buffalo, New York, December, 1945, Vol. 26, No. 2.

be too far-fetched to conclude, or at least to suggest, that the two tiles concerned once made up the long sides of one and the same funerary stove.

We skip to Catalogue No. 105: "Box of lacquered wood. Yüan or early Ming, 14—15th centuries". The description of part of the decoration is characterized as "flowered vines" and it is said: "The vine ornament shows a certain similarity with the blue and white decoration on porcelain pieces datable to the Yüan and early Ming dynasties [reference is made to Catalogue Nos. 106 and 108]. The box is dated accordingly".

This seems a very easy dating method but indeed not a recommendable one. Similarities of the kind in question are entirely dependent on the eyes seeing and especially on what they want to see. After the passage quoted the text continues: "A transport of a variety of objects reaching China from Japan in the year 1433 is known to have included some "cases and boxes (round and square of different sizes) and containers of incense . . . of black lacquer inlaid with mother-of-pearl"". A note refers to Wang Yi-t'ung, *Official Relations Between China and Japan 1368—1549*, Harvard-Yenching Institute Studies IX, Cambridge, Mass., 1953, p. 99. The passage quoted actually reads as follows, "Cases and boxes (round or square, of different sizes) and incense containers, in wash gold and sprinkled gold, lacquered in black and inlaid with mother-of-pearl".

This shows that, aside from the quotation being incorrectly rendered, half of the explained technique has been completely left out. This is impermissible and directly misleading. But nevertheless the author goes on to say: "Without attempting any definite identification it is no unlikely assumption that this account is concerned with pieces like the present box, which in many respects is more closely related to Japanese than to Chinese traditions of craftsmanship.—A Korean provenance has been brought up occasionally as a possibility". In this connection reference is made to Fritz Low-Beer, *Chinese Lacquer of the Early 15th Century*, BMFEA no. 22, 1950, p. 162. Etc.

We shall confine ourselves here to refer to two scholars, both of whom have declared this kind of lacquer work with inlay of mother of pearl to be Korean and to date from the Li (Yi) dy-

nasty (1392—1910) or more precisely from the middle part of that dynasty, i. e. the sixteenth century¹. We think it superfluous to continue our perusal of the Catalogue and shall conclude with the Confucian quotation: "If the scholar be not grave, he will not call forth any veneration, and his learning will not be solid"².

May the discussed Catalogue, despite its obvious short-comings, serve its apparent aim: to make known the selected Chinese objects in the Copenhagen Museum of Decorative Art. An excellent photographic material together with the good disposition of the Catalogue should be a strong enough means by which to succeed in attracting the public's attention to the fine collections.

¹ Eckardt, P. Andreas: *Geschichte der Koreanischen Kunst*. Pl. CLXIV, pp. 195—196. — Okada, Jō: Korean Influence on Nacre Inlay Designs in "Early Modern" Japan, pp. 3—4, fig. 1. *Museum*, August 1955, No. 53. Tokyo.

² Legge, James: *The Four Books. Confucian Analects translated*. Book I, Chapter VIII, 1, p. 7.