Han Dynasty Tomb Murals from the Luoyang Museum of Ancient Tomb Relics
‘Binary’ Imagery in Early Sixth Century Chinese Pictorial Art
Tang Dynasty Iron Oxen of Pujin Bridge/Yamato-e
Three Famous Stone Monuments from Luoyang: ‘Binary’ Imagery in Early Sixth Century Chinese Pictorial Art

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The period known as the Northern and Southern dynasties (386-589) is commonly recognized as a turning point in Chinese art history. Major developments during these two centuries include the construction of enormous Buddhist cave chapels, the emergence of great painters and calligraphers, and a profound change in visual perception and representation. This last achievement has often been characterized as the discovery of pictorial space, meaning that the artist was finally able to turn an opaque canvas or stone slab into a transparent ‘window’ open to an illusory reality. This assertion is not false, but it often attributes such a development to a few master artists or views it as an independent evolution of pictorial forms. An alternative approach advanced in this article is that the new visual forms represented a rebellion against traditional ritual art. While old types of monuments – the mortuary shrine, sarcophagus and stele – continued, their surface decoration began to assume independence. Although still ceremonial or didactic in content, a pictorial scene intrigued the eye and the mind. By transforming a monument into a sheer surface for pictures, these forms allowed people to see things that had never been seen or represented before. This approach has led me to reinterpret three famous stone monuments. Created at the beginning of the sixth century in Luoyang in present-day Henan province, their engravings best demonstrate an important but neglected mode in early Chinese pictorial art, which I term ‘binary’ imagery.

Dating from 529, a small funerary shrine now in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (Fig. 1) exhibits no major differences in form and structure from a Han dynasty (206 BC-AD 220) shrine of some four centuries earlier. What does distinguish it from a Han ritual building are its engravings, especially those executed on the single stone panel that forms the shrine’s rear.

(Fig. 1) Funerary Shrine of Ning Mao Northern Wei dynasty, 529
Grey limestone
Height 138 cm, width 200 cm, depth 97 cm
Anna Mitchell Richards and Martha Silsbee Funds
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 37.340
Photograph courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
wall (Fig. 2). Here, a faintly delineated architectural framework represents the timber façade of a building, a 'frame' enclosing the portraits of three gentlemen. Attired in similar costumes and each accompanied by a female figure, the three men differ from one another mainly in age. The figure to the right is a younger man with a fleshy face and a strong torso; the one to the left is heavily bearded with an angular face and a slender body. Whereas these two vigorous and high-spirited figures both face outward in three-quarter view, the third figure in the middle is a fragile older man with his back to the viewer retreating into an inner space. Slightly humpbacked and lowering his head, he concentrates on a lotus flower in his hand. The iconic use of the flower — a symbol of purity and wisdom — originated in Buddhism, which by the sixth century had spread among the Chinese literati. Lost in deep contemplation, this focal figure is about to enter the wooden-framed building, leaving this world and us, the viewers, behind.

The modern Chinese scholar Huang Minglan has offered an
interesting reading of this composition. He suggested that all three images represent Ning Mao, to whom the mortuary shrine was dedicated, and that these images together narrate the stages of Ning’s life, from his vigorous youth to his final spiritual enlightenment (see ‘Shike xianhua’, fig. 5). Ning Mao’s epitaph (Fig. 3) mentions three dated events: at the age of 35 (486) he became a clerk at the Ministry of the Imperial Cabinet of the Northern Wei dynasty (386-539). A few years later, in 489, he was promoted to a general of the Imperial Mausoleum Guards in charge of ritual affairs. After the Northern Wei moved the capital to Luoyang in 494, he assumed the post of chief of the Construction Corps, which was in charge of building new palaces and temples. He was promoted to chief secretary of the Construction Office after the completion of the main palace, but soon fell ill and died in 501 (Tomita, pp. 109-10). Although the three portraits on Ning’s shrine do not necessarily coincide with these specific events, they do show the general contour of his life as described in the epitaph. His positions as ritual specialist and imperial architect must also explain the unusually high quality of the engravings on his memorial shrine. The sentiment conveyed by the portraits – transformation from engagement in worldly affairs to the internal pursuit of spiritual peace – was a favourite intellectual subject during the Northern and Southern dynasties; in the pictorial representation, however, the conflict between life and death, between worldly activities and internal peace, is crystallized in the ‘front and back’ images. Lived experience ends at the point where the central figure of Ning Mao turns inward, about to penetrate the solid surface of the stone.

This juxtaposition of ‘front and back’ images eventually became a pictorial formula. In many cases this type of composition no longer possessed a specific ritual or philosophical implication, but was used as a standard device to increase the complexity of representation. Figure 4 reproduces the engravings on a famous Northern Wei period sarcophagus now in the collection of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City. On the two long sides of the stone box, stories of filial paragons are delineated in a landscape setting. Compared with Han period depictions of similar subjects, these pictures signify many new developments. A comparison of the sarcophagus’ scene illustrating the story of the filial son Dong Yong (Fig. 4a) and the same story illustrated on a wall of the Eastern Han period (25-220) Wu Liang shrine in Shandong.
province (Fig. 5) demonstrates most noticeably the development of a new sequential narrative mode and a three-dimensional landscape setting. Framed by a patterned band, each composition of the Nelson sarcophagus seems a translucent ‘window’ onto an elusive world.

The strong sense of three dimensionality in these pictures has enticed scholars to interpret them in the light of the standard criteria of a linear perspective system, such as overlapping forms and the technique of foreshortening (Soper, 1948, pp. 180-85). In such an analysis the researcher, either consciously or unconsciously, equates the Chinese example with post-Renaissance painting, which employs linear perspective as the most powerful means to create pictorial illusions. If one examines the pictures on the sarcophagus more carefully, however, there are some peculiar features that do not agree with the basic principles and purposes of linear perspective, but do fit perfectly well with the ‘binary’, or ‘front-and-back’, representational mode. In simplest terms, the single station-point assumption of linear perspective is that the artist’s and viewer’s gaze travels from a chosen vantage point to a fixed vanishing point (Fig. 6). The ‘binary’ mode, however, is based on the assumption that a form should be seen from both the front and the back; when a form is represented as such, it guides the viewer’s gaze back and forth but never toward a real or implied vanishing point in the picture (Fig. 7).

A detail on the Nelson sarcophagus (Fig. 8) depicts the

(Fig. 5) Scene depicting the story of the filial son Dong Yong Wu Liang shrine, Jinxiang, Shandong province Eastern Han dynasty, 151 Rubbing of stone engraving (After Wu Hung, The Wu Liang Shrine: The Ideology of Early Chinese Pictorial Art, Stanford, 1989, p. 290)

(Fig. 6) The single station-point assumption of linear perspective

(Fig. 7) The binary mode of pictorial representation
(a: front image, a': back image)

(Fig. 8) Detail of Figure 4 showing the story of Wang Lin
story of the famous Confucian paragon Wang Lin, who saved his brother from bandits. A tall tree in the middle divides the scene into two halves. Alexander Soper has boldly suggested that the images in both halves actually represent a single episode – the confrontation of Wang Lin and the bandits; the difference between the two scenes is that one is depicted from the front and the other from the rear (Soper, 1941, pp. 159-60). It seems to me that in making this assertion Soper has gone too far. In the left-hand scene a rope is tied around the brother’s neck, and Wang Lin has thrown himself on his knees in front of the bandits, begging them to take him instead of his brother. In the right-hand scene, both Wang Lin and his brother have been released. These two scenes, therefore, represent two consecutive episodes of the story in a temporal sequence.

This iconographic explanation, however, does not rule out Soper’s basic observation regarding the different views of the two scenes. What is most important here is not which episode or episodes the picture represents (similar stories had been abundantly illustrated from the Han period onward), but how these episodes are depicted and viewed. In the scene on the left the bandits have just emerged from a deep valley and are meeting Wang Lin. (In a more general sense, they also meet the viewer.) In the next scene, Wang Lin and his brother are leading the bandits into another valley and the whole procession has turned away from the viewer; all that can be seen are people’s backs and the rear end of a horse. One’s vision is controlled by the figures’ motion. In viewing the left ‘frontal’ scene, the eye takes in the arriving figures, but turning to the next scene one cannot help but feel that the viewer has been abruptly and, in a way, very rudely abandoned and ignored. The figures are leaving and about to vanish, and in an effort to catch up the eye follows them into the deep valley.

This ‘binary’ mode can also be seen as the compositional formula of another famous example of Northern and Southern dynasties art – the celebrated handscroll, The Admonition of the Instructress to Palace Ladies (Niushizhen tu) attributed to Gu Kaizhi (c. 345-406) and now in the British Museum. Although the attribution is not secure, as there is no reference pre-dating the ‘Tang dynasty (618-906) for Gu’s description of the subject, a newly discovered fifth-century screen bears a scene (Fig. 9) almost identical in composition to one of the seven narrative scenes in the Admonition scroll (Fig. 10). Provided with this piece of evidence, we can view the scroll and the Nelson sarcophagus as approximately contemporary works. Not surprisingly, one of the most interesting features of the scroll is the ‘front-and-back’ composition, which, however, has been even further removed from its original ritual context to become a purely pictorial mode.

The scroll illustrates the third-century writer Zhang Hua’s essay of the same title, and one of the scenes depicting Zhang’s line ‘Human beings know how to adorn their faces’ (Fig. 11) demonstrates an extremely sophisticated use of the binary composition. The scene is divided into two halves, each with an elegant palace lady looking at herself in a mirror. The lady on the right turns inward with her back to the viewer: her face is only seen in the mirror. The lady on the left faces outward, and her reflection in the mirror becomes implicit (only the mirror’s patterned back is visible). The concept of a ‘mirror image’ is thus presented literally (Fig. 11a): each group is itself a pair of mirror images, and the two groups together form a reflecting double.
(Fig. 10) Detail of the Admonition of the Instructress to Palace Ladies (Nüzhīzhen tu) showing the story of Lady Ban Zhao Attributed to Gu Kaizhi (c. 345–406) Handscroll, ink and colours on silk Height 19.5 cm, length 347 cm British Museum

(Fig. 11) Detail of Admonition of the Instructress to Palace Ladies (Nüzhīzhen tu) showing the 'mirror' scene Attributed to Gu Kaizhi (c. 345–406) Handscroll, ink and colours on silk Height 19.5 cm, length 347 cm British Museum

(Fig. 11a) Compositional scheme of the 'mirror' scene in Figure 11 (a: front image; a': back image)
No picture like this existed before the Northern and Southern dynasties. What is found on monuments of the Han period are silhouette images ‘attached’ to the pictorial plane: the virtuous widow Liang holding a mirror in her hand (Fig. 12) or the filial paragon Dong Yong serving his aged father (see Fig. 5). In viewing these pictures the eye travels along the surface of stone slabs, the striped patterns of which only make the medium even more impenetrable. Even pictures created during the fourth century do not substantially alter this traditional mode of representation. It is true that the well-known portraits of the ‘Seven Worthies in the Bamboo Grove’ (‘Zhuolin qixian’) exhibit some new elements, such as more relaxed and varying poses, ‘spatial cells’ formed by landscape elements and an emphasis on fluent lines (Fig. 13). These images, however, are still largely attached to a two-dimensional picture plane, never guiding the eyes to penetrate it. The real revolution took place only in the fifth and sixth centuries: the figures in the Wang Lin picture seem to be coming and going of their own free will, and the ladies in the Admonition scroll stare at their own reflections, their gaze guiding the viewer’s. In both cases one’s vision follows the pictured figures in and out, effortlessly crossing the now transparent stone or canvas.

All these pictorial works – the engravings on the Ning Mao shrine and the Nelson sarcophagus, and the painted images of the Admonition scroll – testify to a contemporary desire to visualize things that had never before been seen or represented. The new points of view pursued by the artists, however, were not for depicting actual (or assumed) earthly locations. The mundane achievement of seeing and representing things ‘naturalistically’ could hardly fulfill the artists’ high aspirations, since art, they claimed, should allow the viewer to transcend the temporal and spatial boundaries of observed reality. The relationship between ‘seeing’ and ‘imagining’, or between eyes and the mind, became a central topic of art criticism at the time. Sometimes the relationship was considered antithetical. Wang Wei (415-43), for example, criticized painters who relied only on their physical faculties and ‘focused on nothing but appearances and positioning’. When a good artist painted, he told his contemporaries, ‘it is not in order to record the boundaries of cities or to distinguish the locale of prefectures, to mark off mountains and hills or to demarcate floods and streams. For things which are rooted in form must be smelted with spiritual force, and that which activates the permutation is the heart-mind.’ (Bush and Shih, pp. 38-39). His view may have represented an extreme; other critics such as Xie He (act. 500-35) considered both ‘physical likeness’ (yinwu xiangxing) and ‘spirit resonance’ (qi yun shengdong) as necessary qualities of good art. Nevertheless, Xie He placed the latter at the top of his ‘Six Laws’ of painting (Ibid., pp. 36-40).

(Fig. 12) Scene depicting the story of the virtuous widow Liang
Wu Liang shrine, Jiaxiang, Shandong province
Eastern Han dynasty, 151
Rubbing of stone engraving

(Fig. 13) ‘Seven Worthies in the Bamboo Grove’
From tomb at Xishanqiao, Nanjing, Jiangsu province
Eastern Jin dynasty, late 4th/early 5th century
Rubbing of brick relief
Height 80 cm, length 240 cm
Nanjing Museum
Simultaneously, there appeared the notion of an ideal painter who could realize the artistic goals the new age demanded, and whose unrestrained imagination would make him an immortal:

He moves along with the four seasons and sighs at their passing on, Peers on all the things of the world, broods on their profusion... Thus it begins: retraction of vision, reversion of listening, Absorbed in thought, seeking all around, [His] essence galloping to the world’s eight bounds, [His] mind roaming ten thousand yards, up and down... He empties the limpid mind, fixes his thoughts, Fuses all his concerns together and makes words. He cages Heaven and Earth in fixed shape, Crushes all things beneath the brush’s tip. (Translation based on S. Owen, Reading in Chinese Literary Thought, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992, pp. 90-110)

Such a description was not considered purely metaphorical; when Xie He came to rank painters based on artistic merit (thus giving himself the status of an authoritative viewer), he employed similar criteria and found his ideal artist in Lu Tanwei of the fifth century:

He fathomed the principles [of the universe] and exhausted the nature [of man]. The matter is beyond the power of speech to describe. He embraced what went before him and gave birth to what succeeded him: from ancient times up till now he stands alone. Nor is he one whom even [the most] fervent enthusiasm could [adequately] praise. For is he not simply the pinnacle of all that is of highest value? He rises beyond the highest grade, and that is all that there is to be said. (Translation based on W.R.B. Acker, Some T’ang and Pre-T’ang Texts on Chinese Painting, Leiden, 1954, vol. 1, pp. 6-7)

Xie He seems to have felt short of words. Of an artist who has fathomed the universe and exhausted human nature,
there is indeed nothing one can say except to acknowledge his
god-like existence. Such glorification provides little sense of
the actual masterpieces from that period (which have all long
since disappeared), but the pictures on another sixth century
stone sarcophagus (created when Xie was compiling his
classification of painters) may allow us to perceive the kind of
art he had in mind (Fig. 14). Like the Nelson sarcophagus, this
example in the Minneapolis Art Museum was unearthed at
Luoyang, and both long panels are covered with a rich
combination of pictorial and decorative images (Ikuro, pp.
359-82; R.S.D., pp. 110-16). At the bottom of each rectangular
composition, rolling hillocks establish a continuous foreground,
which recedes into space along the picture’s vertical sides. Tall
trees further divide this U-shaped frame into a number of
subframes or ‘space cells’ for depicting individual stories of
famous filial paragons. Scholars have been astonished by the
‘naturalism’ of these narrative scenes: well-proportioned
figures sit or kneel on a tilted ground or on platforms that
recede into space. Behind them are mountain peaks and floating
clouds, the greatly reduced size of which indicates their
remoteness.

This coherent spatial representation serves symbolic
purposes, however. It groups historical figures of different
times and places into a synchronic setting; the rationale of this
synthesis is that all these figures share the same virtue and their
lives show a similar contour. The naturalism of the illustrations
diminishes, therefore, any vestige of historical reality. The
figures belong neither to the past nor the present, but instead
represent timeless Confucian paragons, who are again
abstractions of history and human deeds. This may be why
these virtuous men are positioned in the lower half of the
pictures: they are still earth-bound and so the naturalism of
their portrayal attests to the trueness of the human principles
they embody.
The historical Confucian figures, as well as the realistic pictorial style associated with them, disappear from the upper half of the composition, which is populated with fantastic and possibly Daoist images: an enormous dragon juxtaposed with a huge phoenix, beautiful fairies riding on clouds or exotic birds, fierce demons roaring against the wind. The decoration on the Minneapolis sarcophagus thus combines images of such historical figures as those seen on the Nelson sarcophagus with motifs of immortality — fairies and fantastic animals and birds — that embellish two other sarcophagi unearthed at Luoyang (Fig. 15) (also see Huang, pls 13-24, 27-34). This sarcophagus exhibits both 'binary' pictorial styles and spatial concepts. Instead of being united by a three-dimensional landscape, images of immortality are harmonized by the swirling, rhythmic lines that shape them. One may say that these fluent lines are themselves a metaphor of the vital energy of the universe, from which all these images of the imagination — heavenly flowers, auspicious birds, mystical beasts, fairies and demons — emerge. Floating and ever-changing, these line images seem to shift smoothly on the two-dimensional picture plane without penetrating it.

The design is further complicated by a focal image crossing the upper and lower halves — an animal mask with a ring hanging from its mouth. The model for this image is a sculpted mask of gilded copper attached to a wooden coffin. Here it has been transformed into a flat silhouette on stone. A new layer of visual rhetoric is added: integrated into the overall two-dimensional pictorial representation, the mask seems suspended in air in front of the surrounding scenes, which recede and vanish behind it. Firm and unyielding, the mask reminds the viewer of the stone surface and forces one's gaze (and mind) back from the distant and fantastic worlds, reasserting one's proximity to the solid sarcophagus. This image restores the surface of the picture plane, but only to allow the artist to decompose and recombine it again. On either side of the mask, two windows, perfectly square, guide the viewer looking 'into' the sarcophagus. Two figures, perhaps servants of the deceased, stand inside each window and stare out. These windows, which allow to be seen what is concealed behind the pictorial surface, reject any coherent system of pictorial illusion and any fixed spatial or temporal station.

Viewing such a complex picture that integrates so many contradictory elements, one feels that the artist is offering constant challenges with new modes of pictorial representation. Travelling through time and space, he leads the viewer to confront different realms and states of beings — to 'gallop to the world's eight bounds' and to 'peer on all the things of the world, brood on their profusion'. He creates and recreates tension between different images and between these images and the medium: whenever a scene is about to assume its independence and become 'real', he brings in a conflicting image or style that dismisses any sense of illusion and restocks the pictorial surface with new possibilities to further expand the visual field. The picture seems to ceaselessly rebel against itself — 'reversing' and then refocusing. The illusionistic narrative-landscape scene is juxtaposed with the elusive, decorative immortal imagery, just as the 'relief' animal mask is juxtaposed with the 'sunken' windows. The first set of motifs transforms the pictorial surface into images and then erases it; the second set restores the surface because the mask must be attached to one and the windows must open onto one. The structural key to understanding the creation of such a composition, therefore, is again the binary mode: the artist develops his imagery along opposite yet complementary paths. In making such an effort he breaks away from conventional representation and pushes the possibility of human perception to a new limit.

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Suggested further reading


Guo Jianbang, 'Bewei Ning Mao shishi he muzhi' ('The Stone Offering Shrine and Epitaph of Ning Mao of the Northern Wei Dynasty'), Hennan wenbo tongxun, 1980, no.1, pp. 33-40.


Ikuro Okumura, Kaka (Melon Leaves), Kaka Kenkyujo, Kyoto, 1939, pp. 359-82.


Nagahiro Toshio, Rikacho jidai bijutsu no kenkyu (The Representative Art of the Six Dynasties Period), Bijutsu Shuppan-sha, Tokyo, 1969, pp. 173-218.

