GIFT OF CHINESE RUBBINGS GOES ON SPECIAL EXHIBITION

By KENNETH STARR
CURATOR OF ASIATIC ARCHAEOLOGY AND ETHNOLOGY

RUBBINGS ARE INK COPIES of low-relief or intaglio (incised) inscriptions and designs on stone, metal, fired clay, and other hard materials. The technique is Chinese in origin, and its use, though found in other parts of the world, has been most common in China and contiguous countries in eastern Asia.

'AZURE DRAGON' STRIKES POSE

Rubbing of a dynamic 'Azure Dragon' taken from a relief cut on a stone coffin found in Chinese tomb of Han period (207 B.C.—A.D. 220).

The East Asiatic anthropological collections of the Museum contain over 4,000 such rubbings that in space represent most of the provinces of China, in time range from the late pre-Christian period to the present century, and in content encompass a wide variety of subjects. Recently this collection was notably enhanced by the addition of over 150 rubbings of early Chinese stone and clay tomb reliefs found in the westernmost part of China. These rubbings, the majority of which date from the Later Han period (A.D. 25–220), together with other anthropological materials from China and Tibet, were presented to the Museum by Dr. David C. Graham, who collected them during his long residence in southwest China as teacher and anthropologist. Many of these rubbings were copied from unique archaeological specimens in the collections of the Ssŭch'uan Provincial Museum, the West China Union University Museum, of which Dr. Graham was curator, and in private collections.

Unlike the situation in the western world, where the practice is uncommon, the production, use, and collection of rubbings has played a significant part in the cultural pattern of China and some of her neighbors. In China particularly, with its strong historical tradition, rubbings long have played an important role in the intellectual life of the country. Following the invention of paper by the Chinese somewhere around A.D. 100 and before the printing of books from wood blocks began, presumably sometime in the eighth century, classic texts for sake of permanency were inscribed on stone, and subsequently rubbings of these texts were made for scholarly use. Though it is quite likely that the practice of taking rubbings of these stone texts occurred earlier, the earliest extant Chinese rubbing dates from somewhere in the years between A.D. 627–649. Although gradually printing from carved wood blocks became the standard method whereby Chinese books were printed, nevertheless the production of copies from stone continued, particularly in the duplication of official texts. In recent centuries the practice of making rubbings has been limited largely to the copying of the inscribed stone pillars (*shih-pei*) that dot the Chinese towns and countryside, marking historical events of local importance. In keeping with their traditional orientations and according to their particular tastes, Chinese scholar-collectors for centuries have collected rubbings of these inscribed pillars, in a manner comparable to that in which prints have been collected in the West; and just as there are prestige factors present in the possession of "first impressions" of prints, so also there is prestige value in the possession of an early copy of a rubbing. Thus, a Ming-period (A.D. 1368–1644) rubbing of a T'ang-period (A.D. 618–907) inscribed monument is prized above one made during the Ch'ing period (A.D. 1644–1911). Lest such desires be charged purely to snobbery, it is well to note the practical fact that the earlier copy generally is sharper and more clear. The making of rubbings long has been a special profession in China, and such craftsmen with their stock of rubbings can be found throughout the country, particularly in the localities that are richest in historic monuments.

TECHNIQUE DESCRIBED

How are these rubbings, or "squeezes" as they sometimes are called, made? Briefly described, the technique used is as follows. A sheet of the proper paper, a variety of "rice paper" (actually, most "rice paper" is made from bamboo pulp), is wetted, often with water to which a little agar-agar has been added for stiffening and adhesive purposes, and the paper is plastered upon the surface from which the rubbing is to be taken. Thereafter the mildly elastic wet paper is tamped down with brushes, care being taken to press the paper into every detail of the surface. A sheet of coarser paper sometimes is laid on top of the actual rubbing paper to protect it in the tamping process. When the rubbing paper has been well pressed into contact with every detail of the surface beneath, the paper is left to dry, the outer protective paper being first stripped away. When the rubbing paper is dry, an inked pad is carefully applied to the high surfaces, and when properly inked the paper is peeled off the surface being copied and is flattened between boards. The technique is an admirable one, for it reproduces quite simply and in full size every detail of the original surface. The "flatness" of the reproduction, in that it fails to communicate the quality of depth inherent in the original surface, in large measure is compensated for by the dramatic effect of black Chinese ink on textured white paper. The technique of making rubbings has served as a sort of camera for many centuries, though rather more cheaply, it may be added. Even today, some Chinese and Japanese scholars carry with them small bundles of materials for making rubbings. The technique is extremely useful, the more so by virtue of the facts that it is inexpensive and immediate. Of importance also is the fact that the object being copied in no way is damaged.

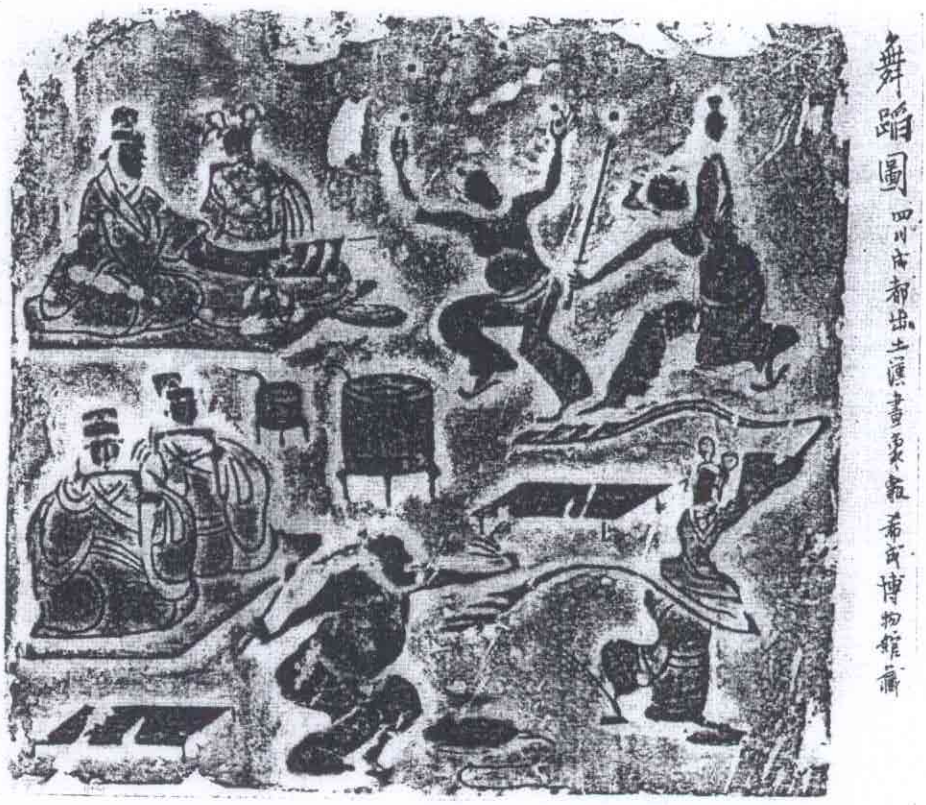
The types of objects whose surfaces are copied by the rubbing technique are limited only by the need for a hard surface upon which there is some relief, either positive or negative. In China rubbings commonly are made from such materials as the following. (1) *Stone pillars.* In keeping with the traditional historical orientations of the Chinese, the materials most copied by the rubbing technique have been the inscriptions cut on stone pillars. The content of these inscriptions is varied in the extreme—classical texts, passages penned by famous calligraphers, accounts of historic events, memorial inscriptions for outstanding local men and women, religious inscriptions, descriptions of public works, and a variety of other subjects of local importance. (2) *Reliefs.* Reliefs, particularly religious and tomb reliefs, are another favorite area wherein the rubbing technique has been employed. The greater portion of the rubbings given by Dr. Graham fall into this category, for they are copies of reliefs found in Han-period tombs, cut out of the natural sandstone in the lower Min River area of Ssŭch'uan Province in west China. The majority of these reliefs are in stone, though many inscriptions and designs, in both low relief and intaglio, derive from clay blocks, molded and fired hard. Descriptions of these tombs, their location, construction, contents, and ornamentation may be found in either of the following two books: (1) Rudolph, Richard, *Han Tomb Art of West China* (1951) and (2) Wên, Yu, *Ssuch'uan Han-tai hua-hsiang hsüan-chi* (1955). Many of the rubbings reproduced in these two books are represented among those given by Dr. Graham while many others in the Graham

collection have not yet been published, a fact that increases their scholarly value. (3) *Miscellaneous.* The rubbing technique is used for copying from a wide variety of other types of subject matter, among which may be mentioned only the most common ones: bronze vessels (texts and designs cast in low relief and intaglio), coins and coin molds, and many other small objects of metal, stone, wood, and bone. As was noted, the copying of textual materials and decorative elements by the rubbing technique has been particularly popular in China by virtue of its simplicity and inexpensiveness, as well as by the effectiveness by which such rubbings can be reproduced for publication.

VALUE OF RUBBINGS

What is the value of rubbings? Relevant to the aims and purposes of the Museum, three reasons may be set down. First, rubbings are of historical value in that copies of inscriptions frequently provide information obtainable in no other printed form. Inscribed on the stone pillars that stand everywhere in China is to be found a vast amount of specific local history that often is not included in the traditional sources. Both the historian and the archaeologist—the latter who is but a historian of the period before the existence of written records—rely upon such information: the historian to supplement the data obtainable in printed sources and the archaeologist that deducible from archaeological materials. Second, rubbings are of value in studying the life and customs of centuries long past. Tomb reliefs such as those represented in the rubbings presented by Dr. Graham provide graphic evidence of many aspects of life in ancient times, for the people of early China recorded variously in the burial complex—on tomb exteriors and interiors and on the burial furniture—many scenes depicting the life of the deceased as well as the religious beliefs and symbolisms of their time. By judicious inference, one can reconstruct some of the aspects of the life of the ancient period, adding the results of these inferences to those acquired from the study of reliefs of similar type and time-period elsewhere, from other relevant archaeological materials, and from available written records. Often, as the Graham rubbings from west China attest, comparative studies are possible. Although the reliefs represented in the western rubbings date from a similar time-period as others in east China and although both groups of reliefs represent a single generalized "Han culture," nevertheless points of difference in matters of style and symbolism occur as between the reliefs of the two regions, a condition attributable to the fact that the west China reliefs presumably were influenced by the non-Chinese T'ai culture, which played a major part in the history of the Ssŭch'uan region well up into the post-Han period. Third, many rubbings, apart from their basic historico-cultural significance, are objects of aesthetic interest, exciting our sensitivities by virtue of their artistic excellence, whether the original subject be a classic poem composed by a famous poet and penned with the Chinese brush by an outstanding calligrapher or whether it be some finely executed motif. The historical, cultural, and aesthetic significance of the rubbings housed in public and private collections throughout the world becomes even greater when one considers the fact that the monuments from which they were taken in many cases no longer exist, having fallen prey to the destructive forces of nature and man.

A showing of selected examples of the rubbings given by Dr. Graham and representing scenes depicted on stone and clay in the Han-period rock tombs of southwestern China is being made in Stanley Field Hall during the seven-week period beginning December 1 and continuing through January 19, 1958. The 50 rubbings included in the special exhibit have been grouped to illustrate some of the aspects of life in west China during the Han period (207 B.C.–A.D. 220). These groups are as follows: social activities; economic activities; horses and chariots, gates and towers (military scenes); animals and humans—real and imaginary; miscellaneous; tomb bricks—geometric designs and brief inscriptions.



PARTY SCENE—SECOND CENTURY STYLE

Active party scene shows seated man and woman (upper left), two jugglers (upper right), two musicians (lower left), and an acrobat or musician and dancing woman (lower right). Rubbing depicts aspects of life in second century in west China where original molded clay relief was found.

NEW MEMBERS

The following new Members were elected from October 16 to November 15:

Contributors

Dr. David C. Graham
Stewart J. Walpole*

Sustaining Member

Allen C. Michaels

Annual Members

Edward F. Anixter, William J. Aste, Walter H. Baumgartner, Theodore C. Beug, Miss Carolyn Eloise Carey, Donald Coleman, William B. Cudahy, Mrs. George E. Dolezal, Dr. John G. Ersfeld, Clifford T. Fay, Jr., C. V. Felker, Burleigh B. Gardner, F. Sewall Gardner, Bruce J. Graham, Robert V. Guelich, D. S. Haigh, Walter L. Hedin, Mrs. Wilmarth Ickes, William W. Joyce, James S. Kemper, Lorenz F. Koerber, Jr., Benjamin C. Korschot, John T. Landreth, Glenn E. Martin, Miss Christine Mathis, Hugh J. O'Connor, Robert E. O'Hanlon, Dr. Raymond J. Pellicore, M. F. Peterson, Marvin E. Pritikin, Miss Lillian F. Reid, Earl K. Riley, Robert George Schmidt, Phil Shorr, Charles F. Short, Jr., Ezra Solomon, Kenneth M. Wiggins

* Deceased