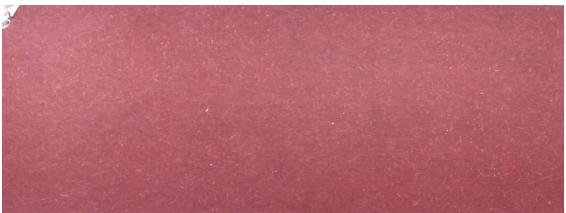


A Bridge of Chinese Jade

by Thomas Hefferman

WITH THE SHRINKING of today's world, there is an inevitable friction of disparate ways of life reacting to one another. This phenomenon has had important effects in the political, economic, social, and cultural aspects of human existence. The dichotomy is especially crucial in the historical division of the world into East and West, which is becoming less distinct as these two halves have approached closer and closer to interdependence. In many ways, however, the joining of these parts is a forced one and can never result in anything permanent, unless a proper disposition and attitude is cultivated by both parties. Essentially, it seems that the first approaches must be made on as basically human a level as possible. Since it is in artistic expression that this quality is to be found, this means of communication must be examined as a possible aid. To test this thesis the examination by a Western nonspecialist of an Eastern work of art could be effective.





As 17th century France was the cultural superior of her neighbors and was imitated by them, so did China shape the aesthetic criteria of her neighbors Korea and Japan. Many examples of Chinese art testify to her achievements and indicate as well something of the transcendent appeal of true beauty as a means of effecting a deeper interest in, and a consequent communication between, one people and another. As an example of the kind of knowledge to be perceived from an object of art it might be of assistance to examine a Chinese vase produced during the Ch'ing Lung period which extends from 1736 to 1795.

Carved from a piece of white jade, the vase is exquisitely formed, so delicate and paper-thin that it is translucent. The attention to significant detail which makes masterpieces out of minutiae is particularly impressive in this piece, but even more immediate is the delicacy of rhythm, a grace of proportion and harmony. At first, the emphasis seems to be most certainly on the flowers, particularly on the central, larger one; and this seems so because of the small scale of the birds as well as because of their subordinate position. The birds are no mere ornamentation, however. They provide a subtle contrast. Though both the flowers and the birds are formed so as to look almost real, the flowers give no hint of motion, of a breeze swaying them ever so delicately: they look real, indeed, but only in the sense that a floral display is real—at the same time it is dead. The birds, on the other hand, are bursting with life. The very attitudes and poses are studies of motion. For instance,



the egret on the left side stands with one leg supporting him, the other raised to walk toward the center. The hen in the center is balancing herself on a branch with the aid of her outstretched wings. The rooster on the right is standing so that his body is pointed away from his two companions; his head, however, is turned back to watch the peregrinations of his companions. Thus the two pheasants and the egret themselves are a marvelously balanced tableau in addition to contributing to the unity of the piece at the same time that they provide a contrast.

The vase, then, is appealing to eye and, from that point of view, is beautiful. It possesses qualities of proportion, harmony, contrast, and unity, as well as the further refinement of expert craftsmanship evident in its careful chiseling and highly polished surface. Another viewpoint, however, is that, given all the above-mentioned qualities, an object cannot be considered beautiful in the fullest sense unless it succeeds in being what it was intended to be. Under this aspect a gorilla is just as beautiful in its own way as a saffron sunset. Accordingly, we must ask the question: how beautiful is this vase *as a vase*?

Beauty is not something appended to a thing after it has already been fitted to some purpose. It is rather a quality infusing the being of something that is well made according to its nature. Examining this vase, one has no choice other than to admit the competence—rather more the genius—of its maker. We have seen that the attention of the observer is directed towards the three

lilies, especially the large, central one, by two devices: first, the proportional magnitude of the flowers to the other parts; and second, the directing of the observer's attention toward the central flower by the posturing of the birds.

The flowers are the specifically functional parts of the vase because their cuplike shape is adapted to hold the contents. Functionally speaking, of course, a broken bottle could fulfill this purpose just as well, but not so beautifully. The jade flowers are arranged so that the natural flowers to be placed within their cupped shapes would become part of a unified decorative effect. The natural flowers rise out of the artificial ones which hold and support them. It seems as though the artist were trying to say in a concrete way that all matter is one. Visually, there would be little indication of which flowers were the craftsman's creation and which were not.



TO UNDERSTAND the nature of tools and materials, and to activate them under the touch of a creative imagination is the only way true art can be effected. The process is a combination of intellectual understanding, spiritual-emotional stimulation, and physical labor. Thus the completion of a work of art in the true sense requires a co-ordination of all the artist's faculties. Consequently, besides being itself, being what it was made to be, an artifact can tell an observer certain things about the maker, and—because the maker is to some extent a product of his time and environment—also about his contemporary and cultural world. Beyond the aesthetic or emotional appeal, then, art does, or rather should, communicate (whether or not it does rests somewhat upon the acuity of the beholder).



Among the various ways it does this is the illustration of religious truth, such as in Western medieval cathedrals, the ancient churches of the Byzantine world, the temples of the ancients such as Harnak. Not only in the religious sphere, however, is this true. A well-delivered political appeal, for example, attracts us because of the mastery of the speaker's rhetoric. But the purpose of this rhetorical adornment is purely and simply to gain the auditor's ear for the content of the statement. So it is with this vase that its *raison d'être* is not merely to be beautiful, but to communicate something. I have suggested that the artist may perhaps be demonstrating the unity of matter, but whether or not this is what the artist was attempting to do is unimportant because any single work can have several valid interpretations.

There is no doubt of the importance of the artistic legacies of the past in helping us to document the story of the past. Civilizations far back in time and distance are in part described, and made understandable to us through the still-enduring objects of art produced during their sway. In our own contemporary world, this is just as true. Closer contacts between divergent contemporary civilizations and the increasing shrinkage of the size of the globe, make mutual understanding not only desirable but absolutely necessary. To a certain extent, I maintain that art can be a means of producing a sympathetic interest between East and West today, that it can be useful in communicating something of the values and characteristics of a people where another means would fail.

Beauty has a magical ability to absorb the interest, attention, and concentration of people. Indeed, that is truly its function—to attract us, not to beauty itself, but to the beautiful thing. Beauty is some quality which makes a truth attractive to us, whether that

truth be a religious doctrine, a man, or a vase—all of which can be said to be truthful insofar as they exist. All human beings have had the experience of being so stimulated by a beautiful thing that they are almost compelled to investigate it. We *must* know more about it. This is the effect that I believe art will have in bringing the East closer to the West and the West closer to the East—a stimulus toward sympathetic understanding of people who are different from one another.

The East is so different from the West in its historical development especially during the past four or five hundred years that one cannot expect too much from this one means, however. Art appeals to all people because, regardless of philosophical, religious, or national differences, the emotional—and to a certain extent the intellectual—response is similar. A Westerner may be captivated by a Chinese jade vase for different reasons than an Easterner would be, but both are unanimous in their appreciation of it. The Easterner can see this work of art as part of a living system, whereas a Westerner who is not well versed may not. But for the Westerner, Eastern art is a likely starting point.

That the Easterner would be as affected by Western art as the Westerner by Eastern seems rather doubtful to me, however, because Western art is not part of a unified system. As materialism grips the minds of a people and transposes its set of values from a spiritual plane to one based more exclusively on worldly considerations, artistic expression tends to reflect more and more the personal peculiarities of the individual artist, rather than a common body of truth upon which the society's soul rests. Western art today has no unanimity. Sculpture and painting and all the rest (except perhaps architecture) are often so highly subjective that they communicate nothing to people. It seems in accordance with the facts to maintain that for many Westerners art has no meaning; it is merely a matter of technique. At best it seems to be an ephemeral expression of a momentary emotion. Perhaps it is closer to the truth to say that rather than being just the result of some artist's subjectivity, this characteristic of discreteness is symptomatic of the West's spiritual ailments. The whole of Western society is basically fragmented and disoriented; it recognizes no higher meaning in human existence than the amount of money one possesses, or the newness of his car, or the Dow-Jones average. This is not true, of course, of individuals, but it is of the society—insofar as it can be considered as a whole.

For the reasons stated above, it seems to me that the more the

East accepts our ideas, the less chance there will be for mutual understanding. We must have *some* things in common, of course, but if they were to accept, as I hope they will not, our ways and our values, whatever spiritual unity their lives possess will be lost.

It was Charles Malik, the Lebanese delegate to the UN who stated that the West can hardly expect to benefit the East until it cures its own spiritual ills. I concur with this to the fullest extent. That the East, for self-preservation, must adapt and change some of its age-old ways, is doubtless. But once she loses her spiritual values and motivations, she will be a mere competitor with the West. Today we still have opportunities for meeting on the human plane—because the East is still societally human. The craftsman and the individual artisan still have a place there. The whole man, the man spiritually satisfied in his work, will become less and less common as the factories and the other industrial and economic influences of the West displace the old ways and negate the old truths. Should this happen, should the East become torn from its proper antecedents and spliced to Western tradition, a sick hybrid will result—neither one nor the other, and manifesting only what is worst in each tradition. Not to be unduly pessimistic, I am forced to this conclusion because the East can never be, and never should be, another West. If she is forced to abandon her true nature, she will be even more spiritually frustrated than the West, she will be as spiritually scatterbrained as the West corporately is, and as a result will be even less able to communicate with us (on the human level) than she is today.

It is true that Westernism has already made heavy inroads in the East in both its forms—capitalism and Communism. To speak only of the former, it is perhaps axiomatic to say that capitalism has brought both good and bad. However much the good (or bad) may be, it seems fair to say that East is no closer to the West than she was one hundred years ago. With the foreseeable possibility of a world culture in the next few millenia, there will never be true understanding until both East and West modify. It is not a case of one side being right and the other wrong. It is a case of a necessary partnership in which each must bear equal responsibility. With all our differences, we still have a common participation in the human family.

It is often pointed out that in the East the individual does not count for as much as in the West. It seems to me that that statement should be re-examined at least from one aspect. It is not true that the societal solidity which was so much a part of India,



China, and Japan was possible only because millions of individuals sacrificed some of their rights for the common good? Is it not true that in the West of the rugged individualist, the attitude is more likely to be one of competition with every-man-for-himself? The difference to me seems to be that the Easterner is more self-disciplined, not that in reality the individual is less important.

As long as the West is forced by its materialistic scale of values to be introverted, to be unable to see anything worthwhile but a mad, self-acquisitive scramble, she will be unable to seek a true identification with her neighbors. When the West is able to truly understand the human values, she will be able to understand the East. Because of its intimate association with the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual facets of man's being, it seems to me that art is one of the primary means of breaching the gap. Eric Gill in *Money and Morals* made this statement: "I can tell you the absolute truth about art in a couple of sentences. Art is skill; it is the deliberate skill of men used in the making of things, and good art is the well making of what needs making." This statement, it seems to me, would receive wide acceptance in the East than in the West, because the Eastern practice more closely approximates it. When the West understands this principle, more men will make more things *deliberately*, more men will appreciate the fact that "artistic" is not just another word for "bizarre," and more men will be able to comprehend the Eastern approach to the little things. Perhaps we will never be able to appreciate as do the Easterners, but or lines of communication will be open. — *Humanities*.