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This Diverse Realm, This Melting Pot, This China?

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Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art

A second- to third-century plate with Dionysus in the center that was probably made in Rome

UNTIL fairly recently the history of China has been imperial history, and the art history has been the imperial collection, now housed in the Palace Museums of Taipei and Beijing. Quotidian life was of limited interest to Chinese scholars; the culture valued the extraordinary rather than the representative, and meaning was found at the center of the society rather than at its periphery. But the last hundred years or so have seen a shift. Though the study of Chinese art still focuses on court life, it has broadened to include the lives of ordinary citizens. These revisions largely come from archaeology of the last hundred years, and particularly of the last three decades. "If excavations simply confirmed what we know of early China," said Alfreda Murck, an independent scholar based in Beijing, "we would all have an easier time. But they don't. Archaeology has upset and confounded the traditional linear narrative with discoveries that no one could have anticipated. What we call China is revealed as a complex world more culturally diverse, more multiethnic than previously imagined. Archaeological discoveries are redefining what it means to be Chinese."

On Oct. 12 the Metropolitan Museum of Art will open its groundbreaking "China: Dawn of a Golden Age, 200-750 A.D." The show took seven years to assemble and is the first major exhibition organized by James Watt, who took over as chairman of the department of Asian art in 2000. It is the Met's largest exhibition of Chinese art since the splendid Palace Museum show in 1996. While that was a triumph of canonical connoisseurship, featuring many of the best-known masterworks of Chinese art history, the ones you studied in college if you studied art history, this one has objects that no one has seen from the time they were created until quite recently. Indeed, no one even knew about most of this work. More than a hundred of the 247 works in this show were excavated after the Cultural Revolution ended, in 1976; eight objects, added at the last minute, were found after 2000. Cordial relations between the United States and China paved the way for the loan of an unusually high number of "class one" objects of particular artistic merit and historic interest. There are works in every medium, including ceramic, bronze, jade, wood, stone, glass, gold and textile, as well as paintings and calligraphy.

The exhibition furthers the conversation that began with the Met's "Great Bronze Age of China" in 1980 and continued in the National Gallery's "Golden Age of Chinese Archaeology" in 2000. Unlike the Guggenheim's incoherent "China: 5000 Years" show in 1998, this one gives a measured, intelligent analysis of the oft-neglected period immediately preceding what we think of as the highest accomplishments of dynastic China, and turns up some superb things in the process. The wonders unearthed by archaeologists reflect a cosmopolitan China enmeshed with the rest of the world, and they give us a sense of day-to-day life in a culture that was luxurious, complex, ritualized and diverse. Seeing this work in the United States for the

first time, scholars and newcomers will be able to engage with basic questions about the international origins of modern Chinese culture. A whole civilization - and its surprising conventions - is revealed to us.

Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art

A fifth-century glass bowl.

Confucian tradition has always valued a focus on the past; Ssu-ma Ch'ien, the great Chinese historian of the second century B.C., anticipated Santayana by some 2,000 years when he wrote, "Events of the past, if not forgotten, are teachings about the future." The great Sung scholar Lü Ta-lin wrote in 1092 that it was necessary to use antique objects "to search for the origins of institutions, to fill the lacunae in the classics and to correct the errors of the scholars of the past." But archaeology as a discipline emerged in China only at the very end of the 19th century. It was initially a colonialist enterprise; the first archaeologists to work seriously in Chinese territories were Japanese, Russian and Western, and the contents of the ancient sites they explored ended up in places like the British Museum, the British Library, the Musée Guimet in Paris and the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard. Chinese authorities began to complain in the 1930's, criticizing these "unlawful excavations" and their "illegal plunder." By the mid-30's cooperative excavation programs were in place - under the aegis of history departments, not anthropology departments as in the West - and most of the unearthed material stayed in China.

These ancient works began to cast doubt on received Chinese history. A group of scholars who called themselves "Questioning Antiquity" asserted that many written records of ancient times were a later, Confucian invention, and called into doubt the very existence of the early Chinese emperors and even of the entire Xia dynasty. "China itself seemed to have lost it roots," the scholar Xiaoneng Yang wrote in the catalog for the National Gallery's Chinese archaeology exhibition. "Who but the archaeologist would be able to reconstruct early Chinese history?" In the years that followed, Chinese archaeologists who had trained in the West led efforts to find the origins of their civilization. But they were caught between a misguided Western belief that China had been populated by Eastern European immigrants and a native emphasis on areas mistakenly believed to be the cradle of Chinese civilization.

In 1937 most archaeological investigation stopped when the Japanese had dominion in China, and a golden age for archaeology came to an end. The cause was picked up again in 1949, after the war. The government bodies responsible for archaeology were established in the early 1950's, and by then, Marxist-Leninist thought had lent new value to the detritus of ordinary life. Mao took a much greater interest in the artifacts of slaves, farmers, peasants and traders than he did in the imperial collection, declaring that "the people are the motive force of history." As Yang pointed out, Marxist historical materialism was attractive to archaeologists because it emphasized that a society's physical production was the best reflection of its technological and social development. Between 1949 and 1970 there was little exchange with the West, but a grand national program of building roads, railway lines, factories and irrigation works turned into a marathon of digging, and archaeologists were kept busy doing "rescue excavations" of the materials being churned up by industrialization.

The Cultural Revolution was another fallow period, despite a few heroic rescue operations, but since 1976 Chinese archaeology has gained vigor and vitality, with burgeoning excavations conducted by ever more qualified academics. New laws protect cultural relics and accommodate foreign scholars. There are now more than a thousand Chinese archaeologists working in China with a broad variety of international colleagues, and most provinces have established local museums; indeed, the Met show includes loans from 46 collections.

Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art

A Sui dynasty necklace is one of the many objects included in the Met's exhibition, which shows early China to be multi-ethnic and diverse.

"Archaeology has added immensely to our study of Chinese cultural history," Mr. Watt, curator of the Met's exhibition, said. "By comparing archaeological finds in northeast China from the third to fourth centuries to those from Afghanistan (especially the so-called Bactrian gold that has been so much in the news recently), we can identify sources of the material culture of a part of China that was politically important at the time. We also learn something of international commerce and movement of peoples during the early centuries of our era. Look at the sudden naturalism and realism in Luoyang in the 6th century. It's like the Greek miracle, and can be attributed only to Westerners in China. Artistic developments reflect the larger cultural spheres. In other words, archaeology enriches our understanding of each historical period as revealed by its cultural production. The relationship between northern and southern China during this period is completely revised by the content of this show, by some of these rather bizarre things that reflect such disparate influences."

This exhibition is most interesting for all the non-Chinese material and ideas it includes: it's almost like seeing a Chinese international fair. Excavated Roman glass, for example, makes a good showing here, part of the trade in luxury goods from the West. There are extraordinary Hellenistic silver items, some actually produced in the eastern parts of the Roman empire (probably in present-day Iran), and some made in the style of that part of the world. It is astonishing to encounter acanthus leaves and images of the Olympian deities, appreciated and collected in China in the fourth and fifth centuries by the Northern Wei dynasty, much as Louis Vuitton is in contemporary Shanghai. A plate with a figure of Dionysus was made in Rome, probably owned by someone in central Asia and finally brought to China. A number of silver vessels from Central Asia, found in fifth-century Chinese sites, reflect the influence of Sasanian Persia, the great Central Asian empire of the earlier part of the first millennium, and the eastern Roman empire. A nautilus cup is made of a shell from Indonesia. An exquisite necklace of gold, pearls and stones came from Rome or Iran, but was excavated from the tomb of a Chinese princess. Similar jewelry has been found in Georgia and in India; it was a trademark of the sixth- or seventh-century international elite, a class of people that few today can even imagine.

A ceramic jar from a Buddhist site in the form of an amphora has a portrait of Pan, but puts him in an Asian crown. A fifth- to sixth-century ewer is clearly Greek or Roman in form and decoration, but with all kinds of little errors that show it was made by someone misunderstanding the originals on which it was based, as in a game of telephone. A second-century figurative textile fragment shows a completely Western face, though it was woven in Asia. A strip of fabric found in Qinghai has an inscription on it in medieval Persian.

A standing Buddha reflects a Western taste for modeling the body under the draped robe. And figures of foreigners abound: a Western man riding an animal; a group of Indonesians performing a ritual on a carved pedestal; Tang foreign attendants with Western or, in one instance, African features. The influence of India is obvious not only in the Buddhist sculptures, but also in the trampling guardian warriors of gilt bronze and in the hairstyle of a ceramic female figure. It seems that foreigners were commonplace in the major cities of

China in the period covered by this exhibition, but to read the official dynastic histories, you would never know it.

It has long been accepted that Buddhism traveled to China from India, though the details of that transit have been somewhat obscured. As it turns out there was much more exchange between China and the rest of the world than the Chinese historical texts would have us believe. The proof is in these extraordinary objects, which tell of a culture engaged with points west. What we have thought of as the dark time in which they were made proves to have supported an extraordinary internationalist culture of refinement and elegance. This incipient globalism, of little interest to the court historians of the time, is astonishing today, both for what it tells us about China's past and for what it points to in China's future.

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A rhyton is a drinking vessel, and rhyta from the ancient Persian world are often decorated with human and animal heads. The main part of the body of this example takes the form of a man's head that is transformed at the terminal into a bull's head. While this combination is typical of Sasanian Persian rhyta, the rendering of the man's head characterizes works made in Yotkan in Central Asia, where this example was found, and related centers in the Khotan region along the southern branch of the Silk Road. Nevertheless, the physical type represents a foreign wine seller from Iran or elsewhere in the Near East.

Holding a lobed drinking bowl, a man leans against a cushion in the center of this small stone tray. One attendant pours liquid into the bowl, another kneels at his feet, and a third stands behind him holding a flywhisk. The motif of reclining at a banquet has a long history in Greek and related early western Asian pictorial art, where it is often associated with the cult of the heroized dead and linked with images of hunting. Under the rule of the Sasanians (224–651), the theme also appeared in metalwork produced in Iran and neighboring areas. Comparable images dating from the late fifth to the eighth century are found in India, Uzbekistan, and even China. It seems likely that the tray was used to hold grain or a symbolic offering associated with royal funerals or festivities for the Iranian New Year, which had overtones of renewal and regeneration.

Wall hanging with centaur and warrior
2nd century B.C.–2nd century A.D.
Tapestry-woven wool
Centaur fragment: warp 21 5/8 in. (55 cm); weft 17 3/4 in. (45 cm); warrior fragment: warp 20 1/2 in. (52 cm); weft 18 7/8 in. (48 cm)
Excavated at Sampula cemetery, Lop, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, 1983–84
Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region Museum

This fragment of a monumental wool tapestry consists of an upper area with a centaur and a lower section with a spear-bearing warrior. The centaur of Greek mythology probably reached northwestern India and points further east as early as the military conquest of Alexander the Great in the third century B.C. The depiction of the centaur in this fragment, however, particularly the clothing and the horn that it plays, indicates that the textile was not manufactured in the Mediterranean region. The gigantic warrior also wears clothing similar to that known from various parts of Central Asia.