All About the Eyes: Two Groups of Sculptures from the Sanxingdui Culture

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For years, I have been fascinated by a sculpted human figure in The Art Institute of Chicago (Figs 1a, b and c). It intrigues me most for a visual disharmony: while the figure itself is perhaps the most sensitive representation of the human body from Bronze Age China (c. 16th-3rd century BCE), it has no eyes. On either side of the straight bridge of the nose are two slightly sunken surfaces, curving smoothly to connect raised cheekbones with a pronounced forehead. No carving is discernible on these two surfaces, whose blankness—the lack of eyes—is further accentuated by those facial features that do exist: ears, a mouth and a nose—all faithfully rendered in three-dimensional form. This, of course, means that the sculptor not only left the eyes out, but deliberately emphasized their absence: the realization of what the statue lacks is heightened by what it so masterfully represents.

Carved from a block of black jade-like stone and polished to a shining surface, the figure, most likely a man, kneels in a frontal pose (see Fig. 1a), his hands tied behind his back with what appears to be a thick rope (see Fig. 1c). The pressure on his wrists forces him to bend his upper body slightly (see Fig. 1b), but he still faces forward with his head held high (thereby making his ‘blindness’ even more pronounced). The statue is not a tiny, crude mannequin; about 20 centimetres tall, it is considerably larger than most known jade figures from the Shang (16th century—c. 1050 BCE) and Zhou (c. 1050-256 BCE) periods (see Fig. 14). What is truly remarkable about this work, though, is not its size, but its quality of artistic representation. The proportions of the figure are surprisingly naturalistic for a work from such a remote age. No clothes are shown, yet neither the genitalia nor other bodily details (apart from the hair and ears) are represented—the planes on the torso are in fact so simplified that the sculpture takes on an almost abstract character, with the unbroken smoothness of the subtly swelling surfaces seeming to reflect a conscious pursuit for a plastic rendering of form and volume. This style also characterizes the head, in which three-dimensionality is achieved by adjoining semi-abstract concave and convex planes into a solid shape. The details of the hair and ears, however, are delineated using the technique of linear incision: the hair on top of the head, which is parted in the middle like an open book, is marked with parallel...
striations on each side, and the pigtail hanging down from the back of the head to the waist is engraved in the form of a double braid (see Fig. 1c); the unusually large fan-shaped ears have incised helices; additionally, the lobes are perforated.

The early history of this statue is somewhat a mystery. It was first published by Osvald Sirén (1879-1966) in 1942 in *Kinas Konst under tre Artusenden* (Stockholm, vol. 1, pl. 18.5). No information concerning its provenance was given, although its whereabouts were vaguely identified as ‘a private collection’ in Peking. Here, however, Sirén was probably misled by his Chinese informant, because the statue may have been acquired by Edward Sonnenschein (1881-1935) as early as the beginning of the 1930s. (The entire Sonnenschein collection entered the institute as a bequest in 1950.) Then Elnor Pearlstein, the institute’s Associate Curator of Chinese Art, who has been researching the carved jades in the Sonnenschein collection for years, drew my attention to an old photograph in the museum archives (Fig. 2). It shows the ‘jade room’ in Sonnenschein’s house in Glencoe, Illinois, with the black statue displayed in a prominent position in a glass cabinet. The photograph is not dated, but according to Alice Putnam Breuer, whom Pearlstein interviewed in 1996, the room in the photograph is furnished exactly as it was when she visited Sonnenschein’s house in 1934, and she remembered vividly the ‘black kneeling figure’ in the cabinet.

For the next half a century the figure remained a unique example of its kind, as although an increasing number of jade and stone human figures were found in Neolithic (c. 6000-c. 1700 BCE) and Shang-Zhou sites during this period, they differ from this statue in shape, size, and material. The poverty of comparative examples has made it difficult to ascertain the statue’s date and origin, and in his catalogue *Archaic Chinese Jades from the Edward and Louise B. Sonnenschein Collection* (Chicago, 1952, pl. LXXXVI), the prominent scholar of archaic Chinese jades Alfred Salmony (1890-1958) offered no opinion as to its possible provenance, and dated it, rather impressionistically, to the late Eastern Zhou (771-256 BCE), probably due to its sophisticated artistic style and advanced carving technique.

Recent discoveries in Sichuan province, however, offer us a valuable clue to the statue’s origin. In 1983, during the construction of the Sichuan Provincial Works’ Union Building in Fanci street in Chengdu, an ancient site was discovered, which underground remains demonstrated had been active for a period of close to 1,000 years, from the late Neolithic to the Spring and Autumn (722-481 BCE) period (Xu, p. 90; a different opinion held by some Chinese scholars is that the site lasted from the Shang-Zhou to the Warring States (480-221 BCE) period). Artefacts from an early stratum included pottery cups and jars with pointed bottoms, as well as a human skull bearing chiselled holes and traces of burning – clearly a divinatory instrument, which the excavators linked to similar oracle bones from the last Shang capital at Anyang in Henan province. Another important find from the same stratum was a large sculpted human figure, which, according to the excavation report, was about half a metre tall and made of greenish stone, and represented a kneeling
ing figure with hands tied behind his back; the hair is parted in the middle on top of his head', although these features were hardly evident in the accompanying photograph (ibid., p. 91; Wu, 1988). A trip to Sichuan in 1995 enabled me to examine in person the Fangchi street figure, which is housed in the Chengdu Municipal Museum (Fig. 3). Its relationship with the Chicago piece is beyond any doubt — in fact, although the excavated work is made of ordinary stone and damaged on one side, the man it portrays is almost identical to the Chicago figure. Both have their hands tied behind their back and wear the same hair style. What is more, both figures have no eyes.

The Fangchi street excavation was just one of many important archaeological activities conducted in the early 1980s in the Sichuan Basin which radically changed our understanding of the early history of this remote southwestern region. The most spectacular discoveries were made at Yueliangwan and Sanxingdui, two adjacent villages in Guanghan county some 60 kilometres northwest of Chengdu. After a series of excavations and surveys, archaeologists concluded that an ancient city once existed in this place; its thick walls enclosed numerous buildings, workshops and sacrificial sites in an area of 120,000 square kilometres (Fig. 4). In fact, several large groups of jade and stone carvings had already been found in the Yueliangwan area in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and it also became clear that these were all remains of this ancient city. The group found earliest was discovered in the spring of 1929 by a local family named Yan, and consisted of 300 to 400 items, including many jade ritual objects. The family kept the find secret for three or four years and sold their discoveries later on, creating a sensation in the Chengdu antique market in the early 1930s. Recognizing the importance of these ancient objects, V.H. Donnithorne, an English priest in Chengdu at the time, persuaded the city’s Huaxi University to collect them in its newly established museum. Still, many pieces in the group fell into private hands, and it is quite possible that some were sold abroad (Qu et al., p. 39; Ao and Liu, p. 331).

The 1929 event initiated a series of planned excavations and accidental finds in the Yueliangwan area, including an archaeological expedition organized by Huaxi University in 1933 and 1934, surveys conducted by Sichuan Provincial Museum and Sichuan University in 1958 and 1963, and the accidental discoveries of two hoards of stone and jade carvings in 1964 and 1974. The large number of unfinished works in stone and jade found in these excavations led scholars to believe that the area was a manufacturing centre for such carvings, an assumption which was confirmed by a large-scale excavation in 1984 at nearby Xiquankan, where, in an architectural foundation, numerous finished and unfinished stone bi-disks and an abundance of leftover stone materials were found, as well as some pottery vessels (including jars with pointed bottoms), and, according to the excavation report, a ‘sculpted stone slave with his hands tied behind his back’ (Chen Xiandan, p. 216). So far, this canard is uncontrovertible. Reports elsewhere (Chengdu Municipal Museum, 1981), however, also mention Xiquankan bodies in the same archaeological horizon.

We do not have the same sort of coherent iconographic programme in the nearby Xiquankan, although the fourth-century B.C.E. date for the same finds coincides with that of the market for ancient bronzes in the fourth century B.C.E. in the Sanxingdui area. This is why the excavations there are more sophisticated. But we do know that the figures from Xiquankan, typical of the mental process of the Semitic Sannong cultural complex, were found, and it is for this period that we can determine that the Sannong cultural complex could have been.

B efore we attempt a synthesis, however, we need to cross-examine the record. Sichuan’s story, well-organized and detailed, is one of the large and partly disorganized pottery and ceramic industries of lacquer, jade, and stone items, homogenous in their production technique, and for our purpose, figure types. In this case, in lieu of the occasional pictorial evidence, bronzes and jade images of statues (Fig. 12), many of which are small and decorative.

The findings have not been limited to ten or a dozen examples. An interpretation of the representations has been confirmed by a wealth of information about the finds and the various representations, an interpretation which derives from the indigenous Sichuanese usage of argicultural divination.
this carving has only been briefly mentioned in archaeological reports, but thanks to Chen Xiandan, Director of the Guanghan Municipal Museum and a chief organizer of the 1984 excavation, I was able to see photographs not only of this piece, but also of a second stone figure found in the Yueliangwan-Sanxingdui area. The heads of both figures were broken, but their bodies closely resembled the kneeling image in Chicago and the one from Fangchi street.

We now know, therefore, of four stone sculptures depicting the same kneeling figure; their close resemblance in both iconography and style attests to a specific artistic convention for representing the human form. Three were excavated from nearby sites in Chengdu and Guanghan, and it seems likely that the fourth piece in The Art Institute of Chicago originates from the same area, the time it entered the Sonnenschein collection coinciding with the surfacing of ‘Guanghan jades’ in antique markets in the early 1930s. We can thus confidently link these four works, as well as the artistic convention they embody, to the Sanxingdui culture, which emerged in the Sichuan Basin in the early third millennium BCE and developed into a highly sophisticated civilization in the middle and late second millennium BCE (Chen Xiandan, pp. 223–26; Zhao, pp. 6–7). The four figures can be dated to the late Sanxingdui period for two reasons: first, pottery vessels found at Fangchi street and Xiqiankuan, especially jars and cups with pointed bottoms, were typical products of the Sanxingdui culture in its last developmental stage during the late Shang to early Zhou. Second, the Sanxingdui-Yueliangwan site, where two of the figures were found, also developed into a walled ceremonial centre during this period.

Now that the date and provenance of the figures have been determined, we can proceed to link them with other types of Sanxingdui images and to explore their meaning in their cultural context.

Before 1980, most archaeological activities were concentrated on the Yueliangwan area; an accidental find in 1980, however, directed archaeologists’ attention also to Sanxingdui, across the Manu river to the southeast of Yueliangwan, and the Sichuan Archaeological Institute and Sichuan University organized three scientific excavations of the site in 1980, 1982 and 1986 (see Fig. 4). The 1986 excavation, which explored a large area of 1,325 square metres, yielded more than 100,000 pottery sherds and some 500 objects in bronze, jade, stone and lacquer. The excavators concluded that these artefacts were homogeneous to those from Yueliangwan, both stylistically and technically, and that the two sites belonged to the same culture and formed a single ceremonial complex. No sculpted human figures were found in these excavations; however, two sacrificial pits discovered in July and August 1986 yielded over 100 bronze human and semi-human images, including a life-size statue (see Fig. 10), fifty or so individual heads (see Figs 5 and 12), more than thirty masks (see Figs 6 and 7) and several dozen smaller figures (see Fig. 11).

The unprecedented forms and scale of these strange images have made Sanxingdui world famous. Numerous articles written on them often mix sensitive observation with subjective interpretation; identifications assigned to the sculptures (as representations of gods, rulers or shamans) are inevitably weakened by the lack of directly related literary evidence; proposals about their ritual function remain hypothetical because of their random disposal in the pits. This paper departs from these lines of argumentation. Instead of approaching the bronze images as a self-contained group and expounding on their identities and usage, I hope to link them with other Sanxingdui objects — in particular, the stone kneeling figures — and to explore some essential patterns in artistic imagination and production; differences between the two groups may reveal certain significant but previously unnoticed conventions in figurative representation in the Sanxingdui culture.

The most startling difference between the two groups of images lies in the treatment of the eyes: while the stone figures have no eyes, eyes are the most exaggerated feature of the bronze figures. Two kinds of eyes equip these bronze images. Most have a pair of huge, almond-shaped slanting eyes which dominate the whole face, with large brows above and deep sunken grooves below (Fig. 5). Their most distinctive feature is a central horizontal ridge, which transforms the eyeball into an angular geometric form. The second type of eye is even more fantastic, with the pupil projecting from the surface of the eyeball on a stalk. Three enormous, grotesque masks from Pit 2 feature such eyes and were probably originally installed on huge wooden columns. The largest mask is 138 centimetres wide and 65 centimetres high; each of the tube-like pupils is 16.5 centimetres long and 13.5 centimetres in diameter, with a flat ‘hoop’ in the middle (Fig. 6). A smaller one, 82.7 centimetres high and 77 centimetres wide, has an additional scroll-shaped projection rising from the nose (Fig. 7a).

What message did these distorted and exaggerated eyes convey, and why did the same culture also produce a group of ‘eyeless’ figures? As available archaeological materials supply little information to help answer these questions, it may be
(Fig. 6) Mask
From Pit 2, Sanxingdui, Guanghan county, Sichuan province
Sanxingdui culture, c. late 13th century BCE
Bronze
Height 65 cm, width 138 cm
Sichuan Provincial Institute of Archaeology and Cultural Relics
(After Chen De'an, 1994, pl. 29)

feasibility of the problem and recent research suggests that the persistent difficulty is due to the work of the late wintergale. The icon features a fully developed head, the best example of the making of an icon for the recreation of the ancient kingdom. Lakan's transformation of the head, it is now known, is based on the throwing of the mask (The Enigma, p. 85).

When we consider the making of the mask, we see that the sculptor, who lived in a more complex society, was aware of the ancient traditions. The mask, whose function was to protect the knaves from the prying eyes of their fellows, was a symbol of the Muslim world. It was made by the first agha, who had begun to practice Islamic calligraphy and was known for his beautiful handwriting and his skill in the art of calligraphy.

In this context, it is particularly interesting to note the fear of the mask as an object that can cause harm, and the refraining from using it to jump over the house, instead of doing so in a controlled atmosphere. The house is destroyed by a sudden, unexplained explosion. The mask is found broken in the sky. It is evident that the mask has been used for immolation, possibly by those who are seeking the freedom from death. The mask is also used to create a new style: a combination of ancient traditions and a new style that they are trying to create 'faced masks'. This is because they are not satisfied with the traditional mask, which they consider to be only one of a number of fixed designs.
feasible to turn to other artistic traditions, especially because problems concerning eyes – their representation, symbolism and relationship with ritual and religious belief – have been a persistent topic in the study of Western art. These issues have recently been studied by David Freedberg in his exhaustive work *The Power of Images*. Much of Freedberg’s discussion explains the power of eyes: over and over, the beholder of an icon finds himself controlled by its eyes, which are so powerfully directed at him that he feels unable to evade them, hence the belief in the eyes’ power. Consequently, the final stage of making an icon was often the ‘opening’ of the eyes – a consecration ceremony which aimed to bring the image to life. Ronald Knox, an Englishman held prisoner in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in the seventeenth century, for example, witnessed the transformation of a Buddhist image: ‘Before the Eyes are made, it is not accounted a God, but a lump of ordinary metal, and thrown about the shop with no more regard than anything else... The Eyes being formed, it is thenceforward a God’ (Freedberg, p. 85).

While the belief in the power of eyes could inspire the making of an icon, it also underlies one of the most frequent forms of iconoclasm: the destruction of the eyes of painted or sculpted images by religious enemies. A visitor to the Kizil caves in Chinese Turkestan (present-day Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region), for example, finds hundreds of Buddhas and bodhisattvas whose eyes have been stabbled by sharp knives; in so doing the icon-destroyers followed an archetypal example established by Muhammad himself: before removing pre-Islamic idols from the Ka’abah in Mecca, he first attempted to strike out their eyes with his bow. The unspoken premise of such practices is that to deprive the image of its eyes is to deprive it effectively of life.

In other cases, it is the artist who voluntarily left his image without eyes, through fear of their power. For example, it is said that Chinese artists Wei Xie (3rd-4th century) and Zhang Sengyou (act. 500-550) both refrained from painting in the eyes of their dragons, because they dared not see this mysterious creature become animate and jump out of the walls. One day, however, upon being challenged to do so, Zhang finally painted in the irises; the walls immediately collapsed, and the dragon took life and flew up into the sky. Similar tales are found in other cultures and may account for images which never have their eyes painted or sculpted. Freedberg has also noticed, very perceptively in my view, that these eyeless images often demonstrate a naturalistic artistic style; a ‘peculiarly realistic waxwork without eyes’ is ‘deeply troubling...precisely because where we fully expect eyes to be, they are awfully absent’ (ibid., p. 220); and in the case of a ‘faceless’ Greek statue of a dead woman: ‘We find it arresting because our expectation of a face in an otherwise anthropomorphically worked image is thwarted’ (ibid., p. 72).

Many parallels can be drawn between these examples and the Sanxingdui-Yuélijiangwan images. Both the stone and bronze figures from the Sanxingdui culture reflect a heightened awareness of the power of eyes, but in two different – and indeed opposite – manifestations of this awareness, the eyes are exaggerated on the bronze and omitted on the stone figures. Moreover, a peculiar feature of the tube-eyed masks from Pit 2 may suggest a certain form of the ‘eye-opening ceremony’: the protruding pupils were first made as separate pieces and then fixed onto the mask’s hollow eyes through a second casting (Fig. 7b). Technically speaking, the column-like pupil could easily have been cast together with the mask, and the employment of the ‘second casting’ technique may therefore have served a specific ritual purpose.

On the other hand, the Sanxingdui culture examples also challenge and enrich Freedberg’s theory. Calling his book a study of ‘visual response’ (i.e., the relationship between image and beholder), Freedberg focuses on the role of the gaze, which he equates with the eyes – a problematic equation seen in many other analyses of figurative images in Western art as well. The eyes, however, are the organs of sight; the gaze is the sight and pertains to the act of looking. In a visual representation, an eye is a physical feature defined by the eyelids and embellished with eyelashes, eyeballs and pupils; the gaze is an effect of a particular eye image and is necessarily produced by the look of the pupil. If the pupils were to be erased, the impression of the gaze would immediately disappear – but a pair of gaze-less eyes would remain. These distinctions are necessary because they allow a more precise analysis of images. In the present case, they enable us to define the nature of the two different kinds of distorted eyes on the Sanxingdui bronze figures. The first type – slanting, and with a horizontal ridge across the eyeball – exaggerates the size, contour and opacity of the eyes; but these have no pupils and do not affect the onlooker with a definite gaze (see Fig. 5). The second type follows a reverse logic – the tube-like protrusion only exaggerates the pupil (see Figs 6 and 7a). It seems that the gaze is given a material, sculpted form, extending towards the onlooker and overpowering him with its sheer physicality.

What we find here, therefore, is a situation which can not be explained satisfactorily by the theory of visual response. Although one type of eye omits the gaze while the other exaggerates it, the visual communication between image and onlooker is fundamentally absent. Rather, the Sanxingdui bronze figures signify a particular notion of the eye (and even the gaze) as a physical entity, transformed by art into an alien form to inspire awe. This notion also implies isolation and objectification, and in Sanxingdui art, eyes not only dominated faces, but also acquired individual form as disembodied objects: about fifty diamond-shaped bronze fittings – the largest over 76 centimetres wide – were found together with the bronze heads and masks in Pit 2 (Fig. 8). Each has a raised circular
centre between two relief triangles – a pattern that has led the excavators to call them 'eye fittings'. Another type of disembodied eye, equally stylized, has a disk for the eyeball; the outer corner rises to a sharp tip and the inner corner turns into a hook. Such eyes are made as individual fittings, or appear beneath a huge-eyed zoomorphic mask (Fig. 9).

Only at this juncture can we attempt to link these bronze images with certain literary evidence which, though coming from later periods or different contexts, associates ancient Sichuan with exaggerated and isolated eye idioms. In Shang dynasty oracle bone inscriptions, for example, the character Shu – the name of an ancient kingdom in Sichuan – is written as 甲, which shows an enormous eye with a serpentine body. Some Chinese scholars have noticed a resemblance between this graph and patterns on the clothes of the life-size Sanxingdui statue (Fig. 10) (Chen De'an, pp. 124-25). Other scholars have found an interesting passage in the 'Shu Zhi' ('Records of the Shu Kingdom') chapter of the Huayuanzuo Zhi ('Records of the Huayuan Kingdom'), a fourth century text by Chang Ju containing valuable information about ancient Sichuan history, which states that Can Cong, the legendary ruler of the Shu kingdom, 'had a pair of "vertical eyes" (zong nu) and made himself king'; they have proposed that the term zong nu may in fact describe the tube-like eyes on some of the Sanxingdui masks and that these masks represent Can Cong (Fan, 1991). Regardless of the reliability of this theory, the text clearly documents a belief in which an extraordinary ruler is distinguished by the extraordinary shape of his eyes. This belief seems in perfect symmetry with another ancient belief, which associates slaves with 'blindness'. The famous historian and epigraphist Guo Moruo (1892-1978) first noticed that in inscriptions of some Western Zhou period (c. 1050-771 BCE) bronzes, min (slaves) and mang (blindness) share the character 甲, a graph which shows 'an eye being pierced by a sharp blade' (Jiaju Wenzi Yanjiu [Studies of Oracle Bone Inscriptions], Beijing, 1952, pp. 33b-34b).

This finally leads us back to the eyeless figures from the Sanxingdui culture, whose differences from the bronze figures denote a far inferior social status. First, they are all naked, but when the body of one of the bronze figures is represented, it always wears an elaborate costume, with fine patterns imitating complex embroidery. Second, the eyeless figures all have their hands tied behind their back, but none of the bronze figures are subjected to this or other kinds of punishment. The bronze figures with bodies often hold a ritual object, such as a ceremonial sceptre (Fig. 11). The object originally held by the life-size statue is missing (see Fig. 10), but judging from the angling of the massive holes in the hands, it is likely to have been a curved piece, probably an elephant's tusk. (Abundant elephant's tusks were buried in the same pits, suggesting their ritual significance.) While this imposing statue is clearly an important icon for worship, the eyeless figures possibly represent captives or slaves – who were often used as human sacrifices in Bronze Age China. Although in real life, their eyes may have been pierced – Guo Moruo found such cases in ancient texts – in art they are simply portrayed as being without eyes. The artistic representation itself thus signifies symbolic killing: as Freedberg has suggested, to take away the eyes is to take away life.

It would be too limited, however, to understand the relationship between the two groups of Sanxingdui figures merely in a sociological sense. What they index, in fact, are two different but complementary systems of visual signs. In terms of artistic medium, the four eyeless figures are all made of stone, the jade-like material of the Chicago statue being the finest; however, an X-ray diffraction study conducted by Janet G. Snyder of the Sackler Gallery in Washington, DC, has found it to be mineral chlorite (serpentinite), a type of low-grade metaphoric rock. (This information is provided by Elinor Pearlstein.) The huge-eyed images from the two Sanxingdui pits, on the other hand, are all made of the precious metal bronze; some even have additional gold masks covering their faces (Fig. 12). Perhaps more important, though, is the fact that the two groups of sculptures display very different artistic styles. As mentioned earlier, the stone figures show a remarkable naturalism rarely seen in early Chinese art, the use of which in portraying blinded captives or slaves heightens the sense of absence. We are reminded of Freedberg's theory, that 'if an image is perceived as particularly lifelike, then the absence of the eyes may inspire terror' (Freedberg, p. 202). The bronze figures, in contrast, are highly stylized and schematic, and are characterized by a high degree of unnaturalness. Most of the faces are so grotesque that they appear as fantastic combinations of human and animal shapes; it seems that by distorting the natural human form, the artist could bestow his creation with supernatural qualities.

A final piece of evidence allows us to place the eyeless Sanxingdui images in an even broader context. Scholars have pointed out many similarities and differences between the
(Fig. 10) Life-size statue
From Pit 2, Sanxingdui, Guanghan county, Sichuan province
Sanxingdui culture, c. late 13th century BCE
Bronze
Height 262 cm including base
Sichuan Provincial Institute of Archaeology and Cultural Relics

(Fig. 11) Drawing of a kneeling figure holding a ceremonial sceptre
From Pit 2, Sanxingdui, Guanghan county, Sichuan province
Sanxingdui culture, c. late 13th century BCE
Bronze
Sichuan Provincial Institute of Archaeology and Cultural Relics
(After Chen De'an, 'Sichuan Sanxingdui Yuzhang de Zhonglei, Yuanyuan ji qi Zongjiao Yiyi' ['The Typology, Development and Religious Significance of Jade Sceptres from Sanxingdui in Sichuan'], in Teng Chungen, ed., Nan Zhongguo ji Lian Jia Gu Wenhuai Yanjiu (Studies of Ancient Cultures in South China and Neighbouring Regions), Hong Kong, 1994, p. 98, fig. 13-7.1)

(Fig. 12) Head
From Pit 2, Sanxingdui, Guanghan county, Sichuan province
Sanxingdui culture, c. late 13th century BCE
Bronze with gold detail
Height 41 cm, width 12.7 cm
Sichuan Provincial Institute of Archaeology and Cultural Relics
(After Chen De'an, 1994, pl. 23)

Figures in real life, and such figures as being a means of expressing human aspirations or being the symbol of man's relationship to the natural world. Snyder et al. have suggested that the long sections of the sceptres are symbolic of the metaphorically 'tongue' of a 'terror snake' (after Earhart). Snyder et al. have also suggested that the sceptres may have been used as visual aids in ceremonies, perhaps to convey the idea of the ruler's power to his subjects. This idea is supported by the fact that the sceptres are often found in the tombs of the rulers of the Sanxingdui culture. The sceptres are also often found with other objects that are associated with the ruler, such as his throne and his regalia.

The sceptres are typically long and thin, with a variety of shapes and designs. The shape of the sceptre is often symbolic, and the design may represent a specific idea or concept. For example, the sceptre may be shaped like a dragon or a phoenix, symbols of power and prosperity. The sceptres are often decorated with intricate designs and patterns, which may represent the natural world or the ruler's personal beliefs and values.

The sceptres are made of a variety of materials, including bronze, jade, and wood. The bronze sceptres are often more elaborate and decorative, while the jade sceptres are more simple and functional. The sceptres are often highly polished, and the surface is often decorated with engravings or carvings.

The sceptres were likely used in a variety of contexts, including religious ceremonies, military parades, and other public events. The sceptres were often carried by the ruler, and they may have been used as symbols of power and authority. The sceptres were also likely used as symbols of the ruler's connection to the natural world, and they may have been used to convey the idea of the ruler's ability to control and manipulate the natural world.

The sceptres are a fascinating example of the Sanxingdui culture's use of art to express their ideas and beliefs. The sceptres are a testament to the creativity and skill of the Sanxingdui culture, and they continue to be studied and admired by scholars and art lovers around the world.
artistic products of the Sanxingdui and the metropolitan Shang cultures. My study of sculptured figures from ancient Sichuan has also led me to search for similar examples in the Central Plains area. Among the numerous jade and stone carvings discovered in the tomb of Fu Hao (d. c. 1200 BCE), the famous consort of the Shang king Wu Ding, at Anyang, was a sculpted human head that is quite unique (Fig. 13). With a height of 5.6 centimeters, this piece is much larger than the head of any other human figure in the tomb, although it is similar in size to the head of the kneeling figure in the Art Institute of Chicago. While the features of a typical Shang figurine are delineated by lines (Fig. 14), the modelling of this head relies exclusively on three-dimensional forms — an important characteristic of the Chinese statue. What clinches the identity of this head to be an imported work from the Sanxingdui culture, however, is that it has no eyes. In their place are two empty depressions, just as we have found on the kneeling figures in Chicago and from Fangchi street (see Figs 1 and 3). Fu Hao’s collection of ‘exotic’ jades thus not only included old pieces from the Neolithic Hongshan (northeast China; c. 3500-c. 2500 BCE), Liangzhu (southeast China; c. 3500-c. 2500 BCE) and Shijiahe (south-central China; c. 2500-c. 2000 BCE) cultures, but also pieces from contemporary Sichuan. (For non-Shang jade found in Fu Hao’s tomb, see Jessica Rawson, Chinese Jade from the Neolithic to the Qing, London, 1995, pp. 41-43.) Nevertheless, this type of Sanxingdui sculpture seems to have had little impact on metropolitan Shang art: neither its ‘eyeless’ iconography nor its naturalistic style are shared by excavated Shang figurines, even though some of them represent slaves or human sacrifices.

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