



Art and Political Expression in Early China

Mr. Martin J. Powers

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Powers examines the art and politics of the Han dynasty (206 B.C. - 200 A.D.) and shows that both were influenced by the rise of an educated, non-aristocratic public who questioned the authority of the ruling class at all levels. The Han dynasty saw the establishment of many innovations in Chinese history and art, says Powers. As the first stable empire in China, the Hans incorporated a new bureaucratic system of government, implemented a meritocratic standard of official performance, and made available to commoners a greater number of resources and social prerogatives than they had ever had before - including freedom of political expression and social criticism. In this same period, Chinese art began to incorporate figure painting, narrative painting, and genre scenes for the first time, and landowners, lacking noble or official rank, began commissioning large-scale monuments that challenged rather than supported the status quo. Tracing issues of political expression in Han pictorial art, Powers examines the design and construction of local tombs and shrines, their mural schemes, subject matter, and style. He analyzes the rhetoric of social criticism seen in written work such as stone inscriptions, critical essays, and official memorials and shows how a similar rhetoric can be seen in the visual arts. Placing major trends in artistic taste within a narrative of political rivalries, Powers here reconstructs the existence and nature of a public that rejected the cultural standards of the feudal courts and established an alternative culture that influenced politics, taste, ideology and the visual arts.

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