

therefore incentives to artistic creation. . . . A comparative study of decorative art and primitive representational art suggests forcibly that *form is first*, and the representational function accrues to it."

Gradually, with existing designs offering the thematic material for new versions, some of which fell by the wayside, there emerged a series of standardized, successful zoomorphic images, the familiar "dragons" of late Shang.

The stylistic phases of this development will become quite clear, I believe, through the descriptions given in this catalogue. In accordance with a conception formulated by me in an article, "The Bronze Styles of the Anyang Period" (*ACASA*, VII, 1953), the phases are designated as Shang I-V. Excavations carried out in China during the intervening years have shown that this sequence is fundamentally correct. A brief summary of the five styles of Shang zoomorphic decoration may be added here for convenient orientation:

Style I: Thin relief lines; simple forms; light, airy effect.

Style II: Relief ribbons; harsh, heavy forms; incised appearance.

Style III: Dense, fluent, more curvilinear figurations developed from the preceding style.

Style IV: First separation of motifs proper from spirals, which now become small and function as ground pattern. Motifs and spirals are flush.

Style V: First appearance of motifs in relief: the motifs rise above the ground spirals, which may be eliminated altogether.

It would take us too far to broaden this brief outline by a similar presentation of the typological changes of the vessels' shapes, which corroborate and help to establish the sequence of the styles of decoration. It should be mentioned, however, that the thorough investigations of casting techniques and mold forms from An-yang undertaken by Li Chi and Wan Chia-pao have led to a sequential classification that appears to correspond, more or less, with the technical side of the décor styles outlined above. Their classification comprises four categories:

A—Simple, incised mold design.

B—Composite model-mold design.

C—Engraving and appliqué on model.

D—Relief on model.

The first of these categories agrees with Style I; the second, with the frequent combination on one vessel of Styles I and II; the third answers to the techniques of Styles II, III, IV; and the fourth squarely corresponds to Style V.

The sequence of the five styles offers a chance of seeing continuity in Shang decorative design. The system makes sense, historically, because it permits us to determine the relative date of a decorated vessel. Absolute dates, however desirable, are of secondary importance unless the relative position of an individual vessel is fully understood. For the Shang period there is virtually no possibility of relying on inscribed bronzes to establish a chronological sequence anyway; most of the vessels are uninscribed.

If the ornaments on Shang bronzes came into being as sheer design, form based on form alone, configurations without reference to reality or, at best, with dubious allusions to reality, then, we are almost forced to conclude, they cannot have had any ascertainable meaning—religious, cosmological, or mythological—meaning, at any rate, of an established, literary kind. Quite possibly these ornaments were iconographically meaningless, or meaningful only as pure form—like musical forms and therefore unlike literary definitions. Perhaps we may expect some guidance in an attempt to answer this question by relying quite simply on the form of the ornaments themselves: do they not stand somewhere between the geometric and organic realms, unidentifiable with either? Perhaps, therefore, we must renounce attempts to explain these elusive images in terms of cosmology or religious lore, not to mention the naive idea that the zoomorphs reflect the Shang nobility's passion