

The Evolution, Characteristics, and Aesthetic Expression of Han Dynasty Sculptures: Exploring the Artistic Achievements of Ancient China

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Abstract. This study explores the development, traits, methods, and philosophies of Han sculptural works throughout Chinese history. Han dynasty sculptures are exceptional works of art due to their unusual ceramic figurines, stone creature sculptures, and pictorial stone designs. The article explores the evolution of art across time, centering on the Han dynasty and its emphasis on functional sculptures. Cultural influences such as the mixing of Chu and Western Region art via the Silk Road are discussed how they influenced Han Dynasty sculptures. The study also explores the stories told via the sculptures of the Han era, focusing on themes of life, myth, and masculinity. With an emphasis on stone carving and a wide range of expressive methods, this article examines the creative expressions and aesthetic principles at work in sculptures from the Han Dynasty. The relevance of sculptures from the Han Dynasty to the evolution of ancient Chinese art is discussed, with examples highlighting the sculptures' dynamic life and creative quality.

Keywords: Chu, Han, Culture, Sculpture, Han Sculpture, Han Dynasty, Chinese History, China.

1. Introduction

In the history of Chinese art, the sculptures of the Han Dynasty are a remarkable artistic achievement. Each form of sculpture, such as pottery figurines, stone creatures, and pictorial stones, has its own distinguishing characteristics. This paper will examine the evolution, characteristics, techniques, and philosophies of Han sculptures.

2. The Evolution of Han Sculptures

In archaeological literature that traces the origins of human creativity to the late Palaeolithic period, it is stated that the formation of figurative and animal art began with the moulding of clay figures. The Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties all experienced a steady increase in the number and variety of sculptures as civilisation advanced. These forms were progressively incorporated into various aspects of society, thereby influencing the artistic landscape of the time. By the Han Dynasty, a prosperous society with rising productivity and the trend towards elaborate burials fostered the development of sculpture, as evidenced by the abundant presence of diverse figures and animal pottery in Han tombs.

The simplicity yet ingenuity of Han Dynasty sculptures contrasted with the solemn and magnificent styles of earlier eras, moving away from ritualistic symbolism and towards practical daily implements, signifying a period of transition in Chinese artistic expression. Their bronze sculptures, which were initially influenced by the curvilinear and decorative styles of the Warring States period, progressively transferred their focus onto the design and shape of objects, demonstrating an integration of scientific technology and modelling art from the mid-Western Han period onward.

The unification of the Han Dynasty facilitated a cultural exchange that immersed the Central Plains in the rich, romantic, and enigmatic ambience of Chu culture, which had a significant impact on the development of Han Dynasty sculpture. This cultural fusion, consistent with the goals of the Great Han Dynasty, contributed to the emergence of a robust, pastoral, and romantic Han culture and burial art [1].

Interestingly, the Han Dynasty diverged from the pointed, straightforward lines of the Qin Terracotta Warriors, which reflected the "dominant" aura of the Qin Dynasty. Instead, the Han Dynasty adopted a more rustic and raw style, using stone as a medium to artistically depict a variety of celestial, terrestrial, and subterranean phenomena. This artistic evolution represented a significant improvement over the sculptures of the Shang and Zhou dynasties, which were primarily limited to patterns or decorative expressions [2].

3. Comparative Analysis of Western Sculptures

The sculpture style of the Han Dynasty has the most intense and expressive artistic language, representing a value system that can be contrasted with the realistic system of the West. Han Dynasty sculptures made use of the natural form of stone slabs, requiring only minimal carving to form the desired object. Compared to Western sculpture exemplified by ancient Greece, this carving technique emphasizes the Chinese approach of combining "meaning" and "form" in a "expressive" depiction.

Western sculpture, on the other hand, is based on the physical existence of objects, sculpting stones and depicting innate physiological structures to express a sense of volume and strength, thus conforming to reason. In contrast, the stone engravings of Huo Qubing's tomb take the "original stone" as their starting point, reverence nature, and are predominantly in a lying position, emphasizing the expressions and characteristics of various objects. The distinct transformation and creation are based on the stone's natural appearance. The sculptures of the Han Dynasty celebrate the majesty of the vast Dao, exemplifying an inclusive worldview — "exalting the great as beautiful" This expansive mindset and inclusiveness merged individual lives into the flow of all life, thereby transforming enormous life scenes into art [3].

Han culture venerated gods and immortals, revered heaven, believed in witchcraft, and acknowledged heaven's interaction with humanity. They excelled at evoking the surreal and metaphorical while cultivating a profound reverence for the cosmos, constructing the most imaginative speculations about the earth and nature. In the minds of the Han people, heaven was no longer a sacred and inaccessible entity. Despite being proposed for political purposes, the concept of unity between heaven and man established a connection between humans and the heavens. Consequently, they sincerely believed in the existence of Penglai, the mythical islands of immortals, and the concept of ascending to the heavens [4]. As a result, their sculptures reflected the relationship between divinity and humanity.

The sculptures of the Han Dynasty emphasised masculinity in their depictions. As the philosophical foundation for aesthetic pursuits, Confucian thought emphasised the autonomy of the individual, moulding the Chinese outlook on life and national character. Confucianism admired the spirit of individuality, which inspired individuals to endeavour incessantly and fight for the truth. Individuals with this mentality would not hesitate to surge into national crises or ethnic extinction, willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for their country. This masculine spirit of patriotism and nationalism was artistically idealised in the stone engravings at Huo Qubing's tomb, where the audience could experience the patriotic, nationalistic, and protective spirit [5].

The development of sculpture during the Han Dynasty was inextricably tied to its humanistic and political context, which reflected the imperialism of the Han period. The Han people placed a premium on accomplishments and education, and their ambition to conquer the globe was reflected in their sculptures.

Simultaneously, the characteristics of Han Dynasty carvings resembled those of literati paintings concentrating on expressions rather than external appearances. The sculptures reflected Laozi's philosophy, especially the Dao of Wu Wei, or inaction.

Sculpture and painting in ancient China are similar to fraternal siblings. Aspects of painting had a significant impact on the sculptural construction philosophy. From the late Eastern Han period onward, literati began to engage in painting; their works influenced Chinese sculpture with their artistic conceptions, lending it a painterly quality. In contrast to Western sculptures, which emphasize volume, space, and the formation of masses, Chinese sculptures emphasize the rhythm and cadence of contour lines as well as the alterations in body and garment patterns.

The sculptures of the Han Dynasty were not constrained by particular artistic concepts; the styles were diverse and unrestricted. These diverse sculptural stylistic elements imply inherent fluidity and freedom in their formation, demonstrating the art's capacity to transcend and adapt.

4. From Cultural Influence to Harmonious Beauty

The artistic style of Han dynasty sculptures is endowed with a naive appeal, which is manifested further in the non-realistic style inherited from Chu traditions. In addition to displaying the unrestrained and romantic exuberance of Chu art, the social aesthetic psychology of the Han period transcends the superstitious, wild, and ludicrous intentions and imagination of Chu artistic tradition, returning to earthly affairs. This reflects the development of moral and ethical concepts and the progression of social civilization [6].

Chu culture was characterized by a predominance of gentleness and softness, and its dance traditions significantly influenced the characteristics of Han sculptures, especially the dancing figurines. Frequently, female dance figurines exemplify a sense of unrestrained expression; their postures are vibrant and full of life, giving the impression of graceful fluidity. During the sculpting process, the waists of the female figurines were purposefully elongated to emphasise their grace, whereas the male figures were sculpted to be more robust and durable, conjuring a sense of power.

Nanyang Han pictorial stones completely embody the Chu culture, which is filled with wondrous cosmic visions and a strong romantic hue. In addition to the influences of Chu culture, however, Han dynasty sculptures conspicuously retain vestiges of Central Plains culture, exhibiting simple, open, and straightforward artistic characteristics [7].

Zhang Qian's four diplomatic missions to the Western Region facilitated the influence of Western Region art on the sculptural aesthetics of the Han culture, which extended beyond Chu culture. These missions promoted cultural and aesthetic exchanges between the Han Dynasty and the countries of the Western Region by establishing the famous Silk Road. Even regions such as Daxia, Kangju, Darouzhi, Parthia, and the Roman Empire fell under the influence. Following the establishment of the Silk Road, the art of the Han Dynasty incorporated new domains and assimilated diverse cultures, exemplifying inclusion and integration [8].

Appreciating individual sculptures from the Han Dynasty affords observers a variety of experiences. To appreciate the elegance of composition and harmony, it is necessary to contemplate the spatial relationships of these sculptures. Sculptures devoid of spatial context lose a substantial portion of their cultural essence, thereby diminishing their aesthetic appeal. This relationship can be comprehended in the context of tomb sculptures, where the overall design incorporates spatial planning, and the tomb's engravings serve to emphasise this relationship. Without this arrangement, the tomb's allure is significantly diminished.

The 'joy' culture of Han Dynasty sculptures cannot be ignored when discussing the aesthetics of harmony. One of the central precepts of Confucian art is the pursuit of 'joy' in aesthetic activities, a joy that transcends desires and interests, embodies the unfettered spirit of 'harmonious beauty,' and is a state of harmonious joy. In this state, the relationship between man and nature, the individual and society, and the physical and psychological aspects of an individual are in perfect harmony, constituting the most aesthetically pleasing realm of life art. From the perspective of aesthetic appreciation during the Han Dynasty, an object is not merely described as beautiful or unattractive, but rather as harmonious or not. Harmony is equated with attractiveness in their perception [9]. The harmony of Han Dynasty sculptures is accomplished by demonstrating the 'psychological harmony' that the subject offers to the viewer, thereby demonstrating the unity of sculptural art with nature and society.

5. Sculpture Carving Techniques

The primary technique of Han Dynasty sculpture is stone carving, with a style determined by the material. This style lacks in-depth depiction, intentional arrangement, and excessive embellishment. Instead, it presents a complete image with bold lines and broad outlines, a remarkably straightforward overall view that evokes a tranquil, natural, ancient, and unadorned artistic image [10].

Sculptures of reclining bulls, crouching horses, amphibians, and toads are examples of this type of representation. The overall strategy is to maintain the original shape of the stone block as closely as possible, without being limited to depicting minute details. Utilizing a combination of round carving, relief carving, and line engraving, the emphasis is on minor carving at characteristic junctions. This technique appears accidental but conveys the vitality and momentum of the stone beasts flawlessly.

In terms of sculpting technique, the chiselling is precise and swift, and the lines are both delicate and robust, giving the sculpture a strong artistic expression. The tomb of Huo Qubing contains stone carvings with skilled carving. Craftsmen selected suitable stone materials based on the desired form, requiring only a few strokes to convey the animals' presence and vitality. The lines incised at critical structural locations appear to be quite bold, much like the character of frontier soldiers: imposing and direct [11].

The sculpting adheres to the aesthetic principle of beauty in strength and a primitive, unadorned appearance. The sculpture art of the Han Dynasty emphasizes a sense of bulk and heaviness through the use of strength, motion, and dynamism to represent the era's desire to conquer nature, perpetually innovate, and advance forwards. Movement, strength, and vitality are the substance of Han Dynasty art, the very lifeblood of the period's art.

A primal and untamed state is maintained through the use of concise, striking contours that depict the overall action and scenes [3]. The sense of pride and victory is incorporated into the art, presenting a profound and solemn beauty. Even though the majority of Han Dynasty pottery figurines—another form of Han Dynasty sculpture—are quite tiny, typically measuring between sixty and seventy centimeters, viewers do not regard them as insignificant or feeble. As a result of their simplified, exaggerated, and simplified dynamism, they feel majestic, imposing, and powerful. This suggests that the aesthetic creators of the Han Dynasty esteemed the pursuit of a commanding presence [9].

6. Artistic Techniques and Aesthetic Expression

Combining round carving, relief carving, line engraving, and subtractive relief, artisans carved and sculpted utilising a vast array of expressive techniques. Stone engravings in front of the tomb of Huo Qubing are an illustration of the mentioned sculpting techniques. For instance, the limbs of the wild man in "Wild Man Wrestling Bear" are depicted in an exaggerated manner, creating a strong sense of volume. Although these arms are thinner than actual limbs, they exude a sense of ineptitude and latent strength [10].

Some of the well-known sculptures include: "Horse Trampling the Xiongnu", "Resting Bull", "Resting Horse", "Jumping Horse", "Resting Elephant", "Crouching Tiger", "Stone Frog", "Stone Toad", "Stone Fish II", "Wild Man", "Wild Boar", "Monster Eating Sheep", and "Man with Bear" [9].

Figurines of Han pottery unearthed in Guangzhou have extravagant attire, short limbs, developed musculature, and thick necks. Although these figures do not correspond to actual proportions, they embody people's aesthetic conceptions by employing exaggerated body proportions to generate interest [6].

Despite lacking dynamic poses, some Han pottery figurines still impart a sense of internal movement, force, and tension. Western Han painted female pottery figurine is an example. This figure lacks authentic facial expressions and physical depictions, but its dynamic curves and fluid forms flawlessly convey the grace and gentleness of women [4].

The development of calligraphy during the Han Dynasty had a significant impact on sculpture crafting techniques as well. The majority of the lines in Han stone carvings are chiselled, conveying a strong sense of metal and stone while also emanating the inexhaustible allure of brushwork. The "accumulation of momentum" method, which is characteristic of Han clerical script, is applied to the lines of Han Dynasty sculptures, augmenting the lines' rebound momentum. In addition, the sense of speed and power of the lines can be conveyed through variations in direction, curve, length, thickness, strength, weight, reality and illusion, turn, and delay, among other elements.

The development of clerical script reached its peak around 156 AD. The rise of clerical script is predominantly indicative of the use of techniques involving twisted brushwork. In contrast to seal script's lines, which only used the middle point of the brush and maintained uniform thickness and stability, clerical script transformed round shapes into square ones, particularly by employing the "silkworm head and goose tail" contorted brushwork technique [11]. This technique of contorted brushwork was also utilized in the carving art of the Han Dynasty, which was prominently featured on stone steles.

Although the human body structure in the sculptures may not appear logical, it exudes a sense of realism and humor. For instance, the terracotta pot stand from Sichuan, known as the "money tree," features a carving of a man riding a livestock. Sheep riders are extremely uncommon in nature, so depicting this in sculpture demonstrates a high level of imagination.

Some reliefs depict humans who are larger than mountains, while others depict birds who are larger than animals. These exaggerated forms stem primarily from the desire to express the subject and emotions.

Whether through the highly exaggerated body postures and vigorous movements of the dancing pottery figurines with long sleeves, the gallant horses trampling swallows, and unicorns, or the numerous still-life sculptures such as crouching tigers, stone frogs, and stone horses, one can perceive the internal movement, power, and speed that evoke courage and grandeur.

7. Sculptures within Han Tombs as Funerary Objects

Aside from the statue of Li Bing and a few stone figures, the majority of Han Dynasty sculptures were funerary depictions accompanying the deceased in their tombs. The most notable examples are the Stone Tiger of Du Village in Shanxi, the Western Han Stone Sheep of Kang Bridge in Lintong, and the Wàngshn Grand Stone Statue in Lianyungang [12].

The sculpture of the Han Dynasty emphasised so-called "displays of martial prowess during the deceased's lifetime." It was used by emperors to display their dignity and by generals to convey their merits. Numerous Han graves are guarded by an abundance of soldier figurines and animal statues made of stone.

Regarding the stone animals of the Han monuments, they are not biological entities, but rather a collection of different creatures. They are primarily based on lions and tigers, but incorporate elements of other animals, such as wings and rhomboid organs, to create a distinct image of a fortunate beast [12]. People viewed them solely as guardians safeguarding the tomb owner, not as all-powerful deities.

The majority of tomb chambers continued the Qin Dynasty's military array scenarios, inferring certain Han Dynasty characteristics. Particularly during the Western Han, the burial system was prevalent, and by the mid- to late-period of the Western Han, various pottery figurines depicting the pursuit of life's pleasures were commonly discovered in tombs. Under the new social structure and system changes, pottery figurine art took on a new appearance, emphasizing an overall style, a strong sense of the whole, simplifying the complex, and employing highly abstract methods to express ideas.

The art of Eastern Han pottery advanced beyond its early period, and its themes became more expansive. Han pottery animal figurines originated primarily in Guizhou, which was Qianzhong Prefecture during the Qin and Han dynasties. In 1975, excavations of over a dozen monuments of the Eastern Han were conducted in Xingyi County. Numerous Han monuments are located in the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River in Anhui Province, in Guangzhou, which was part of Nanhai Prefecture during the Qin and Han periods, and in Nanyang, Henan. In addition to a large number of human pottery figurines, the unearthed artefacts also contain a large number of animal pottery figurines. The animal pottery figurines employed a figurative language that was economical, exquisitely crafted, concise and swift, abstract, and in places somewhat exaggerated. The works provide a readily accessible and fluently expressed sense of artistic delight.

8. Conclusion

When analyzing the development of Chinese art, the monuments of the Han Dynasty offer a unique perspective. In contrast to the stone sculptures of the later Tang and Song Dynasties, which may initially appear more refined, Han Dynasty sculptures, despite being in a nascent stage and therefore perceived as naive, rough, and awkward, display an inherent rhythm of movement, evident posture, and vibrant and dynamic momentum that highlight their unique superiority and brilliance.

The artists of the Han Dynasty achieved an unprecedented level of artistic tension and vitality in their objects. This level of intensity contrasts starkly with the emphasis on "charm" that characterized the art of the later Wei and Jin periods, which resulted in a regrettable reduction in both aesthetic tension and figure vitality.

Regarding terracotta figurines, the Han Dynasty artefacts offer an additional compelling contrast. Despite the fact that Tang dynasty figurines are formidable and courageous, they lack the unrestrained spirit of their Han counterparts. In terms of modelling, strength, and character, Song figurines, which are predominantly known for depicting daily life, appear to pale in comparison to Han figurines.

An essential characteristic of Han Dynasty art is its emphasis on functionality. It transcends the culture of the pre-Qin period and embodies a creative, masculine vitality and a free-spirited, inherent human spirit. This distinguishes the art of the Han Dynasty from the more restrained aesthetics of the pre-Qin period in a striking manner.

In conclusion, the achievements of Han Dynasty sculpture, both in terms of form and aesthetics, hold a revered position in the annals of art history, signifying a pinnacle in the development of ancient Chinese art. The robust and profound, romantic and graceful art of the Han Dynasty not only captures the immense cosmic consciousness of the Han progenitors but also reflects the prosperity and artistic achievements of Han society. Beautifully combining romanticism and realism, this art form represents the pinnacle of Chinese sculpture art throughout history. This brilliance emanates from the pages of Chinese art history, symbolizing the art's shining future in the nation.

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