

Style and Classification in the History of Art and Archaeology

Review of:

Robert Bagley, *Max Loehr and the Study of Chinese Bronzes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell East Asia Series, 2008) by Miao Zhe, Professor, Center for Art and Archaeology, Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, China

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Every field has its own irritations. Historians of ancient art, dependent on archaeologists for material to study, are irritated both by restrictions placed on access to excavated objects and by the archaeologists' self-conferred status as sole legitimate interpreters of the objects. Archaeologists in return view art historians as unintellectual treasure-hunters trespassing on their territory. Eliminating mistrust evidently depends on the magnanimity of archaeology. But it depends also on art history's establishing a credible claim to being an independent discipline with a distinct contribution to make. It must mark out its own boundaries and cultivate its own territory. And if scholars of the early history of art wish to do this, then Robert Bagley's *Max Loehr and the Study of Chinese Bronzes* is a must-read. Using Loehr's research on Chinese bronzes as a case study, it delineates, with remarkable clarity, the intersections and separations between art history and archaeology.

Although Loehr's name stands alone in the title of the book, his work on bronzes was intertwined with that of Bernhard Karlgren (1889-1978), to whom Bagley accordingly devotes close attention. Karlgren is a familiar name to readers in Sinology. His study of Chinese phonology influenced a whole generation of Chinese philologists and linguists, such as Luo Changpei and Wang Li. In addition to ancient Chinese language, his interests included antiquities of the Shang and Zhou dynasties, such as bronze ritual vessels and mirrors. Loehr's fame by contrast is probably confined to archaeology and art history. Max Loehr (1903-1988) was a German who first studied the history of Chinese art with Ludwig Bachhofer. On receiving his PhD he became the curator of Asian art at the Museum für Völkerkunde in Munich, but soon thereafter he moved to Japanese-occupied Peking, where he served as director of the Deutschland-Institut. The Institut closed in 1945 after the German surrender, but Loehr stayed on in Peking, supporting himself by teaching German part-time at Tsinghua University. During his stay in Peking he enjoyed scholarly contacts with distinguished experts on Chinese antiquities,

including Rong Geng, Chen Mengjia, and Sun Haibo, and he was able to see many Shang and Zhou artefacts as well as metalwork from the northern steppes. He also learned about the Academia Sinica's 1928-1937 excavations at Anyang, the last Shang capital. His research deepened as his social contacts widened. In 1949 he returned to Germany; in 1951 he accepted an invitation to teach in the United States, where he spent the rest of his life. His teaching and research in the States had a tremendous impact on the field. (His student James Cahill described his teaching in 'Max Loehr at Seventy', published in *Ars Orientalis* 10, 1975.) In addition to bronzes, his interests included Chinese painting of the Song and later periods. In hindsight, he was one of the most outstanding art historians before the generation of Cahill and Wen Fong. Ever since beginning my own study of art history I have lamented that it is hard to equal Loehr's achievement. His stylistic sequence of Shang bronzes anticipated archaeological excavations. That was a remarkable feat. But more admirable still is the model he provides for intellectual discipline and rigorous reasoning in art history.

Before the time of Karlgren and Loehr, the corpus of ancient bronzes was in chaos. The 'pre-Han' designation commonly used in early bronze catalogues was an intellectual flag of surrender. Some scholars actually questioned whether the corpus included anything as early as Shang or Zhou. Thousands of bronzes were known, but none had been scientifically excavated. And it was not only absolute dates that were lacking; there was no conception of developmental sequence. Indeed some scholars declared that there was no development to be found: whether as an indulgence in Hegelian Orientalism or merely as an intellectual cop-out, they declared that the various types of bronzes were frozen at the moment of their first appearance. Even those who did not subscribe to Oriental stasis tended to interpret differences of style as regional rather than temporal variation, foreclosing the possibility of tracing changes over time. The only way out of this intellectual paralysis, it seemed, was to wait patiently for the archaeologist's good luck.

It was against this apparently hopeless background that Karlgren and Loehr made their appearance. Karlgren represented a confidence in the power of logical reasoning, Loehr a belief in human intellect—not just the intellect of the historian but also that of the ancient artisan whose creations the historian studies.

Karlgren's work on the bronzes stretched over nearly three decades; between 1936 and 1962 he published eight long papers examined in Bagley's chapters 2-4. In his first paper, basing his argument on three inscriptions that he misdated, he divided Shang and early Zhou bronzes into 'Shang' and 'Shang-Zhou' groups and claimed that, though his epigraphic analysis proved the groups to differ in date, in style they were almost identical, virtually indistinguishable. Then in 1937 he did a Linnaean classification of Shang decorative motifs to confirm and extend the conclusions of the 1936 paper. In this second paper, he divided Shang bronzes into two 'style groups,' A and B. The defining traits of both can be seen in the two-eyed animal-like motif traditionally called the *taotie*. Karlgren's A style has what he called

a 'realistic' *taotie*; the *taotie* on his B style bronzes he described as dissolved, degenerate, or corrupted. There could be no question, he believed, that his A style was earlier than his B style. In his view, the 'geometrical' B style resulted from the dissolution or corruption of the 'realistic' A style. I suspect that he was inspired by ideas commonly held by historians of western art; Riegl's *Stilfragen*, for example, describes how the realistic lotus dissolved into geometrical motifs.

In his attempt at ordering Shang bronzes, Karlgren consulted only a few features of surface decoration; he believed that he needed only to decide whether a vessel's motifs were 'realistic' or 'dissolved.' The shapes of the vessels, the flatness or sculptural effect of the decoration—all such features he excluded from consideration. Furthermore, he limited his attention to the decoration in each vessel's main register, maintaining that subsidiary registers on shoulder or foot were of no consequence. However, as Bagley points out, the motifs in those subsidiary registers—various kinds of dragons and birds—are almost all described by Karlgren as 'realistic,' in other words A style, regardless of whether the *taotie* in the main register is A style or B style. Thus when Karlgren created a 'C group' as a refuge camp for the motifs in subsidiary registers, he was trying to save his theory that the A style precedes the B style by putting out of mind the motifs that are common to both. The other features that he neglected presented him with the same problem. As he himself admitted, the vessel shapes of the supposedly late B style are no different from those of the supposedly early A style:

We find the whole array of vessel types known to belong to the Primary style also in the Secondary....I have not been able to detect any distinctive changes in the shape of the vessels in the B style as compared with that of the A style.¹

In other words, his A and B styles, which he introduced as chronological groupings, ultimately showed no sign of any consistent difference in date. The only feature in which they differed was the feature he had employed to define them in the first place: A-group vessels have 'realistic' motifs in their main registers; B-group vessels have 'dissolved' motifs in their main registers. He never doubted that this difference made the A group earlier than the B group, yet he could not point to any other feature that corroborated his dating. Quite the contrary: he had to insist on the irrelevance of all features that gave conflicting indications of date, such as vessel shape, so that he could go on believing in the reality of the nonsensical 'styles' he had invented.

I suspect that even without looking at the evidence Karlgren excluded from consideration, Loehr would have found plenty to object to in Karlgren's methods and conclusions. Karlgren's statement that early décor occurs also in late periods is

¹ Karlgren 1937, quoted in Bagley, p. 26.

a confession of inability to distinguish early from late; his assertion that the bronze industry that produced the extant corpus was static is unhistorical. And his claim that the development which generated his B motifs from his A motifs took place in an as yet unknown archaic period is a *deus ex machina*: he answers the objection that extant bronzes do not support his theory by inventing a period with undiscovered bronzes that do.

Loehr did not believe that logic can replace archaeology, but he had no doubt that only logical reasoning can achieve order: 'new archaeological finds will only be harder to digest if we have made no progress in understanding the material we have already.'² Instead of waiting for archaeology to provide a navigation chart, therefore, he took on board what few archaeological materials were available, and with close analysis of individual objects as his guide, launched his analytical boat on the ocean that sank Karlgren's ship.

Loehr's work on bronze vessels was presented in two papers published seventeen years apart. The first appeared in 1936, a year before the publication of Karlgren's second paper (the paper in which he defined his A and B styles). In contrast to Karlgren's single-minded focus on main-register surface décor, Loehr's method was openminded, resourceful, and comprehensive. He opened two lines of attack, analyzing decoration and vessel shape simultaneously but independently in the expectation that they would eventually converge on one result. And in both he saw signs of change everywhere. In vessel shapes he noticed round, thin-walled types resembling pottery and sharp, angular, architectonic types close to architecture. In surface décor he found smooth and sinuously carved lines, high relief that looks massive and moulded, and forms transitional between the two. Because it was the pottery-like vessels that carried linear décor and the architectural ones that had high-relief, his lines of attack did indeed converge. Since pottery long predates the invention of bronze, Loehr suspected that Neolithic pottery supplied the prototypes for the first bronze shapes, and his instincts therefore told him: the closer to pottery, the earlier the bronze. This reasoning gave him the direction of the development. That settled, he was able to arrange Shang and Zhou bronzes in a sequence of three stages that he called archaic, classical, and (for bronzes several centuries into the Zhou period) decadent.

Toward the end of his chapter 5, Bagley reviews the successes and failures of Loehr's first paper. Loehr was wrong in believing that the painted designs of Neolithic pottery were ancestral to the bronze decoration; he was also wrong when he argued that the *taotie* was invented by combining spirals and one-eyed motifs. And he overlooked the very earliest bronzes in the corpus, failing to assign them to his archaic period. But he made important steps forward. Not only did he find changes, he saw the logic of those changes—from pottery shapes to architectural shapes, from linear carving to shaped high relief. Moreover though his account of

² Loehr 1936, quoted in Bagley, p. 49.

the origin of the *taotie* motif was mistaken about details, it was right about the most startling and most fundamental point: the motif did not originate from depictions of animals but from a free play of lines. Bagley regrets and is somewhat baffled that many readers today have yet to understand what Loehr meant by insisting on this observation. I share his bafflement whenever I come across papers ostentatiously talking about the meaning of the *taotie* without ever mentioning its origin.

Loehr's second paper, 'The Bronze Styles of the Anyang Period' (1953),³ can be seen as a refinement of the first, with key revisions, tightened arguments, and deepened thoughts. Every scholar in the field regards this paper as Loehr's most glorious achievement; it has even won respect for art historians in the eyes of the archaeologists. Yet this famous essay, excluding illustrations and endnotes, is only nine pages long. Its pace is rapid; its conclusions flow irresistibly from a wealth of evidence brilliantly marshalled. In this paper, unlike the previous one, Loehr does not take the reader step by step through his reasoning; after a few brief opening comments on matters of principle, he moves quickly to the presentation of his results. These he lays out as a sequence of five styles, each represented by three or four carefully analyzed examples. The presentation is so simple and compelling that it is easy to overlook the immense labours it rests on. Loehr had first to master a huge and varied corpus and then, within that corpus, to detect a 'main line of development' that made sense of the variety—a procedure that required, for the time being, disregarding branch lines. Finding the 'main line' depended on alertness to any feature of a vessel that might offer a clue to its historical position. Though the paper is organized as a sequence of *décor* styles, this is only a narrative strategy. Loehr's analysis is attentive to *décor*, to shapes, to the overall visual effect of a vessel, even to matters of casting technique (here he found a crucial observation in a paper by Leroy Davidson). Li Ji's Anyang excavations, combined with the evidence of bronzes known from their inscriptions to be early Zhou, gave important assurance that his five styles all belonged to the Shang period. One short paragraph at the end of his paper can be taken to symbolize the order he brought to the bronze corpus (though without illustrations to give it substance it is regrettably abstract: in the context of his paper it is very concrete). He is summarizing the history of the surface decoration:

The impression we receive from the sequence of styles as described above is that of an unbroken, steady and coherent process. Simple abstract patterns of linear character in Style I are gradually transformed into complicated designs which cover a given surface densely and evenly, as in Styles II and III. A new phase opens when the coordination of the elements was overcome in Style IV by the reduction of some of them to the role of background patterns. The

³[Available at <http://www.jstor.org/pss/20066953>. Ed.]

clarity thus achieved was further accentuated by a ‘standardization’ (implying selection and simplification) of the motifs, which only now acquire the power and vigour that often has been taken for a sure indication of earliness. These motifs appear in Style V in relief, on meander background and also on smooth surfaces.⁴

That is, the earliest bronze decoration consisted of sparsely applied thread-relief lines. The patterns they formed gradually became more intricate, spreading eventually to cover the entire surface of a vessel, but without yet showing the sort of differentiation that would distinguish a motif from a ground. At stage IV, however, this distinction was introduced, and the motifs that now came into being were at the next and final stage set in high relief (thus creating, at the very end of the process, the ‘realistic’ *taotie* that Karlgren had taken to define his A style). In this summary form, Loehr’s sequence sounds like a mere description of events, but the real achievement of his paper is to have reconstructed the thinking of the designers who made the events happen.

In 1953, when Loehr published his paper, the Academia Sinica’s prewar Anyang excavations had not yet been fully published, and the excavations that from the mid 1950s were to transform our understanding of Shang and Zhou bronzes were still in the future. The first readers of Loehr’s paper therefore took it to be just another clever hypothesis. As excavations resumed after the founding of the PRC, however, the hypothesis began to look like an oracle. In the decades since then, (1) the Erlitou cultural remains at Yanshi (pre-Anyang, before the 15th century BC) have vindicated Loehr’s suggestion that the earliest bronze decoration was simple and abstract thread relief; (2) the Erligang cultural remains at Zhengzhou (pre-Anyang, 15th-14th centuries BC) have shown that his sequence from Style I to Style III is correct; and (3) the tomb of Fu Hao at Anyang (Anyang period, 1200 BC) has yielded the earliest datable examples of his Style V, placing its invention around that time. Loehr’s sequence and the discoveries of archaeology fit together like the two halves of a tally. Only a few minor adjustments are needed. Working at a time when Anyang was the only known Shang site, he called all five of his styles ‘the bronze styles of the Anyang period.’ We know now that the first three are pre-Anyang.

Although the agreement of Loehr’s hypothesis with emerging archaeological evidence at first met with acclaim, as time passed some scholars began to find his method and results redundant. Audrey Spiro spoke for them in a 1981 essay:

In the past, periodization as an end in itself had long occupied archaeologists and art historians alike. In the absence of securely dated vessels, Loehr’s method was an important, and often the only, means

⁴ Loehr 1953, quoted in Bagley, p. 76.

for the periodization of objects. For the archaeologist, however, the development of such scientific techniques as Radiocarbon Dating and—as importantly—excavation techniques that permit *complexes* of artifacts to remain intact rendered the old methods and goals obsolete.

She continued:

Periodization based on the evolution of forms may have a restricted future. The wealth of new finds unearthed under controlled conditions and improved techniques for scientific dating of vessels are likely to render obsolete the old methods of dating.⁵

Remarks like these were not made only by Western scholars; I have often heard similar judgments when talking about Loehr with friends in China. But this reaction seems to betray an ignorance of both archaeology and art history. As Bagley says in his book, archaeology does not supply facts, or at least not the ones we are looking for; it supplies the materials from which we try to infer facts. Stratigraphy is the archaeologist's most 'factual' evidence. But when two successive strata have bronzes in them, stratigraphy does not tell us how the bronzes are related, it only tells us when they entered the ground. And not every site has clear stratigraphy. As for radiocarbon dating, useful though it is to archaeologists, its margin of error can be a century or more. Styles can change a great deal in a century. In reality, among the various dating methods employed by archaeologists, the most important is the typological analysis of excavated objects (usually, but not always, pottery): in archaeological reports, typology, like the Tang poet Du Fu's liquor debt, is everywhere. Though in art history it may go under other names, such as 'stylistic analysis,' typology is a specialty of art historians as well as archaeologists; it is a point of convergence of the two disciplines. And it requires the utmost skill and judgment. Anyone who believes that an archaeological report is a mechanical and automatic presentation of facts, uncontaminated by subjective human judgments, profoundly misunderstands archaeology.

The foregoing remarks, however, are not a full reply to Spiro's criticism of Loehr's approach; a full reply must point out that Loehr's objective was much more than just periodization. His ultimate concern was not chronology but art historical understanding. Bagley proposes a thought experiment to explain this. Let us imagine, he says, that just before the publication of Loehr's paper, archaeologists discovered a site with five clearly defined strata one above the other; and let us imagine that the lowest stratum contains Style I bronzes, the next contains Style II bronzes, and so on upward: let us imagine that Loehr's sequence is discovered in

⁵ Spiro 1981, quoted in Bagley, p. 78.

Miao Zhe Review: Style and Classification in the History of
Art and Archaeology

the stratigraphic record. Would the discovery render Loehr's paper redundant? Should he not bother to publish it?

The answer we give will depend on what we are interested in. If sequencing bronzes is our only goal, then Loehr only offers a polished version of a method archaeologists already use. But if our goal is to understand the thinking that brought the bronzes into existence—the thinking that is responsible for their variety and their dazzling changes of design—then Loehr is indispensable. Taking the artist's mind as our own mind, pondering his questions, talking with him about solutions, working with him on new designs—in short, if beyond Mr. Gradgrind's 'facts' we still care about human creativity, if we still want to understand how artists think, then Loehr's approach must not be abandoned. To overlook art history's contribution to questions of archaeological sequencing is to overlook the convergence of archaeology and art history. To be unaware that art history has legitimate concerns of its own is to miss the boundary between the two disciplines, and to fail to see the important territory that lies on the far side.

The most outstanding historian of Chinese art of his generation, Loehr made a contribution that is one of the triumphs of art history. But his legacy is hard to digest. His precise ratiocination, disciplined intuition, and daring intellectual leaps are admirable, but they are also daunting. The heroic age of art history is over. The discipline has gone in so many directions since Loehr's time that his concerns seem forgotten. His mother tongue has become as difficult as an archaic language. We should be grateful that Bagley has taken the trouble to explain its every inflection to us.

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