



# Aesthetic Research on Sanxingdui Bronze Artifacts

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## Abstract

The Sanxingdui culture, situated at the Sanxingdui site in Guanghan City, Sichuan Province, boasts a history spanning approximately 4,000 to 5,000 years. It represents a distinct cultural system in a non-central region during the Shang and Zhou dynasties. Since its initial excavation in 1929, the artifacts unearthed at the Sanxingdui site have garnered widespread attention from scholars both within China and abroad. These artifacts, characterized by their exquisite craftsmanship and unique designs, not only showcase the exceptional technological prowess of the ancient Shu people but also embody a profound aesthetic culture. They serve as a vital window through which we can delve into the ancient Ba-Shu civilization and explore the aesthetics of ancient China. Therefore, this article aims to delve into the aesthetic features of Sanxingdui bronze ware, uncovering the rich connotations of ancient Shu aesthetics and tracing the evolution of aesthetic concepts. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the ongoing research into the aesthetics of the Sanxingdui culture.

## Keywords

Sanxingdui; Bronze Artifacts; Aesthetics

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## Introduction

Since the beginning of the 20th century, a large number of bronze artifacts, pottery, jade artifacts, and other precious cultural relics with different shapes have been discovered through archaeological excavations at the Sanxingdui site. These artifacts illustrate the daily life and religious practices of the ancient Shu people while reflecting their distinctive aesthetic principles. As a highly developed and self-contained regional civilization, Sanxingdui represents a regional civilization distinguished by its unique bronze casting technology, which, while sharing some similarities with contemporaneous Shang and Zhou cultures, exhibits a more pronounced artistic and regional identity (Ming Guang Hao, 2010). The unearthed cultural relics of Sanxingdui, such as bronze vessels and jade artifacts, are connected with the Central Plains Shang and Zhou civilizations in terms of patterns and shapes but also have significant differences. The bronze divine tree, bronze standing figure, bronze mask with protruding eyes, and other cultural relics unearthed from the Sanxingdui site have not been found in other civilizations. They show the uniqueness and creativity of the ancient Shu civilization. Some scholars speculate that Sanxingdui is an independent regional civilization outside the Central Plains Shang and Zhou civilizations, but there is also a certain degree of connection with it. The artistic style of Sanxingdui shares some common elements with the Central Plains civilization, but also clearly shows its regional uniqueness. In-depth analysis of these valuable cultural relics is of great significance. The research significance is not only to enhance our understanding of the cultural connotations of the ancient Shu civilization, but more importantly, it provides rich materials and research evidence for further exploration of aesthetic characteristics, comparison of artistic exchanges and influences between different civilizations, and inspiration for contemporary artistic creation.

## 1. Aesthetic Characteristics of Sanxingdui Bronze Artifacts

As an important part of ancient Chinese civilization, Sanxingdui bronze artifacts have reached a remarkable height in artistic creation with their unique artistic style and exquisite craftsmanship, showcasing the glory and uniqueness of the ancient Shu civilization. The following will explore the aesthetic thoughts of Sanxingdui bronze artifacts from three aspects: the unique charm and connotation of the shape, the rich connotation and symbolism of the patterns, and the exquisite and unparalleled craftsmanship.

### 1.1 Charm and Connotation of Shape Art

The shape art of Sanxingdui bronze artifacts exhibits a distinctive aesthetic appeal, which is mainly reflected in its exaggerated and stylized artistic forms and strong visual impact. Taking the bronze divine tree as an example, this bronze artifact, which is as high as 3.96 meters, combines the base, tree, and dragon perfectly through the segmented casting method, depicting three interconnected mountains as a "divine mountain" and placing the tree at the top of the "divine mountain" to directly connect with the universe (Hao T, Xiaotian Z, & Jianbo G, 2022). This shape not only reflects the ancient Shu people's awe and worship of nature but also gives people a strong visual shock. The bronze standing figure is another masterpiece of shape art, about 1.8 meters high, with a total height of 2.608 meters. It wears a tall crown, is dressed in three layers of clothes embroidered with exquisite patterns such as dragon patterns, and stands on a square monster seat with hands in a ring shape. The image is solemn and majestic, and it is the largest bronze figure discovered at the same time so far. The shape of the bronze standing figure not only reflects the ancient Shu people's pursuit of human beauty but also creates a mysterious and majestic atmosphere as a whole.

From the perspective of design aesthetics, the unique charm of the shape art of Sanxingdui bronze artifacts lies in its breaking through the traditional realistic style and creating a transcendent aesthetic experience with exaggerated and deformed techniques. This aesthetic experience not only satisfies people's pursuit of novelty and uniqueness but also touches people's longing and exploration desire for the mysterious and unknown world at a deeper level. At the same time, the shape art of Sanxingdui bronze artifacts also reflects the ancient Shu people's understanding and worship of nature, deities, and the cosmic order. For example, the bronze divine tree, which is several meters high, has lush branches and leaves symbolizing the prosperity of life, and a thick trunk symbolizing the stability and solidity of the earth. This not only reflects the ancient Shu people's reverence for the vitality of nature but also reflects their understanding of the cosmic order. Another example is the bronze mask with protruding eyes, whose exaggerated eye shape may symbolize the awe and prayer for deities. In addition, the frequent appearance of divine beasts such as dragons and phoenixes, and natural elements such as the sun and mountains in bronze artifacts, not only shows the ancient Shu people's worship of all things in nature but also reflects their faith and pursuit of mysterious forces. This understanding and worship are transformed into a kind of sublime and solemn emotion in aesthetics, making people feel a spiritual shock beyond the material level when appreciating these bronze artifacts.

### 1.2 Connotation and Symbolism of Pattern Art

The patterns on Sanxingdui bronze artifacts also have great artistic value. These patterns are not only delicate but also contain rich cultural connotations and symbolic meanings. Taking the bronze mask as an example, its patterns mostly appear in the form of geometric shapes and patternization, including straight lines, curves, triangles, squares, etc. These patterns not only have a strong decorative effect but also represent the ancient Shu people's beliefs and values in symbolic meaning. The patterns of eyes, noses, mouths, and other parts on the bronze mask are often exaggerated and deformed, such as "protruding eyes" and "broad mouth" features, which not only reflect the ancient Shu people's worship of eyes and mouths but also give people a strong visual impact.

From the perspective of visual culture, the rich connotation of the pattern art of Sanxingdui bronze artifacts lies in its transformation of cultural connotations and symbolic meanings into visual aesthetic experiences through artistic means. This aesthetic experience not only satisfies people's pursuit of beauty but also touches people's thinking about culture, history, and beliefs at a deeper level. In addition, the pattern art of Sanxingdui bronze artifacts also reflects the ancient Shu people's understanding, imagination, and worship of nature and deities. For example, the exaggerated eyes and mouth design on the bronze mask, as well as the complex totem images on the bronze divine tree, not only show the ancient Shu people's high artistic creativity but also create a mysterious atmosphere beyond reality in aesthetics. This understanding and worship are transformed into a kind of mysterious and peculiar emotion in aesthetics, making people feel an aesthetic enjoyment beyond reality when appreciating these patterns.

### 1.3 Exquisite and Innovative Craftsmanship

The exquisite craftsmanship of Sanxingdui bronze artifacts is also an important part of its aesthetic characteristics. These bronze artifacts used advanced casting techniques such as mold casting and lost-wax casting in the casting process, involving alloy proportioning, precise mold design, and superb casting techniques. The use of these techniques not only enabled Sanxingdui bronze artifacts to reach a high level of craftsmanship in shape and patterns but also ensured their durability for thousands of years. Compared with other bronze artifacts of the same era, the use of mold casting and lost-wax casting, and other advanced technologies made the bronze artifacts more precise in shape and more delicate in patterns, with a more outstanding overall artistic effect. At the same time, Sanxingdui bronze artifacts also reached a high level in alloy proportioning. The main alloy components of Sanxingdui bronze artifacts include copper, tin, and lead. Specifically, the proportion of red copper in Sanxingdui bronze artifacts is about 7.9%, tin bronze is about 21.1%, lead bronze is about 15.8%, and tin-lead bronze occupies the largest proportion, about 55.3%. These proportions make the bronze artifacts both hard enough and maintain good toughness, which can last for thousands of years. This exquisite craftsmanship and superb artistic level make Sanxingdui bronze artifacts occupy an important position in the history of bronze art.

From the perspective of technological aesthetics, the exquisite craftsmanship of Sanxingdui bronze artifacts lies in the creativity and wisdom shown in the process of transforming artistic concepts into material forms through technological means. This creativity and wisdom not only reflect the ancient Shu people's pursuit and breakthrough of technology but also transform into a pursuit of perfection and delicacy in aesthetics. In addition, the craftsmanship of Sanxingdui bronze artifacts also reflects the ancient Shu people's understanding and worship of nature, deities, and the cosmic order. This understanding and worship are transformed into a pursuit of order, harmony, and unity in aesthetics. For example, the bronze divine tree, with its rigorous hierarchical structure and symmetrical layout, reflects the ancient Shu people's understanding and worship of the cosmic order. The exaggerated but orderly patterns on the bronze mask reflect the ancient Shu people's awe of the power of natural deities and the concept of harmonious coexistence. Because of the shape of the bronze mask, they generally have exaggerated large eyes, high nose bridges, and peculiar decorations. These characteristics are not random but have profound symbolic meanings. Because the ancients believed that deities had the divine power to see everything, which could transcend the vision of ordinary people and see a broader world and deeper truths. Therefore, the exaggerated large eyes represent the divine power to see everything. The high nose bridge may represent a bridge to communicate with heaven and earth, implying that the ancient Shu people hoped to establish contact with deities through the mask and pray for their protection and guidance. These bronze artifacts, as important artifacts in sacrificial and ritual activities at that time, reveal the ancient Shu people's profound thinking and aesthetic pursuit of the universe, nature, and deities in their design and production. This pursuit is also closely related to the theocratic political system of the ancient Shu kingdom at that time, reflecting the profound interaction between social structure and aesthetic concepts.

## 2. Artistic Connotations of Sanxingdui Bronze Artifacts

As the treasure of the ancient Shu civilization, Sanxingdui bronze artifacts are not only the crystallization of technology and art but also the profound embodiment of religious beliefs. They not only demonstrate the superb casting skills of the ancient Shu people but also reveal their religious beliefs and worldview through unique shapes and rich patterns. The religious beliefs and worldview of the ancient Shu people can be further explored through the artistic expression of Sanxingdui bronze artifacts.

### 2.1 Artistic Expression of Religious Beliefs

Sanxingdui bronze artifacts play a vital role in religious rituals. They are not only the core props of sacrificial activities but also the bridge for the ancient Shu people to communicate with deities. These bronze artifacts, with their unique shapes and rich patterns, have become sacred symbols in religious rituals. Bronze human figures, especially the bronze standing figure, are generally considered to symbolize the highest religious and political leader of the ancient Shu kingdom. They show the ancient Shu people's imagination and the shaping of deities' images with exaggerated facial features. These bronze human figures may serve as the incarnation of deities in religious rituals, receiving people's worship and offerings. At the same time, bronze masks, with their mysterious and majestic images, have become important props in sacrificial rituals to communicate with deities or drive away evil forces. The bronze divine tree may symbolize the connection between heaven and earth, representing the ancient Shu people's

understanding and worship of the cosmic order. The "Classic of Mountains and Seas" records that "Jianmu" is the bridge connecting heaven, earth, and deities, and is the mysterious ladder connecting the mortal world with the divine world. The shape of the bronze divine tree highly matches this description, and therefore it is considered the concrete expression of the "Jianmu" image by the ancient Shu people. Moreover, The Sacrificial (2023) in sacrificial rituals, these bronze artifacts not only enhance the sacredness of the rituals but also visually present the ancient Shu people's religious beliefs and worldview through their unique shapes and patterns, enabling participants to more intuitively feel the presence of deities and the power of the universe.

The aesthetic value of Sanxingdui bronze artifacts lies not only in their unique shapes and exquisite patterns but also in the sacrificial rituals and cultural connotations they carry. These bronze artifacts transform the ancient Shu people's religious beliefs and worldview into visual aesthetic experiences through artistic means. While appreciating these bronze artifacts, people can also feel the sacred atmosphere of religious rituals and the profound connotations of the worldview. This aesthetic experience not only enriches people's spiritual world but also promotes the emergence and development of aesthetic concepts.

## 2.2 Artistic Expression of Worldview

The unearthed sacrificial bronze artifacts often have symbolic meanings. They represent the ancient Shu people's observation and imitation of nature, as well as their worship and pursuit of mysterious forces. The patterns of the dragon, phoenix, bird, and beast face are widely seen on Sanxingdui bronze artifacts. These patterns not only show the ancient Shu people's ability to observe and imitate nature but also reflect their worship and pursuit of mysterious forces. In Chinese culture, dragons symbolize sanctity, representing power and nobility, while phoenixes symbolize virtues and auspiciousness. The appearance of these animal images reflects the ancient Shu people's awe and belief in the mysterious forces in nature. At the same time, patterns such as the bronze divine tree and the sun wheel may symbolize the cosmic order and the relationship between heaven, earth, and deities, reflecting the ancient Shu people's understanding and worship of the cosmic order. In Sanxingdui bronze artifacts, we can see many patterns and images symbolizing the cosmic order and the relationship between heaven, earth, and deities, such as the divine tree symbolizing the connection between heaven and earth, and the sun wheel representing the power of the sun god and the laws of the universe. These patterns and images not only show the ancient Shu people's understanding of the cosmic order but also transform it into visual aesthetic experiences through artistic means. While appreciating these bronze artifacts, people can also feel the profound connotations of the worldview. From the unearthed bronze artifacts of Sanxingdui, it can be found that the ancient Shu people had a unique worldview, which was centered on the sacred number "five" and closely related to the cross-shaped cosmic structure. From archaeological materials and handed-down literature, it can be found that the ancient Shu civilization widely worshipped the sacred number "five", such as the sacrificial platform base, the tall crown of the bronze priest, and the rays of the sun wheel all take "five" as the unit. This kind of worship is not only reflected in the sacred fields such as religious sacrifices but also runs through the secular life of the ancient Shu society, such as the queen taking "five" as the unit, and the clan blood relationship organization taking "five ding" as the levy unit. At the same time, the ancient Shu people's worldview is similar to that of the Shang Dynasty in the Central Plains. The Shang people also believed that the universe was a cross-shaped structure divided into five parts (Hao L, Wanlu F, & Shiyu X, 2023). This concept is not unique to the Central Plains or the ancient Shu, but widely exists in the indigenous religious cultures of East Asia, North Asia, and America, forming a part of the "Asia - America Cultural Continuity Circle". Therefore, it can be said that the ancient Shu people's worldview is a unique concept system centered on "five" and closely related to the cross-shaped cosmic structure.

## 2.3 Evolution of Aesthetic Concepts

The religious beliefs reflected in Sanxingdui bronze artifacts are not static but evolve over time and with social development. In the early stage of the Sanxingdui civilization, religious beliefs were probably more primitive and simple, mainly focusing on the worship of natural deities and ancestor sacrifices. The bronze artifacts of this period probably focused more on the images of natural deities and ancestors, showing the ancient Shu people's imagination and shaping of deities' images through exaggerated and deformed artistic techniques. As the Sanxingdui civilization continued to develop and its social structure became more complex, religious beliefs gradually became more diversified and complex. In the later stage of the Sanxingdui civilization, we can see the emergence of new deities such as the sun god and the moon god. These deities probably represent the ancient Shu people's deeper understanding and

worship of the cosmic order and nature. At the same time, with the exchange and integration of the Sanxingdui civilization with surrounding cultures, some foreign religious elements were gradually introduced and integrated into the ancient Shu people's religious beliefs, making the religious beliefs of the Sanxingdui civilization more colorful. Compared with the Central Plains Shang and Zhou cultures, the Sanxingdui civilization and the Central Plains Shang and Zhou cultures intersect in time and region. By comparing the bronze artifacts, jade artifacts, and other cultural relics of the two, it can be found that the Sanxingdui civilization was influenced by the Central Plains Shang and Zhou cultures in terms of religious beliefs and artistic styles. For example, the unearthened bronze zun and bronze lei of Sanxingdui are derived from the bronze artifacts of the Central Plains Shang culture, showing the exchange and integration of the two in religious beliefs. Compared with the cultures of West Asia and Central Asia (Huang Jianhua, 2023), the Sanxingdui civilization was also influenced by the ancient civilizations of West Asia and Central Asia in terms of religious beliefs. This is mainly reflected in some patterns and shapes of the unearthened gold batons and bronze artifacts of Sanxingdui, which are similar to the ancient cultural relics of West Asia and Central Asia. For example, the bronze mask with protruding eyes of Sanxingdui is similar to the ancient masks or deities in West Asia. Of course, the patterns and shape characteristics of Sanxingdui bronze artifacts cannot fully explain the influence of West Asian and Central Asian cultures. It may also be that different cultures have aesthetic commonalities, which need further excavation and interdisciplinary research by Sanxingdui to answer.

In the evolution of religious beliefs, Sanxingdui bronze artifacts not only record the historical changes in religious beliefs but also transform them into visual aesthetic experiences through artistic means. While appreciating these bronze artifacts, people can also feel the profound connotations of religious beliefs and aesthetic culture. This aesthetic experience not only enriches people's spiritual world but also promotes the formation of aesthetic concepts. At the same time, the sacrificial culture carried by Sanxingdui bronze artifacts also provides important clues for us to study the ancient Shu civilization's religious beliefs and worldview, enabling us to better understand the ancient Shu people's spiritual world and cultural traditions.

### 3. Conclusion

In summary, the aesthetic research on Sanxingdui bronze artifacts not only reveals the unique artistic style of the ancient Shu civilization but also offers critical insights into the ancient Bashu culture and Chinese aesthetics the ancient Bashu culture and Chinese aesthetics. These bronze artifacts, as treasures of historical and cultural heritage, embody the ancient Shu people's ingenuity through their distinctive forms, intricate patterns, and advanced craftsmanship. Through in-depth research on Sanxingdui bronze artifacts, we can better protect and inherit this precious historical and cultural heritage, enhance cultural confidence, and let more people understand and appreciate the charm of Sanxingdui culture. This will inject more vitality into contemporary artistic creation.

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