

China: Dawn of a Golden Age (200-750 A.D.)

Glossary

Animal Style refers to the art of the non-Chinese nomadic peoples to the north and northwest of China. Since early times they decorated their wooden and bronze weapons, horse harnesses, and personal ornaments with animal images. Chinese artisans adopted some of these motifs, especially during the Eastern Zhou and Han dynasties, for certain types of bronzes and jade ornaments.

Bactria is the Greek name for the region of northern Afghanistan that is bounded to the north by the Oxus River and to the east and south by the mountains of the Hindu Kush. Situated on a great plain in Central Asia almost equidistant between Rome, capital of the Roman Empire, and Chang'an, capital of the Han Empire, Bactria occupied a pivotal position in the web of interregional connections established at the Beginning of the first millennium.

Bodhisattva is a Sanskrit term for a Buddhist "enlightened being" who, despite having accumulated sufficient wisdom and merit to achieve enlightenment, renounces full freedom from the world of suffering until all beings can be saved. Motivated by compassion, bodhisattvas actively assist those in need.

Buddha, or the "awakened one," is a being who, having achieved enlightenment by realizing the truths espoused in Buddhism, is free from the painful cycle of death and rebirth. Although he can still experience sensation, a Buddha is not influenced by them. The Buddhist pantheon includes a number of buddhas, one of whom, Shakyamuni, founded the religion.

Buddhism is one of the great world religions and was founded by Shakyamuni Siddhartha in northern India in the sixth century B.C. The basic tenets of Buddhism are that life is impermanent, illusory, and filled with suffering, which is caused by desire and ignorance and gives rise to a continuous cycle of death and rebirth. The cessation of suffering (nirvana) is achieved when desire and ignorance are extinguished, which can be achieved through a life of moderation, morality, and meditative practice. Buddhism was transmitted to China at the beginning of the Christian era through Central Asia and became wide-spread by the sixth century A.D. Although the Buddhist tenets of celibacy and quest for otherworldliness were essentially in opposition to the principles of Confucianism, which emphasized family and social relations, both were able to coexist and influence each other by the Tang dynasty.

Chimera (bixie) is a mythical winged beast that may derive from Persian sources. In China small images of this animal were carved in jade during the Han dynasty. During the Han and Six Dynasties monumental versions were made of stone and placed outside the tombs of imperial figures and high officials to act as guards.

Confucianism is the philosophical, social, and political doctrine based on the teachings of Confucius and his most important followers. This ideology was developed in response to the need for a new system that could provide social cohesion and moral imperatives needed after the shift from a religious to a humanist society during the Zhou dynasty. Confucianism offered a set code of proper social behavior motivated by virtue and tempered by humanism. During his lifetime, Confucius had little success in convincing rulers to adopt his system, and his precepts did not become guiding principles in China until the Han dynasty. Confucianism's combination of absolutist expression of government control with a philosophy based on the so-called virtue ethic became the unique political legacy of China's Confucian state and was adopted by other countries in East Asia.

Daoism refers to one of China's three dominant philosophical systems. Daoism, which is native to China, encompasses various ancient practices and schools of thought ignored or rejected by Confucianism. In addition to the philosophical components credited to Laozi and Zhuangzi, who advocated a passive acquiescence to the Dao and a close relationship with nature, Daoism also took on components of shamanism, magic, alchemy, medicine, various primitive cults, and organized religion.

Guanyin is the Chinese name for the bodhisattva originally known in Sanskrit as Avalokiteshvara. Because of his role in assisting people who are suffering, this embodiment of compassion has long been a very popular subject of worship in China and Japan. During the ninth and tenth centuries, as the appearance of this figure became sinicized, Guanyin assumed a more feminine appearance and became associated with Mount Putuo off China's eastern coast.

Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220) is divided into two periods, the Western or Former Han (206 B.C.-A.D. 9) and the Eastern or Later Han (25-220), separated by the Wang Mang Interregnum. Following the harsh rule of Qin Shi Huangdi, the Han was one of China's most glorious periods. A strong, unified country experienced a period of enormous power and prestige, with an unprecedented expansion in military, diplomatic, and cultural areas. The empire was extended farther south than ever before, east as far as Korea, and west well into Central Asia. Via the overland trade routes of Central Asia and the sea lanes leading to and from South China, silk was transported to the Western world and in return China received a wealth of ideas and products from lands as far away as the Roman Empire.

Kaolin is a white clay that is important in the production of porcelain. It is found in many areas of China and fires to a white color.

Li Bo (8th century) was one of China's greatest poets. Born in Sichuan, Li studied Daoism and traveled throughout China. He was a favorite at the imperial court and was known for his fondness for wine.

Lost-Wax Method is the method of bronze construction used in the ancient world outside China and in China from the Han dynasty. This process begins with the construction of a model in a material, commonly wax, that will melt or burn easily. After the surface decoration is complete, the model is encased in a heat-resistant material, usually clay. The model is then removed by burning or melting it away, leaving space for the liquid metal to be poured into the mold. Once the metal cools, the mold is broken.

Lotus, a plant in the water-lily family, has numerous symbolic meanings pertaining to Buddhism. The growth of lotus blossoms in shallow ponds is viewed as a metaphor for the way that the true nature of all beings can rise pristinely out of the murky ignorance and suffering of the world. Lotus plants or blossoms are found throughout Chinese art.

Lotus Sutra is one of the most influential Buddhist texts and is especially revered in China and Japan. The scripture, which is thought to contain the teachings of the Buddha Shakyamuni, emphasizes the concepts of universal salvation of all beings and the transcendental nature of the Buddha.

Makara is a mythical sea creature of India. Depictions of this creature entered China through Central Asia along with Buddhism and later became a popular decorative motif in a sinicized form.

Mingqi, literally “spirit object,” are items that were made specifically to furnish tombs and included human and animal statues, containers, architectural structures, and objects of daily use.

Ordos is a region of grassland more or less bordered by the Great Wall and the northern bend of the Yellow River and traditionally inhabited by nomadic tribes. A large number of ancient bronzes decorated with motifs in the animal style have been found in this area.

Phoenix is a mythical bird believed to appear at times of peace and prosperity. As a decorative motif, the phoenix was often associated with the empress.

Porcelain is a very hard, usually white, and translucent pottery commonly made of kaolin and china stone (petuntse), a natural mineral consisting mainly of feldspar, clay, quartz, and mica. When fired to a temperature above 1200 degrees C, the ceramic body vitrifies or becomes glassy.

Sancai or “three color” refers to pottery wares decorated with glazes colored white, amber, and dark blue or green, usually applied in a bold style. This ware was popular during and is closely associated with the Tang dynasty.

Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove was a group of seven friends who lived in the third century after the collapse of the Han empire. They were musicians and poets who paid

little heed to social conventions of the time and remained detached from officialdom. Celebrated in their lifetime, they became models for literati of later generations. Pictorial representation of these sages probably began soon after their time.

Shakyamuni refers to the historical Buddha, Gautama Siddhartha (ca. 563-ca. 483 B.C.), who was born into a wealthy family in Nepal. After a long search for the cause and cure of suffering, he attained enlightenment when he succeeded in renouncing the attachment and craving that causes suffering. He then traveled throughout northern India teaching the Buddhist doctrine until his death.

Tang Dynasty (618-907) was the period when China reached its largest physical size, extending from Korea to Vietnam and across Central Asia to southern Siberia. Buddhism and trade with foreign countries thrived during the Tang, which is also considered one of the greatest epochs for the arts.

Tibetan Buddhism, also called Lamaism, was developed in the Himalayan region from the teachings of Indian sages in the eighth century. This form of Buddhism is based on Tantric practices and beliefs and the veneration of lamas, reincarnations of holy beings, as representatives of spiritual authority. Tibetan Buddhism was favored by Khubilai Khan and was later accepted as the official religion of the Mongolian nation.

Wang Xizhi (303-361) was a member of an aristocratic family living in southeastern China. It is said that in his art, Wang was influenced by the Daoist and Buddhist priests with whom he associated. Known as the Sage of Calligraphy, Wang is one of the best-known calligraphers in Chinese history. He also epitomized the man of letters, who prized poetry, music, and calligraphy.

Yin-Yang is one of the fundamental metaphysical concepts in China and has been expressed in Chinese art since the Neolithic period. Yin and yang are the two opposing polar manifestations of the Dao, and their continuous change and interaction give rise to all things. As each pole reaches the extreme, it invariably begins to develop into its opposite. Each pole has numerous characteristics. Yin is associated with the feminine, darkness, softness, water, passivity, the moon, the tiger, the color black, and north. Yang encompasses the masculine, brightness, activity, the sun, fire, the dragon, the color red, and south.

Zoroastrianism is a dualistic religion based on the concept of a struggle between good and evil that traced its foundations back to the teachings of the Iranian prophet Zoroaster (ca. 6th century B.C.).