

International Exhibition of Chinese Art

THE exhibition of Chinese art, which opened at the Royal Academy of Art, Burlington House, Piccadilly, London, on November 28, is a unique opportunity for student and connoisseur alike. No such collection of objects from the Far East has ever been gathered together in Europe before; and it is an opportunity that is not likely to recur. Nearly four thousand objects are shown, of which every one is of interest, either for its æsthetic excellence, or for its historical significance.

The nucleus of the exhibition is drawn from the Chinese national collections and has been selected from the Imperial treasures which came from the Forbidden City. Not a few of these were made specially for palace use, and bear the emperor's commemorative inscription. In addition, exhibits have been contributed from public and private collections in Japan and the United States, and among European countries, Great Britain, France, Germany, Sweden, Russia, Turkey and the City of Danzig. Even Egypt has helped. In fact, every effort has been made to secure that the exhibits should be as fully representative as possible.

The range of the exhibits is almost as varied as the sources from which they have now been brought together. Every side of Chinese artistic achievement has been covered—in all instances adequately to meet the needs of the student, in many with abundance. Bronzes, carpets, enamels, embroideries, glass, ivories, lacquer, paintings, calligraphy, sculpture, textiles, and, needless to say, numerous examples of the most characteristic products of Chinese culture, jades and pottery and porcelain, all are shown at the highest point of attainment in technique and artistic development in the respective periods.

The exhibition has been arranged on a chronological basis, in dynastic periods. Some idea of the impressive character of Chinese civilisation will be gathered from the fact that the exhibits, of which the earliest in date may well stand comparison in artistic merit with later objects in their own class, cover a period of no less than thirty-five centuries, ending at A.D. 1800 and beginning with the Bronze Age at about the middle of the eighteenth century B.C. This is a record with which not even Egypt, with all its long history, can compete.

In an exhibition such as this, in which the principle of selection has been either purely æsthetic or relative to the history of artistic development, the objects shown are unfortunately but necessarily divorced from their cultural context—an association of the greatest importance, as all will admit, who have any acquaintance with Chinese culture. Of the purely æsthetic aspect of the exhibition, NATURE may well leave others to speak. It is far from being without significance for scientific studies.

The ethnologist, and still more the archæologist, will find much of supreme interest and no little importance here. This indeed is no more than might be expected when so long a period of development is covered. The ethnologist, for example, will note the early appearance in the bronzes of the Shang-Yin dynasty (? 1766–? 1122 B.C.) of the characteristic feeling of China for form and ornament, as well as the delicacy of handling in technique. Nor will he over-

look how, notwithstanding ethnic movement at various periods, after being influenced for a time, these qualities reassert themselves, except possibly in the last period under the Manchu dynasty, when the effect of influences making for an elaboration of form and colour seem to have been unusually prolonged. This persistence of the native stamp may perhaps be appreciated most readily in the sculptures and figures of the T'ang period (A.D. 618–819), when Chinese Buddhist art, purified from corrupting elements by fresh contacts with India through the Chinese pilgrims who journeyed to that country, rapidly reasserted its native qualities in the imported art forms. It is perhaps scarcely necessary to add that the objects belonging to the earlier dynasties, and especially the human figures, coming from burials, are of the greatest significance for Chinese religious belief, legend and domestic culture.

To the archæologist and student of prehistory, the interest of the exhibition, especially in the chronologically earlier sections, is even greater. Early Chinese history in its annals is obscured in the mists of time. The records of the emperors and of their achievements stretch well back into the third millennium B.C. Until recently it had been held—and even then with some doubt—that authentic history did not begin at the earliest before the Chou dynasty (? 1122–249 B.C.). Excavation, however, which began with a Japanese expedition in 1906, was continued by Dr. J. C. Andersson after the Great War, and recently has been prosecuted with vigour by the Chinese themselves, has revealed the existence in North and Central China of a chalcolithic civilisation, which followed on a neolithic culture ending about 2000 B.C. It would appear from recent research that this chalcolithic civilisation reached, or at least influenced, southern China about the beginning of the Chou dynasty, or slightly before (see NATURE of August 31, p. 346). Among the objects of this early culture there appears a painted pottery, apparently belonging to the groups of early painted pottery which have been found in eastern Europe, western Asia, Baluchistan and northern India. In China it appears to be an intrusion which dies out, a second type of unpainted ware being the characteristic form, persisting through the later period.

Interesting as this early civilisation undoubtedly is in view of its possible Western affinities, its connexion with the period which follows, on present evidence, is of no less moment. For it is to be noted that the early ceremonial bronzes and other objects of the Bronze Age from recent excavations, some of which are inscribed, appear to confirm the records of the emperors of the Shang-Yin dynasty in the annals previously regarded as legendary.

Unfortunately, it has not been possible to do more than refer in passing to the remarkable series of exhibits of the T'ang period, perhaps China's age of greatest expansion. Here the most noteworthy exhibits are the paintings recovered by Sir Aurel Stein from Tun-huang; but the whole exhibit of this period is of the greatest importance for the student of cultural contacts between East and West, notably in the sculpture, where Greek influence still lingers, permeating through India after many centuries.