



CHINESE, VIETNAMESE AND LAMAIST ART IN THE COLLECTION OF BEDŘICH FORMAN

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In his collector's pursuits Bedřich Forman did not devote systematic attention to the arts of China – his interests were directed towards other cultural regions. Nevertheless, a certain number of objects from the Far East mainland made their way into his collection. Before moving on, however, to an overview of his Chinese and Vietnamese acquisitions it should be emphasised that his major contribution to the apprehension and promulgation of Chinese arts lies in a field other than collecting – namely, in the art books that he published together with his brother Werner Forman (b. 1921). Through them the two brothers were systematically introducing to western public the arts of non-European, especially Asian, regions. Initially they presented to the general public the Asian collections of the Náprstek Museum and the National Gallery in Prague, later they expanded their activities to the distant countries from where these objects had originated.

The joint work of the Forman brothers together with the orientalist Luboš Hájek (1921–2000) has been instrumental for the incorporation of Asian arts into the cultural awareness of the Czechoslovak and European public. In the numerous publications that have been issued since 1954 by the former Prague publishing house SNKLHU and especially by the foreign language publishing house ARTIA (see bibliography), they introduced new ways of looking at and appreciating “exotic” objects, conceived of as paramount artistic expressions. The close cooperation with Czech orientalists, above all Lubor Hájek, Erich Herold (1928–1988) and others, provided a sound scholarly grounding to their work, consistent with the state of the field in their time.

The photographic oeuvre of the two brothers attests their subtle aesthetic sensibility and their professional training as graphic artists and photographers. Upholding a specific notion about the nature and aims of art photography, they evolved a deeply personal style, which accentuated the subjective point of view and psychological approach in the apprehension of the art object. Their photos of art works are everything but an objective photographic record. Using dynamical, almost “theatrical” light, they succeeded to unveil the hidden beauty, to disclose the structure and texture of the objects. This dramatic, “theatrical” quality is above all evident in photos of three-dimensional sculptures or craftworks.

Highlighting the uniqueness and the aesthetic impact of each single figure, plate or container, the Forman brothers succeeded to convey the significance these objects originally had in the cultural context of Asia, to affirm these works of decorative arts as autonomous artistic expressions, equalling the author works of high culture – a notion which is peculiar to the Far East aesthetic appreciation.

Let us turn more concretely to those objects of Forman's collection, which bear an immediate connection to the Far East mainland. An extensive independent unit, comprising more than 300 items, is formed by Tibetan, Mongolian and Chinese small-scale votive reliefs, mainly of the tsa-tsa type. These are mould-pressed, fired at low temperatures or merely dried, frequently decorated with polychromy or colour glaze. An independent study in this issue is devoted to the tsa-tsa from the B. Forman's collection.

The disparate character of the Chinese and Vietnamese part of B. Forman's collection indicates that their acquisition was dictated solely by the personal taste of the collector, who took a liking in a certain object. The Vietnamese region is represented by several small woodcuts of older date and a group of coloured woodprints from 1950ties.

Objects of Chinese provenience, though not numerous, are extremely varied, and include some very fine examples of sculpture and decorative arts. They can be roughly divided into three groups. Chinese folk art is represented by theatre figures made of rice dough, which functioned as ritual offerings, and by few toys. Another group consists of ceramic bowls and small containers, the oldest dating back to the first century AD (Han dynasty) and the most recent to the 19th century. Special attention deserves a stoneware tea bowl with thick brown-black glaze (temmoku type) (see pl. No. 1) and a plate decorated with moulded flower design under a celadon glaze, both from the Song dynasty (960–1279).

The most noteworthy part of the collection are figural sculptures, either ceramic or cut in wood. These include an example of Tang dynasty (618–907) tomb ceramic, *mingqi* – a realistic earthenware figure of a walking lion (see pl. No. 2). Buddhist sculpture is represented by three Song dynasty works – a head of the Bodhisattva Guanyin (Avalokitesvara), a seating Guanyin (see pl. No. 3), and a figure of Buddha Sakjamuni in lotus position, all cut in wood with partly preserved polychromy.

Catalogue

1. Stoneware tea bowl

China, 11th–12th century, Song dynasty

Height: 4.5 cm, diameter: 9.5 cm.

Acquisition: Bought from the Antiquity shop, 1992.

Inventory Number: A 23 669

The bowl is covered with thick lustrous brown-black glaze with greyish-greenish spots. The glaze partially covers the outer wall, exposing the coarse reddish body at the constricted base. The circle of the rim is slightly irregular.

The tea bowl from B. Forman's collection is an example of a type highly esteemed during the Song dynasty and evidences the taste of the literati strata for whom monochrome wares were intended. Black glaze tea bowls became popular in China with the change in taste

from steeped green tea (the colour of which was enhanced by celadon glazes on the bowls) to whisked powder tea in the Song dynasty. Tea powder and hot water were whipped together in the bowl to produce a layer of white froth, floating on the surface. Bowls with dark glazes were perfect for highlighting the rich white tea decoction and enhancing the aesthetics of tea drinking, while their thick walls retained the heat longer and reduced the risk of burning one's hands. Black tea bowls were made at a number of kilns in north and south China. These came to be appreciated in Japan where, known as "temmoku", they exerted a strong influence on the native ceramic industry.

The random spotting, observed in the glaze of B. Forman's bowl is a purposive effect,

achieved through crystallisation of a part of the iron oxide, which during firing cannot saturate in the glaze. Such element of chance, of unforeseen effects, is specially valued in Chinese aesthetics.

2. Tomb figure of a lion. Earthenware.

China, 618–906 AD, Tang dynasty

Height 122 mm., length 150 mm.

Acquisition: Bought from the Antiquity shop, 1992.

Inventory Number: A 23 672

A fine example of Tang dynasty tomb figures, *mingqi*. Unglazed earthenware, fired at high temperatures, with remnants of red pigments.

The figure of a walking lion is conceived in realistic and lively manner. The beast is expressively portrayed with a widely opened mouth, rich, slightly curled mane, lean body, bulky breast and thick legs. The breast is decorated with jewels. The tail and the left leg are missing. Stylistically the figure is close to the monumental stone sculptures of real and mythical animals that flanked the so-called spirit alleys, *shendao*, leading to Chinese tombs.

Lions are not indigenous to China. Their importation into China occurred relatively early – the first recorded living specimen was sent as tribute to the Chinese emperor by the king of Parthia (modern Afghanistan) in 87 AD. During the later Han dynasty lions became a popular motif in art. Known as the most powerful and fearsome of all animals they were conceived as guardians against evil, which accounts for their popularity in Chinese funerary art of the Six dynasties period (3rd–6th century AD). Aside from smaller earthenware figures put in graves, lions also appear as large stone carvings placed in tomb precincts. Apart from funerary context, sculptured lions frequently appear in later periods at the gates of temples, palaces, official buildings and houses as powerful guardians and protectors. Owing to its unfamiliarity and the aura of mystery that surrounded it, the lion in early art took an extremely stylised, at times even bizarre form and was mostly depicted with wings. From the Tang dynasty on the rather stiff conventional representations were replaced by lively, life-like portraiture in various new poses. Lions were usually depicted without wings, their bodies became thicker and shorter, and their manes became curly. The dynamic realistic style of the Tang dynasty can be

discerned in the lion figure from the B. Forman collection.

Since the Neolithic period tombs of royalty and rich people have been furnished with elaborate grave goods. From the Han dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) on the precious jade objects, bronze vessels as well as human and animal sacrifices have been gradually substituted by clay and wooden figures. The tomb retinue of the deceased included wide variety of animal and human earthenware figurines – servants, dancers and musicians, horses, camels, and in addition numerous ceramic vessels, often made especially for burial, models of dwellings, chariots, etc. Earthenware guardian lion figures of the type, presented in B. Forman collection were also popular in funerary art. The use of tomb ceramic figures in late imperial China gradually declined and during the Qing dynasty they have been completely replaced by paper models, burnt as offerings.

3. Bodhisattva Guanyin. Carved wood, with traces of pigments and gilt.

China, 960–1279, Song dynasty.

Height: 34 cm.

Acquisition: Bought from the Antiquity shop, 1992.

Inventory Number: A 23 233

A wooden figure of bodhisattva Guanyin. The bodhisattva is seated cross-legged on a high, richly carved rock throne. The hair is gathered in a high knot, the deity wears a headdress in the form of a lotus flower and his body is adorned with a long necklace and bracelets on both hands. In the left hand the bodhisattva holds an upright vase, one of his attributes (Vase-holding Guanyin type), from which the 'stream of compassion' was said to flow out, the right hand is bent backward in graceful gesture. The face calm and sensitive, with half closed eyes. The slender upper body is bare, as most often seen in this period by Guanyin figures, the lower part is clothed in a richly draped skirt. The figure is adorned with long undulating scarves and streamers, the dynamic swirls of which animate the somewhat rigid, upright bearing of the body and the head.

After carving, the wood was covered with a thin layer of gesso ground, on which pigments were applied. Some of the colours are still visible: blue on the rock and the hair; red on the skirt, the vase, the headdress, the necklace,



the lips and some of the scarves; yellow on the scarves and the upper part of the skirt. The red skirt is embellished with gold flower patterns, traces of gilt are moreover still discernable on the vase and on the bracelets.

The origins of Buddhist sculpture in China are connected with the decoration of temple

interiors, especially cave temples, such as those found in the famous Buddhist centres of Dunhuan and Yungang, which contain examples of early sculpture dating back to the 5th-6th century AD. These were mainly large statues, carved in stone or modelled on a wooden body, which was afterwards covered with layers of earth and





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gesso, and finally polychromed. Statues carved in wood originate from later periods – mainly from the Tang dynasty on. Smaller scale wooden figures furnished both temple and home altars.

Bodhisattva Guanyin (Sanskrit Avalokiteshvara) is by far the most popular of all Bud-

dhist deities in China. The Chinese name Guanyin or Guanshiyin literally means “the one who observes the sounds of the world”, that is, who listens to every prayer. For this reason ever since the Six dynasties period (3rd–6th century AD) Guanyin has been known in China as the deity of mercy and infinite compassion.

The earliest representations of Guanyin dating back to the 5th century conformed closely to the canonical sources and to Central Asian visual prototypes, and presented the deity in a distinct male form. Gradually, however, the bodhisattva developed specific Chinese features and by the Song dynasty he took a more androgynous appearance. The sculpture from B. Forman's collection exhibits the androgynous looks typical

of the period. The rocky throne on which the deity sits, alludes to the bodhisattva's grotto-dwelling in his earthly paradise. According to the Lotus sutra Guanyin lives on Mount Potalaka, which the Chinese identified with the island of Putuo shan, off the south-eastern coast of China, which until today remains a major centre of Guanyin's cult.