

NEW EXHIBITION EXAMINES THE SOCIAL LIFE OF BRONZES THROUGH THE CENTURIES

Martin Powers*

Abstract

This is a short review of the “Mirroring China’s Past” exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago (February 25th–May 13th, 2018). For reference, the exhibition catalog is: Tao Wang 汪涛 et al. *Mirroring China’s Past: Emperors, Scholars, and Their Bronzes* [吉金鑒古]. The Art Institute of Chicago, 2018. Distributed by Yale University Press, New Haven and London.

The *Mirroring China’s Past* exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago (February 25th–May 13th, 2018) marks a new watershed in the history of Early China exhibitions, being the most important display of Bronze-Age artifacts from China since the *Great Bronze Age of China* show in 1980. From the moment visitors enter the show they will be struck by the astounding quality of the works on display. This was made possible by the fact that roughly fifty works were donated by the Palace Museum Beijing, with some thirty coming from the Shanghai Museum of Art. In addition, you will find choice pieces from the major museum collections of Chinese art in the States, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Nelson-Atkins, the Minneapolis Museum of Art and many more, not to mention the Art Institute’s own Buckingham collection. Even specialists will be surprised by little known but exquisite works from private collections.

The show, however, is by no means limited either to bronzes or to Early China. This exhibition treats viewers to the evolving afterlives of bronze vessels in multiple media, including ceramic, bamboo, lacquer, cloisonné, rubbings, multi-media works, and various forms of painting and print dating from Song times (960–1279) up to the present. Needless to say, the level of organization, diplomacy, erudition, imagination, and attention to detail required for such a show is itself astounding. Most of the credit for that achievement goes to Tao Wang, Pritzker Chair of Asian Art, along with his staff and strong administrative backing from the Art Institute and its community of supporters.

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Of course, the impact of even high-quality objects can be compromised without adequate display, but here again this exhibition sets a new standard. The cases, tailor-made for the show, are understated so as not to divert attention from the objects. At the same time, they are capacious, lending every artifact ample room. Except for objects displayed along the wall, each work can be examined comfortably from all sides. Moreover, wherever possible, the works are placed so that viewers can see at least some of the inscriptions. In keeping with this object-centered aesthetic, the labels are minimalist, identifying the collection, the object, its date and little more. The labels do find amplification in short videos providing viewers with basic information about when, why, and how these objects were made. The process of bronze casting, for instance, is nicely revealed in one video, while others provide context. Still, in this show it is the objects that tell the story. Viewers are invited to enjoy, and to connect the dots. Those desiring greater depth will find it in a catalog offering multiple essays by Tao Wang along with other top-ranking specialists in the field.¹

In the end each visitor to the show will develop her own narrative, depending upon her experience and educational background, but everyone will recognize that the objects on display, arranged in a specific and meaningful fashion, have an important tale to tell. Regular visitors to art shows will appreciate the inventiveness manifest in the transformation of classical forms over time, while provincials will not find the slavish copies they had been taught to expect from Orientals. The astute will observe how objects made for royal sacrifice gradually came to be incorporated into the lives of educated but otherwise ordinary people. By the twelfth century men and women both were collecting classical vessels as masterpieces of artistry, while classicizing styles began to appear on objects of ordinary use even in the homes of middle-income families.

Fans of European art will find parallels and contrasts with Western Classicism. In ancient times Classical statues also were intended for ritual purposes. By Roman times they were displayed in the homes of wealthy patricians, less sacred than before, but still replete with religious meaning. Early modern kings competed to build the finest collections of Classical art and were aped in this by the nobility. By the eighteenth century, we find middle-class collectors, while classicizing styles in clothing and furnishings also made their way into the homes of educated if otherwise ordinary people, both women and men.

1. Published as Tao Wang et al., *Mirroring China's Past: Emperors, Scholars, and Their Bronzes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

For this reviewer the genius of the show lies in its ability to reveal how artists in China could reinvent the classical past in ever more sophisticated ways, moving from “antiquity to plaything” as Tao Wang puts it. Collecting itself sets the stage for this transformation by ripping a ritual object, such as a Raphael Madonna or Tang Bodhisattva, from its sacred setting and putting it on display in a collector’s home. Comparable transformations occurred countless times in Song China when scholars invited friends over to view their art collection, and create new art, as seen in Ma Yuan’s 馬遠 *Composing Poetry on a Spring Outing* (Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City).

Just as the Pre-Raphaelites, Picasso, or Stravinsky breathed contemporary sensibilities into classical styles, this show reveals how artists in China repeatedly made the past contemporary. In both traditions, the key was to de-familiarize the past by inserting well-known forms into an unfamiliar context or medium. This forced viewers to rethink the hallowed object, as well as its tradition, in a new and more personal light. Some objects on display show how a collector could insert himself into a famous masterpiece. More complex are the multimedia works created by artists such as Wu Changshi 吳昌碩 (1844–1927). These scrolls juxtapose rubbings of ancient artifacts—highly accurate records an object’s texture and design—with calligraphic commentary and contemporary painting. Wu Changshi’s playful paintings are especially inventive, treating the rubbing as if it were a fictive image of a palpable thing. In such ways Chinese artists blended historical fact and personal fantasy in one, multi-media object, forcing the viewer to recognize the constructed, historical nature of all the media on display.

The show concludes with Hong Hao’s 洪浩 contemporary exercises in art that takes the history of art as its subject, blending painting and digital photography to insert the past into the present moment. The final act on the road to self-reflexive modernity is the last work in the show, Tai Xiangzhou’s 大香洲 rendering in ink of Minister Xi’s bucket (*you*) from Shang times. Close inspection reveals the marks of brush and ink, yet the work is truly “photographic” in its hyperrealism. Juxtaposing the two antipodes of modernist criticism, it challenges us to question both ends of the scale.

There is one item I would improve, though it in no way detracts from the show’s many contributions. Principally the didactic panels comparing China with other parts of the world do not display the level of scholarship evidenced in the catalog. For one, they compare apples and oranges: for example, the evolution of bronze vessels in China with social or political developments elsewhere. The portrayal of European history in particular is highly romanticized, while even the most significant institutional innovations in China are suppressed. Presumably

this task was given to a research assistant or staff person, one could not expect scholars engaged in writing the catalog to attend to this detail.

In the end the achievements of this show and its scholarship are secure, and I would urge anyone interested in the social life of things to view this exhibition and to get the catalog. Either one will change the way you think about China, and its past.

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提要

芝加哥藝術美院《吉金鑒古》展覽的評論。

Keywords: bronze vessels, Art Institute of Chicago, art collecting in China, the social life of things

青銅器、芝加哥藝術美院、中國的藝術收藏史、文物的社會生活