INSIDE: Film Review: Vincent Collins' "Euphoria" • Dalvaun Valentine I • lolla Installation

July 26, 1975 / Volume 6, Number 26

WEST COAST

ART WEEK

The Chinese Show

San Francisco

H.J. Weeks

One of the major exhibitional coups of the decade is now on view at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. The exhibition consists of Chinese artifacts unearthed and catalogued since the establishment of the People’s Republic twenty years ago. Since mainland China has been closed to westerners for most of these years, the material in this display is as new for European and American scholars, as it is for the general public, who normally use the term, for none of the pieces in the show were strictly conceived as a pure expression of the artist’s sensibilities. Many of them were functional or ceremonial objects. As we look at them with alien eyes, inevitably, if unconsciously, we impose our standards on the objects. We can see them in terms of our own concepts of design or composition — and through these qualities sense the expression of the maker’s individuality and the uniqueness of a culture and time during which the works were made.

To my eyes and mind, much of what is presented is beautiful, all of it is of great interest. The famous jade suit of the Princess Tou Wan, like the equally famous solid gold coffin of Tutankhamen, was made in the cultural belief that the material would protect and preserve the body of the personage it sheltered, thus insuring a prosperous afterlife. Much of the other material on display was also designed to accompany a departing soul and provide it with material comforts which would allow it to exist as comfortably as before.

Such concepts make the esthetic responses of today’s viewers immaterial, but it is through an esthetic response that someone like myself, whose religious views are so alien to those held by the makers and users, can come to grips with the objects. The jade suit, for instance, is such that I can only look at it with curiosity and, finding it impressive, discover that other objects the exhibition appeal more to my esthetic tastes.

Those viewers familiar with art history concepts as applied to western objects by western scholars will find that a similar approach will enable them to discover developments in Chinese art and culture which are visually clear, though some of the Chinese terminology and classifications differ from ones used in the west. The exhibition is carefully arranged chronologically, enabling viewers to walk down through time, observing the complex development of cultural concepts and the growth in technical facility of artists and workers.

This development is most clearly seen in the ceramics. Such early pieces as Pottery jar with stippling and Pottery jar with finger-nail decoratingshow the same materials of the past with a completely different character.

The Chinese Show is continuing through the end of September.