

Style and Classification in the History of Art

Review of:

Robert Bagley, *Max Loehr and the Study of Chinese Bronzes. Style and Classification in the History of Art*. Cornell East Asia Series 141. Ithaca, NY: Cornell East Asia Program, 2008.

Robert Bagley's 2008 monograph *Max Loehr and the Study of Chinese Bronzes. Style and Classification in the History of Art* is a challenging book. Although at face value an assessment of an episode in the history of the twentieth-century study of ancient Chinese art, the book is much more than this: it is an examination of fundamental issues in art historical methodology which should be of interest to a wide audience beyond students of ancient Chinese art and material culture. That it is published in the Cornell East Asia Series may contribute to the work being overlooked by art historians outside this specialist field. Indeed, to date, the work remains unreviewed, even by Chinese art scholars, suggesting that Bagley's arguments are challenging even for them. But the questions Bagley raises, the approach he adopts to the interpretation of Shang bronzes, have important implications for all art historical scholarship.

The starting point for Bagley's monograph is an exploration of the work of his teacher Max Loehr on Shang Chinese bronzes and the scholarly dispute with his rival researcher in the same field, the Swede Bernhard Karlgren. Bagley describes how the conflict between Loehr and Karlgren centred on their different approaches to the exercise of classification. Karlgren claimed to be employing a purely 'scientific' approach in his attempts to arrive at a taxonomy of the Shang bronzes, whilst Loehr employed a more intuitive approach. When a greater body of archaeological data became available in the wake of the Cultural Revolution and the recommencement of the archaeological exploration of China's past, it was Loehr's classificatory scheme which was shown to have successfully anticipated the new discoveries. Bagley points out that the settling of the dispute between the followers of Karlgren and Loehr by evidence from a discipline outside of art history means that the important art historical methodological issues at stake were never really examined in detail (p.11). This is what Bagley's book sets out to do.

Bagley begins with an examination of the issues surrounding classification and the development of classificatory schema. Drawing upon Ernst Mayr's work on the history of biological classification, Bagley outlines the difference between downward and upward classificatory schema, a distinction which, it becomes clear, is critical to the different approaches adopted by Karlgren and Loehr and at the root of Karlgren's flawed methodology (p.11-15). The issue of classification is important for Bagley because it lies at the heart of the art historical notion of style, the accumulation of comparisons which art history employs to attempt to classify art objects into groups.

Bagley's Chapter 4 is an examination and critique of the major writings of Karlgren. Bagley outlines in some detail Karlgren's theories and highlights their fundamental methodological failings. Karlgren employed, Bagley argues, a system

of downward, dichotomous classification and this is where his results went awry (p.28-31). Through misunderstanding the nature of the character he selected as the basis for his classification, surface decoration, Karlgren discovered that his analysis did not provide the chronological data he had expected it to and failed to carry his classification any further. What's more, the lack of chronological data arising out of his study led him, not to question his analysis, but rather to deny any chronology in the group of bronzes he was investigating.

Although now recognised as almost totally worthless as a contribution to the study of the material culture of the Chinese Bronze Age, Karlgren's work is nevertheless interesting for its methodological idiosyncrasies. Karlgren was a philologist, not an art historian, and he was convinced that art history, and archaeology, in his mind compromised by impressionistic attitudes, lacked the necessary objective analytical tools to establish successfully a typology of the early Shang bronzes. Karlgren's approach to the bronzes, by contrast, may be characterised as linguistic in character. His initial classificatory scheme, published in his 1936 paper, the foundations of everything he was to write subsequently, was based on epigraphic evidence. His odd-seeming decision to examine decorative motifs independently of the vessel forms on which they occurred, the latter being largely ignored in his studies, is in many ways suggestive of the methods of epigraphy or grammatology; it is as if Karlgren were treating the surface decoration of the Shang bronzes as an unreadable writing system requiring decipherment. His tracing of a development of motifs from a realistic, pictorial phase through to an abstracted, "disintegrated" form parallels the manner in which the development of pictographic writing systems was envisaged at the time Karlgren was writing – and as the contemporary history of the development of Chinese writing was framed. Karlgren's contention that fully developed Zhou art was governed by a multitude of fixed laws strictly determining what symbols and motifs might be combined with each other, these laws derived from his extensive typological groupings, is reminiscent of the techniques employed by scholars attempting the decipherment of unreadable writing systems – such as those of Ventris with Linear B, and Asko Parpola, unsuccessfully to date, with the Indus Valley inscriptions.¹ As Bagley outlines in his chapter 7, the linguistic metaphor informing Karlgren's approach influences a whole line of subsequent scholars – Zhang Guangzhi (p.107); Eleanor von Erdberg (p.111); Vadim Elisseff (p.109) – who vest considerable effort in attempts to 'read' the decoration of the Shang bronzes.

Bagley rightly argues that the illusion of objectivity provided by the classificatory schemes employed by Karlgren and his followers obscures the highly subjective methods they employ when decisions are made over what characteristics are deemed to bear analytical import. He contrasts this with the approach adopted by Max Loehr and in Chapter 5 Bagley turns to an examination of Loehr's 1936 first paper on the Shang bronzes. Here Loehr outlined a first step towards a typology of the Shang bronze vessels.

The well-attested corpus of later Zhou bronzes formed a clear endpoint for any scheme tracing the development of Shang bronzes. Loehr looks at a small number of vessels but he considers all formal factors, examining decoration in

¹ Asko Parpola, *Deciphering the Indus Script*, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

relation to vessel form. This is working towards an upward classificatory scheme – he forms groups and then chooses characters. Bagley contends that Loehr successfully apprehends the logic of developments behind the stylistic changes evident in the Shang bronzes. It is for this reason that Loehr's studies were able to predict the discovery by archaeology of types of bronzes not extant at the time he wrote. Bagley's comments here are interesting. He contrasts Loehr's typological scheme with that which an archaeologist might produce. According to Bagley, the formal developments that Loehr traces are not mere random drift, or developments in the service of creating a better wine container – they are conscious innovations intended to change the visual impact of the vessel. Bagley attributes to these changes an aesthetic intentionality; they are exercises in design intended to please a patron (p.59).

Loehr's formal typology of developments in the Shang bronze corpus has obvious chronological implications, but its significance is not restricted to chronology. This typological schema traces the development of the visual character of the bronzes. It is at this point that Bagley defends the specific interests of Loehr and of art history – here a history of the products of visual invention – against the interests of, for example, archaeology, which he characterises as concerned with the development of a purely chronological sequence of materials (p.80). Bagley's assessment of Loehr's achievement, however, also highlights the limitations of these results. Loehr's typology remains unanchored to other cultural-historical data. Even the chronological implications of his typology are not hard and fast – the possibility of variation in types representing regional rather than chronological difference must be entertained, and indeed, Loehr's student Virginia Kane successfully extended his work through the identification of such regional variation in the Shang bronzes. In the absence of other fixed points in the cultural history of Bronze Age China with which his data can be correlated, Loehr's schema of the development of decoration on Shang bronzes remains something which exists in an abstracted fashion. This, of course, is not a failing of Loehr's methodology – it is a function of the absence of written sources to facilitate the writing of a cultural history of the largely pre-historic Shang period.

An aspect of Loehr's typology which seemed counterintuitive to many scholars working on these bronzes was that recognisable zoomorphic depictions appear to have developed out of earlier abstract decorations. The assumption of most commentators, including Karlgren, was that the line of development was reversed – initially realistic depictions of animals gradually became abstracted and stylised, the process believed to lie behind the development of the Chinese writing system. Bagley argues that underpinning this position was the desire to find in the decorations of the bronzes symbolic meanings that could ultimately be derived from the assumed symbolic significances of the animals from which individual decorative motifs had evolved. Bagley argues that what is implicit in Loehr's work is the notion that artistic and aesthetic matters must be treated as independent of other concerns. Rather than being dependent upon some other factor – such as a symbolic or literary significance – Loehr believed that the internal logic of design and formal development alone was capable of accounting for the changes in the appearance of the Shang bronzes without the need to appeal to external concerns.

A related concern here for Bagley is the notion of 'style' in art history and he has a number of interesting observations to make on this issue (p.125-27). Like all branches of history, art history attempts to imbue the observed events of the past with a logical ordering. The important point is not to slip into the mistake of assuming that an order brought to data *post factum* constitutes some form of historical 'law'. 'Style', as Bagley suggests, is merely a term employed to refer to the web of comparisons that an art historian makes in order to attempt to classify an artefact. 'Style' is not something that possesses an independent extra-historical existence of its own. A 'style', Bagley observes, does not work through an artist, shaping his or her productions. To construe 'style' as a function of a *Zeitgeist* or some other extra-historical concept is to indulge in the reification of the concept of 'style' itself. The notion of some abstract concept, such as *Zeitgeist*, which works through history, manifesting itself in artistic terms as a particular sequence of styles, is to indulge in a teleological reading of 'style' which is unhelpful and indeed unsustainable. This is the position that Loehr maintained. It is a position which Bagley employs to support the notion that the appearance of the Shang bronzes is not dependent on any external factors by attacking the idea that Shang art might somehow embody a Shang *Zeitgeist*, or worldview.

To illustrate this idea, Bagley invokes a musical analogy, a type of analogy apparently favoured by Loehr himself. The numerous musical settings of a fixed, culturally authoritative text like the Ordinaries of the Mass demonstrate, Bagley suggests, how different artists over time solve the musical aesthetic challenges posed by an unchanging problematic – providing music to accompany the core texts of the Roman liturgy. As the text itself does not change, Bagley suggests that the differences between a mass setting by Palestrina and by Beethoven are to be sought in concerns internal to music. Bagley concedes that, in the case of Palestrina's *Missa Papae Marcelli*, external concerns dictated by theologians, namely the comprehensibility of the text for the listener, does appear to have had an impact on Palestrina's compositional strategies and the ultimate aesthetic outcome, but, he concludes, such instances are few (p.94-95). Palestrina was employed by the church and his music served a religious function. But, Bagley suggests, that function was not to convey theological meaning – that was inherent in the fixed text. Instead it was to exalt, adding eloquence and power to the message of the text. This is how Loehr saw the Shang bronze-casters. They were not required to encode symbolic meanings through their manipulation of ornament. They magnified meaning which arose out of the uses to which the bronzes were put by the patrons who commissioned them.

It is here that we arrive at a critical argument which Bagley has been pursuing for some years and which represents the most controversial aspect of his work.² It is the proposed independence from external factors of the formal

² The present writer is not a specialist in Chinese art history and read Bagley's monograph with an eye on, and interest in, its methodological framework. It was only by engaging in some exploratory reading in bibliography around Bagley's recent work that it began to become clear that this monograph is the latest foray into a larger debate in which Bagley has been engaged for some decades. Two earlier articles in particular, Bagley's 1993 "Meaning and Explanation" (Robert Bagley, "Meaning and Explanation" in Roderick Whitfield (ed), *The Problem of Meaning in Early Chinese Ritual Bronzes*, (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1992), 34-55), and Ladislav Kesner's "The Taotie

development of the bronzes that has proven difficult to accept for many scholars. Bagley has noted that some scholars, like K.C. Chang, (*Art, Myth, and Ritual: The Path to Political Authority in Ancient China*. Cambridge, Mass.: 1983), believed that *only* symbolic content could explain the appearance of the bronzes. The desire to read symbolic meaning in the decoration of the bronzes (the linguistic metaphor again) leads to the posing of questions like “What does a description of the development of the visual forms of Shang bronzes tell us about the history of Shang civilization?” The desire to ask such questions is no doubt encouraged by the lack of contemporary historical sources for most of the Shang period – in their absence the temptation to attempt to “read” the ornament of the bronzes is increased. Bagley’s answer to such questions is “Very little”. The bronzes do provide us with information about Shang society, but they do not provide answers to questions like these. Bagley does not reject the notion that the decoration of the bronzes bore meaning, as he has sometimes been accused of doing by his opponents. The meaning which Bagley acknowledges, however, is social not symbolic. The decoration on the Shang bronzes served to beautify these objects, increase their visual impact, and thus emphasise the importance of the rituals in which they were employed.

A primary concern of Bagley is “the status of the bronzes as art and on the possibility of understanding art that is not explained to us by documents contemporary with it” (p.127). Bagley is critical of attempts to suggest that art as we know it does not exist prior to the Renaissance, or to Kant. He argues that objects were consciously designed with their visual effect in mind long before the Renaissance and that we cannot doubt the existence of ancient art, like the Shang bronzes. A slightly different argument, which he also rejects, is that whilst the existence of ancient art is granted, we cannot know how ancient viewers responded to these objects. Unable to access the intentions of the Shang bronze-casters or the reactions of their patrons, we are prone to imposing our own responses and preferences onto the objects with no way of understanding them as they were originally understood.³ To this Bagley responds that, clearly, in order to construct

Reconsidered”, (Ladislav Kesner, “The Taotie Reconsidered: Meanings and Functions of the Shang Theriomorphic Imagery”, *Artibus Asiae* 51 (1991), 29-53.) not cited in the bibliography of the present work but acknowledged as an important influence in the 1993 article, provide in some ways a clearer understanding of Bagley’s arguments than does the present volume on its own. This was, at least, the case for the present writer; Bagley’s comparison of the decoration of the Shang bronzes with the decorative treatments employed in illuminated Insular Gospel books was most useful in clarifying his position, and Kesner’s explication of the manner in which art can possess social meaning without necessarily directly encoding symbolic information (again, the linguistic metaphor) was illuminating and has clearly benefited Bagley’s thinking.

³ One is reminded of the disputes over the interpretation of the synagogue mosaics from late Roman period Palestine. Numerous attempts to reconstruct the programmes of these iconographically complex compositions have been undertaken, but mostly by drawing upon the received Rabbinic tradition, with its relatively synchronic approach to the development of its own literature and the hermeneutical traditions represented therein. Seth Schwartz has rightly counselled caution concerning the degree of unsustainable over-interpretation which mars most readings of the synagogue mosaics (“On the program and reception of the synagogue mosaics” in I. Levine and Z. Weiss (eds) *From Dura to Sepphoris: Studies in Jewish Art and Society from Late Antiquity*. Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series 40 (Portsmouth, Rhode Island, 2000), 165-181). We in fact have very little secure information about the social groups who were building and using these synagogues and attempts to link these communities with specific elements of surviving Jewish literature remain tenuous. As such,

his typology of the Shang bronzes – a typology vindicated *post factum* by archaeological finds – Loehr had to believe that he could understand the decisions that the bronze-casters were making in order to alter the visual appearance of their creations, along with the reasons why the patrons accepted those decisions.

Bagley's argument raises interesting questions concerning the use of the term 'art'. Is 'art' the physical object, or is 'art' the complex cultural process of production? If 'art' refers solely to the product, the visually designed object, then clearly art already exists in the Paleolithic period. If 'art' refers to a complex framework surrounding the process of production of visually designed objects, of conceptions of the artist and their role, of patronage, of reception, of potential meanings of the objects produced, then 'art' is clearly a term whose significance shifts from period to period, and 'art' as it is conceived in one period is not necessarily to be found in another period as all of these parameters shift. This lack of shared clarity in the use of the term 'art' afflicts a great deal of art historiography. Bagley's use of the term is focused on the former, strictly formal meaning; the visually designed object and its formal development. This is clearly connected to the nature of the materials which he studies. As he argues, in the absence of historical sources, and therefore the means to attempt more complex reconstructions of cultural contexts, objects themselves become the only possible focus of investigation. But in periods where historical sources are available the possible lenses of analysis become more complex, and so does the meaning of the term 'art'. So, for example, Enlightenment readings of Vasari result in definitions of art that see the work of the supreme Renaissance artists, goldsmiths, (analogues of the Shang bronze-casters, at least in formal terms) excluded from the canons of fine art. The point is, surely, that in the end, both definitions offer something valuable in terms of an understanding of visual culture of any period.

Bagley's important study is of interest because, intended as a methodological statement, it is powerfully shaped by the nature of the material that forms the study's point of departure. The Shang bronzes arise out of a largely prehistoric context; the nature of his evidence encourages, indeed restricts, Bagley to a strictly formal art historical analysis. This is an analytical mode which has been slighted by art history in the latter half of the twentieth century, particularly in Anglo-Saxon scholarship. Bagley, through his explication of the methods of his mentor Loehr, clearly demonstrates the power of such 'formal analysis', a term which I do not believe should carry the slightest pejorative sense – Loehr's achievements demand otherwise. Bagley's study insists that visual invention is a worthy object of study. When we turn to other eras of art-historical investigation, especially in the historical period, Bagley's book should serve as a reminder to refrain from neglecting formal visual analysis as a tool to be integrated alongside iconography as a means of art-historical explanation.

highly detailed programmatic readings of these mosaics remain enormously problematic – the evidence to support the readings is simply not available. If this is the case in 4th and 5th century Roman Palestine, how much more problematic is early Bronze Age China?

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