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Allison R. MILLER, *Kingly Splendor: Court Art and Materiality in Han China*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2021. xii, 348 p. ISBN: 9780231196604. 59 USD.

Allison R. Miller, associate professor of art history at Southwestern University (Georgetown, Texas), has published a very original book on art and the political relationships between the imperial court and local kings during the early Western Han 西漢 dynasty (202 BCE – 9 CE). It is also a robust reference book on funerary art, including all recent excavations results and their Chinese and Western analysis. It includes very meaningful notes (58 pages) and a detailed index. The main objective of the author was to “break the disciplinary silos” of political history and art history, which are two fields not often in communication with one another, despite the fact that political leaders are the main commissioners of art. *Kingly Splendor* focuses on the beginning of the Western Han, from Liu Bang’s 劉邦 (256-195 BCE) accession to power in 209 BCE, to the reign of Emperor Wu 漢武帝 (141-87 BCE). Liu Bang took power by building a complex coalition of warlords and thus, after “gaining the throne”, he created a hybrid political structure that relied partly on fiefdoms. On the one hand, the court took direct control of the commanderies of the previous imperial domain of the Qin 秦 dynasty (221-206 BCE). On the other hand, the new emperor and his successors enfeoffed roughly half of the territory of the empire. These territories were given to allies who were granted the title of “kings” (*zhuhou wang* 諸侯王). There were two kinds of kings: Liu family members (*tongxing wang* 同姓王) and warlords or generals (*yixing wang* 異姓王). After the initial founding of the Han dynasty, there was a long period of struggle between the imperial court and local kings. Step-by-step, the court reduced the power wielded by the local kings, the size of their fiefs and the administrative officials subordinated to them. Finally, some of the kings rebelled, but they were crushed during the Rebellion of the Seven Kingdoms (*qiguo zhiluan* 七國之亂 154 BCE). This struggle of influence between the emperor and local kings was played out in a number of arenas, including the funerary art of the kings.

Kingly Splendor is organized into six chapters. After surveying the political context of the early Western Han dynasty (chapter 1), the author delves into five case studies of royal funerary art. For each of them, the author systematically collects all known data and identifies key patterns. Chapter 2 describes the rock-cut tombs commissioned by the kings. Chapter 3 focuses on the terracotta armies discovered in pits in the vicinity of royal tombs. Chapter 4 examines jade suits that have been found in royal tombs. These three chapters illustrate how funerary art styles transferred from the imperial center to the periphery (the local kings). But this was not simply imitation, rather local innovations are evident. The next two chapters focus on specific arts that are very localized and did not exist prior at the imperial center, according to available archaeological findings. Chapter 5 presents murals inside the mausoleum of a king’s relative at Shiyuan 柿園 (Henan province). The study shows that this is the only case of painted decorations in early royal mausoleums. Chapter 6 looks into the purple textile industry of the Qi kingdom 齊國. Emperor Wu liked the purple textiles so much that he confiscated it from Qi.

Kingly Splendor is well structured and researched, however certain assumptions require further discussion and fine-tuning.

Funerary artefacts are complex by nature. Are they placed in the tomb in order to be used by the

deceased in the afterlife, or are they “social goods” (p. 144) that give political signals to the livings, following the death of their king and when attending his burial rites? Little is mentioned in *Kingly Splendor* about the use of these artefacts, and the exact mechanisms to this “political spectacle” (p. 244). Were the artefacts displayed in a temple or palace before the burial? Did the interment rites include a procession within the mausoleum or its facilities? While the author convincingly demonstrates the political symbolism of these objects, we do not see exactly how that symbolism was communicated in practice.

The debate over why the Han terracotta soldiers 兵馬俑 are smaller than their Qin counterparts is reviewed in detail. They were a “social good”. How the terracotta pieces were perceived by audiences was the most important factor guiding their production. The Han emperors wanted to be seen as more benevolent than their Qin predecessors. Miniaturized pieces implied cheaper production costs, casting the Han emperors as more frugal and sensitive to the realm’s economic welfare. The author, who frequently raises interesting exploratory questions throughout the book, could have also considered the substance of the economic arguments. What was the production costs for these figurines, and how do they compare to other goods? The answer may not be obvious. Clay was cheap, but silk was not (and we can sometimes see that the silk reached exquisite levels, like those in the Mawangdui 馬王堆 tomb). The shift from oversized statues to small figurines could also have been motivated by other reasons, like the evolution of artistic tastes in the court and by the local kings or by new approach in cult image.

The selection of purple textile from Qi kingdom as a case study for one of the chapters is surprising. Archaeological evidence for purple textiles is limited, while the other case studies are supported by more ample data. The purple textile industry has also not been explored thoroughly by previous scholarship. This case study looks ground-breaking or unbalanced versus the others. Other funerary items could have been more relevant, for example the lamps which were technologically advanced and highly aesthetic. The sample size for lamps would have been more in line with the data employed for the other case studies in the book, though the analysis of lamps likely would not reveal the greed of the emperor versus his kings.

Returning to the main theme of the book, exploring the relationship between politics and art is difficult. On the one hand, we now have a lot of available sources, from excavated artefacts to references in received texts, but our understanding of sumptuary rules is still fragmentary, as is our understanding of the motives driving the protagonists of this study. The author provides a solid ground for further debate. She deems the emperor as the source of art¹ and thus implies the kings were either followers or innovators against the emperor. This was probably the case a few generations later. But at the beginning of the Western Han dynasty, the relationship was perhaps not yet as defined. When he reached power, Liu Bang did not want his warlords to become kings, it was institutionalized by his successor... We have limited data on one side of the relationship. We have ample evidence of kings’ tombs, but none for the imperial mausoleums. Emperors were probably using more sophisticated artefacts than the ones found in kings’ mausoleums, but we do not know how much the burial practices of kings during the beginning of the dynasty impacted imperial funerary standards in turn.

¹ C.f. “...artistic production... did not proceed in a simple, top-down manner, as is often assumed” (p.3).

In summary, this book is a very original study on art and the political relationships between the imperial court and local kings from Western Han dynasty and also a robust reference book on their funerary art. It is a must for libraries, scholars and students in these fields.

Éric BOUTELLER