MAX J. LOEHR

MEMORIAL MINUTE
ADOPTED BY
THE FACULTY OF ARTS
AND SCIENCES
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

APRIL 9, 1991

MAX J. LOEHR

BORN December 4, 1903

DIED September 15, 1988

At the time of his death Max Loehr was one of the preeminent Western authorities on Chinese art and a teacher of enormous influence. No one observing his early life, however, would have predicted such a career. Indeed, born in 1903 Chemnitz, Saxony, he was in his late twenties when he first experienced the powerful appeal of the arts of China.

His father, a textile merchant, moved to Augsburg, where Max Loehr attended middle school. In 1920 the family moved to Munich, where the father soon died. Max Loehr, despite an abiding passion for watercolor painting and music, was obliged to work to support the family. In 1928 he married Irmgard Kistenfeger and in 1931, at the advanced age of twenty-eight, he entered the University of Munich.

There he studied classical Greek art and European architecture and sculpture, but most important to him was Ludwig Bachhofer (1894 - 1976), professor of Asian art. Bachhofer was not an orientalist in the narrow sense: he did not develop language skills, he did no field work, and he published in a broad spectrum of subjects: Indian sculpture, Chinese painting and archaeology, and Japanese woodblock prints. Nonetheless Bachhofer had gained from his teacher, the celebrated Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945), deep insight into central issues of cultural history and an analytical method that focused on the evolution of artistic style.

In this exacting environment, much affected by the formalist art and architecture of the 1930s, Max Loehr developed attitudes that governed his future studies. He came to believe, for example, that the most meaningful subject for the art historian is the appearance of the works themselves and the logic of their relationship to the works which preceded and those which followed them. He said that art, like music, should be thought of as a more or less closed system. He wrote that interpreting art as an historical monument does it grave injustice and downgrades its absolute importance. Quoting Konrad Fiedler (1841-1895) he wrote that art exists not to express its own time but to give content to its time, and he remarked after a conference in Seattle: "It was a good meeting; no one said a word about the social background of art."

In his studies of Chinese painting, Loehr tried to reconcile principles of creative freedom with those of rational order. He insisted that the most important achievements occur when an artist is free from external constraints of any kind. He also believed, however, that cultural history

From the Harvard University Gazette
Vol. LXXXVII, No. 1, September 6, 1991

itself possesses an overriding logic and meaning which reflect human intelligence but transcend the individual artist.

In 1936, after completing his doctorate on Chinese ritual bronze vessels, Loehr was appointed curator of the Asian collections at the Museum für Völkerkunde in Munich. His two sons were born: Klaus in 1936, and Thomas in 1939. In 1940 he was assigned to the Sino-German Institute in Beijing, then occupied by Japan, a German ally. He journeyed overland, chiefly on the trans-Siberian railway. The following year he was appointed institute director, and his wife and young sons came out by the same arduous route.

Despite the dust and bitter cold of the north China plain, despite wartime shortages of food, fuel, and medicine, Loehr did meticulous research in Chinese archaeology and painting. Confined largely to Beijing (he could make only a few brief excursions), he worked with Chinese specialists in paleography and archaeology, and he catalogued a local private collection of Chinese bronze age weapons. In 1945 Japan's occupation of China collapsed; the Sino-German Institute was closed, and in 1947 Max Loehr was appointed to the faculty of the Quinghua University in Beijing; his wife and sons returned to a devastated Munich. In 1949, upon the establishment of the People's Republic, Loehr abandoned most of his library and returned to Munich, where he resumed his old post as curator.

In 1951, attracted by the flowering of Asian studies in this country, he accepted a professorship at the University of Michigan - instead of the directorship of the Völkerkunde museum. And in 1953 he published in the *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America* what many consider the most important single contribution ever made to the history of Chinese art, an article of only eleven pages but with more substance than most doctoral dissertations. It proposed a system to put into chronological order hundreds of ritual bronze vessels of the Shang period - early China's most elegant and enigmatic works of art.

Until this article appeared, attempts by sinologists and archaeologists to organize this material had been an apparently hopeless muddle. Max Loehr succeeded by carefully observing how the vessels' surface ornaments - dragon and bird motifs and geometric shapes - age changed over time. While later discoveries caused minor revisions, his structure has remained intact as the key to giving these objects their correct place within Chinese dynastic history. In later publications, however, Loehr also proposed the controversial doctrine that the decorative motifs on the bronzes were most likely without religious or mythological significance, that they reflected the purely artistic interests of the craftsmen.

In 1960 Max Loehr was appointed the first Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Professor and Curator of Oriental Art at Harvard, and he attracted graduate students with outstanding abilities. In 1974 he retired from Harvard at age seventy - in excellent health, his mind acute, and his wit as charming as ever. After retirement he agreed to oversee a project intended to sustain him and his last

crop of graduate students in the study of early Chinese art - a three-volume catalogue of the Chinese ritual bronzes in the Arthur M. Sackler collection. He also completed his last major publication, *Great Painters of China,* which placed brief summaries of the lives and work of individual artists into a framework of evolutionary phases of Chinese cultural history that has won wide acceptance. His preface to that book begins with a quotation from Goethe that eloquently expresses the deep rationalism of Max Loehr's historical vision:

> *Art: a second nature, mysterious too, but more intelligible; for it springs from intelligence.*

Pramod Chandra
Oleg Grabar
Wu Hung
Chang Kwang-chih
John M. Rosenfield,
Chairman