

Han Dynasty Sculpture as a Representational Resource: Formal, Symbolic, and Interpretive Characteristics

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Han Dynasty sculpture as a historical corpus and as a representational resource: a set of visual and cultural features that can be identified, organised, and compared. Based on a qualitative study of 30 sculptures grouped into animal, human, and mythological themes, the article combines structured visual analysis with museum labels, catalogues, archaeological records, and relevant scholarship. In response to the need for clearer visual evidence, four illustrative case studies are discussed in detail: Crawling Tiger, Bronze Rhinoceros Zun, the Statue of Li Bing, and Stone Bixie. The findings show that Han sculpture is organised through a layered structure of form, symbol, and interpretive meaning. Formally, the works privilege mass, contour, stable structure, directional tension, surface treatment, and the integration of image with object or function. Symbolically, they depend on recognisable animal motifs, human roles, and supernatural features activated by funerary, ritual, commemorative, utilitarian, and everyday contexts. At the interpretive level, the works point to funerary order, social hierarchy, public memory, performance, technical ingenuity, protection, and transcendence. The article contributes a compact feature library for identifying historical sculptural resources before comparing them with later artistic reinterpretations.

Keywords: Han Dynasty sculpture; representational resource; form; symbolism; interpretive meaning; Chinese sculpture; visual analysis

INTRODUCTION

Han Dynasty sculpture occupies an important position in the history of Chinese art because it brings together funerary imagination, social order, material technique, bodily representation, and mythological belief. It includes monumental stone beasts, bronze and pottery animals, human figurines, public commemorative statues, lamps, vessels, attendant figures, performers, and supernatural guardians. These works have often been studied through tomb culture, historical style, iconography, ritual function, or archaeological context. These approaches remain essential, but they do not fully explain how Han sculpture can also function as a resource whose visible forms, symbolic types, and cultural meanings may be identified and compared across different works.

This article asks a specific question: what formal, symbolic, and interpretive characteristics distinguish Han Dynasty sculpture when it is approached as a representational resource? In this article, "representational resource" does not mean a fixed model to be copied. It refers to a structured set of visual and cultural features that can be recognised and organised before any discussion of later reinterpretation. This definition keeps the focus on the Han works themselves while also explaining why their characteristics may remain analytically useful for future comparative studies.

The article develops this question through a qualitative study of 30 Han Dynasty sculptures. The sample is organised into three thematic groups: animal sculptures, human sculptures, and mythological sculptures. The thematic division is not meant to separate the works rigidly. Rather, it provides a practical way to observe internal variation before moving to cross-theme synthesis. Across these themes, the analysis identifies shared sculptural strategies such as massing, surface articulation, spatial compression, role construction, object-function integration, and context-based meaning.

The central argument is that Han Dynasty sculpture functions as a representational resource through a layered system across form, symbol, and interpretive meaning. Its significance does not lie in a single motif, style, or cultural message. Instead, it emerges through the interaction between visible form, contextual placement, typified motifs or roles, material and technical treatment, and culturally situated meanings. This argument allows Han sculpture to be understood not only as a collection of ancient objects but also as a structured visual and cultural field.

Analytical Framework: From Historical Object to Representational Resource

The study uses a three-level analytical framework: form, symbol, and interpretive meaning, drawing on semiotic and iconological approaches to visual evidence (Aiello, 2020; Chandler, 2022; Panofsky, 1939; Peirce, 1931-1958), but it is applied in a practical and evidence-based way. The first level, form, refers to what can be observed or documented: material, scale, mass, contour, posture, spatial openness, directional tension, surface treatment, texture, technique, and the relation between body, attribute, and object.

The second level, symbol, concerns the way motifs, roles, and types become recognisable. In the animal theme, symbolic identification is often based on species motifs such as tigers, horses, rhinoceroses, sheep, dogs, cranes, or oxen. In the human theme, it is usually shaped by social role, posture, gesture, costume, attribute, and setting, as in the case of dancers, storytellers, attendants, mothers, riders, or public commemorative figures. In the mythological theme, symbolic identification depends on clusters of anomalous features, such as horns, wings, hybrid bodies, fierce animal patterns, or supernatural facial traits.

The third level, interpretive meaning, refers to broader cultural significance. This includes funerary order, ritualised status, public memory, social hierarchy, service relations, family ethics, performance, technical ingenuity, protection, boundary maintenance, transcendence, and immortality. However, this level is treated cautiously. Where archaeological, textual, or museum evidence is limited, the analysis identifies interpretive directions rather than fixed meanings. This is particularly important for small objects, decontextualised pieces, and works whose exact assemblage or ritual use is not fully recoverable.

The framework is not used as a mechanical coding checklist. It is a scaffold for moving from visible features to symbolic organisation and then to culturally situated interpretation, while acknowledging that material and multimodal meanings are produced through relations among form, surface, object type, and context (Bowcher & Liang, 2024; Castaldi, 2024; O'Halloran, 2023).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sample Selection and Categorisation

The article analyses 30 Han Dynasty sculptures selected through purposive qualitative sampling. The aim was not statistical representation but analytical coverage. The sample was designed to include works that could

support a balanced study of major subject types, materials, scales, functions, and contexts within the available corpus of Han sculpture.

Four selection criteria were used. First, each work had to belong to the Han Dynasty and possess a clearly sculptural or three-dimensional quality, including round sculpture, sculptural vessels, sculptural lamps, stone figures, pottery figurines, wooden figures, bronze objects, or jade figures. Second, each work needed sufficient visual documentation, either through direct observation, author photographs, museum images, or published catalogues. Third, basic contextual information had to be available through museum labels, excavation reports, catalogues, or scholarly literature. Fourth, the final group had to cover the three dominant subject categories identified during preliminary review: animal, human, and mythological sculpture. These criteria were used to improve transparency and to make clear that the sample is suitable for qualitative feature identification rather than numerical generalisation.

The 30 works were then categorised by theme. The animal group includes 14 works, such as stone beasts, bronze animals, animal-shaped vessels and lamps, small ornaments, and funerary or decorative animals. The human group includes 12 works, such as commemorative statues, dancers, performers, attendants, nursing figures, mounted servants, and human-object composites. The mythological group includes 4 works, such as tomb guardian beasts, spirit-path guardians, and supernatural anthropomorphic figures. The categories were not treated as closed types. They were used as analytical entry points because they allow the study to compare how different subjects organise form, symbolism, and meaning.

Table 1. Sample selection criteria and research function

Criterion	Operational meaning	Research function
Chronological and object boundary	Works are Han Dynasty sculptures or sculptural objects with clear three-dimensional qualities.	Keeps the study focused on Han sculptural evidence.
Visual documentation	Objects have direct photographs, museum images, or published visual documentation.	Supports formal analysis based on observable evidence.
Contextual evidence	Objects have museum, archaeological, catalogue, or scholarly support.	Allows symbolic and interpretive claims to be checked against evidence.
Thematic coverage	The final sample covers animal, human, and mythological subjects across materials and contexts.	Enables thematic and cross-theme synthesis rather than isolated description.

Evidence and Analytical Procedure

Three types of evidence were used. First, visual evidence was derived from direct observation, author photographs, and available images. Second, contextual evidence came from museum labels, catalogues, excavation reports, and archaeological documentation. Third, relevant scholarship was used to supplement historical, iconographic, and interpretive claims. Scholarship was not treated as a substitute for visual analysis; rather, it was used to verify information, calibrate interpretation, and prevent unsupported claims.

The analytical procedure involved three steps. First, each work was examined at the levels of form, symbol, and interpretive meaning. Second, thematic synthesis was conducted within the animal, human, and mythological

groups. Third, cross-theme synthesis was used to identify recurrent features across the sample as a whole. Because evidence varies between objects, especially between well-documented tomb assemblages and more context-dependent small-scale objects, the article differentiates between strongly supported conclusions and more open interpretive possibilities.

Table 2. Sample structure used in the article

Theme	Number of works	Main materials	Analytical focus
Animal sculpture	14	Stone, bronze, terracotta, wood	Species motif, mass, contour, latent movement, surface treatment, animal-object or animal-function integration
Human sculpture	12	Terracotta, stone, bronze, jade	Posture, role, costume, gesture, attribute, performance, everyday relation, public commemoration
Mythological sculpture	4	Stone, bronze, terracotta, wood	Anomalous body, horn, wing, guardian type, supernatural presence, protection, transcendence

FINDINGS

The findings are presented in four stages. The first three subsections synthesise the animal, human, and mythological themes. Each subsection now includes detailed visual case discussion to make the evidence behind the wider claims more visible. The final subsection presents a cross-theme feature library.

Animal Sculpture: Mass, Motif, Surface, and Function

The animal theme shows that Han animal sculpture was not a single tradition of naturalistic representation. It developed multiple pathways across material, scale, and function. Monumental stone beasts, such as Crawling Tiger and Stone Wild Boar, prioritise mass, compressed posture, and low centres of gravity. Their details are often conveyed through shallow relief, incised lines, rough surfaces, or minimal anatomical cues. The visual effect depends less on anatomical precision than on the organisation of weight, thrust, contour, and surface.

Illustrative case 1: Crawling Tiger. It is a useful example because it shows how the animal body can be formed from the logic of the stone block. The tiger is not described through detailed anatomy. Instead, the crouching body, horizontal extension, low centre of gravity, and rough stone surface create a sense of compressed force. The body appears heavy and restrained, as if movement is held inside the mass. This visual organisation supports a reading of the work as a stone-beast mode in which power is produced through mass and posture rather than through dramatic gesture.

The symbolic significance of Crawling Tiger depends on its placement within the Huo Qubing tomb sculptural system. In that context, the tiger motif is not an isolated animal image but part of a funerary and commemorative ensemble (He, 2009; Wang, 2021). The interpretive meaning therefore emerges from the relation between the stone body, tomb setting, and commemorative programme. It points to monumentality, memorial order, and a broader funerary imagination, although the precise cultural meaning must remain linked to the wider tomb context rather than inferred from the tiger image alone.

Figure 4.1 Worked exemplar of the animal theme



Crawling Tiger, Western Han Dynasty, stone. Views: front, left, right, back. Source: Author's photograph, Maoling Museum, Shaanxi, 2024.

A second pathway is represented by realistic metal animals. Gilded Bronze Horse differs from the stone-beast mode because it constructs animal dignity through credible anatomy, a stable four-legged stance, subtle forward tension, and a gilded surface. The surface does not merely decorate the figure; it elevates the animal image into a status-bearing and ritualised object. Its association with a high-status funerary context and traditions of horse appreciation supports the identification of a realistic metal-animal mode, while more specific cultural claims should remain cautious (Zhang, 1985).

Illustrative case 2: Bronze Rhinoceros Zun. It demonstrates a different principle: the animal body can become the object itself. The hollow abdomen, dorsal lid, bronze body, inlaid cloud pattern, and rhinoceros form produce a structure in which image, container, surface, and ritualised object type are inseparable. The rhinoceros is not simply an animal applied to a vessel; the vessel is organised through the animal body. The work therefore shows how Han animal sculpture could integrate visual form with practical and ceremonial function.

The symbolic force of Bronze Rhinoceros Zun is produced through several elements working together: the rhinoceros motif, the zun vessel type, the cloud pattern, the bronze material, and the gold-and-silver inlay. These elements support a reading of the object as a high-status and ritualised artefact, but the interpretation should not be reduced to a single symbolic code ("Full Interpretation...", 2023; Lan, 2019). Its meaning lies in the composite relation between animal form, vessel logic, surface refinement, and ritual or banquet context.

Figure 4.2 Worked exemplar of the animal theme



Bronze Rhinoceros Zun with Gold and Silver Inlaid Cloud Patterns, Western Han Dynasty, Bronze. *Views: front, left, right, back.* Source: Author's photograph, National Museum of China, 2024.

Other animal-shaped objects extend this logic into technical mechanisms. Bronze Wild Goose and Fish Lamp uses the goose neck and abdominal cavity as an internal smoke-guiding structure, while the fish component participates in the operation of the lamp. The animal form thus becomes a spatial and functional pathway (Jiangxi Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology & Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2019). Small-scale animal works, such as bronze ram ornaments, painted wooden oxen, terracotta dogs, wooden monkeys, and crane figures, use abstraction, symmetry, typical posture, or minimal structural nodes to preserve species recognisability. Their meanings are more open when contextual evidence is incomplete, but they still show how Han animal imagery could condense vitality, alertness, labour, companionship, auspiciousness, or ascent into compact forms.

Overall, the animal theme contributes four key resource characteristics: mass and contour rather than dense naturalism; latent or directional movement within stable structures; surface treatment as part of formal and symbolic construction; and the merging of animal images with vessels, lamps, ornaments, and mechanisms.

Human Sculpture: Bodily Organisation, Role, and Social Relation

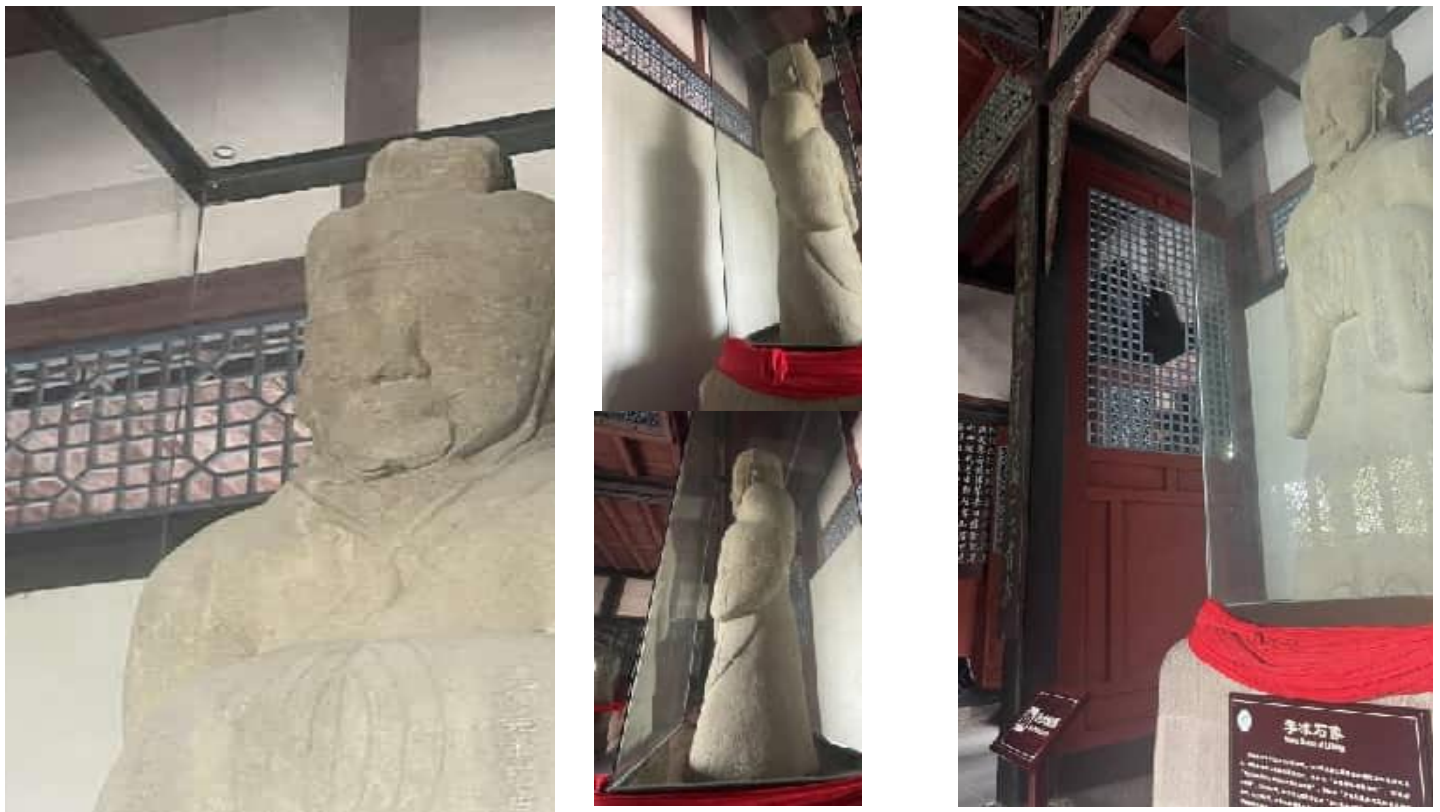
The human theme differs from the animal theme because its symbolic structure is organised less by species motif and more by posture, costume, gesture, attribute, role, and social setting. The 12 samples include monumental commemorative figures, dancing figures, storytellers, attendants, mounted servants, nursing figures, and human-object composites. These works show that Han figure sculpture is not a uniform category of human likeness but a set of role-based and relational configurations.

Illustrative case 3: Statue of Li Bing. This work represents the monumental authoritative-figure mode. Formally, it uses a large stone body, a closed vertical mass, clasped hands, and a restrained frontal posture. The sleeves, robe, and central axis are integrated into a stable, almost columnar structure. This construction produces

monumentality and public presence without relying on expressive bodily movement. The figure is recognisably human, but its visual force comes from frontal stability, ritualised posture, and block-like continuity.

Symbolically, it is not only an individual portrait. It is a commemorative figure associated with Li Bing's hydraulic achievement, public memory, and local governance (Huang, 2021; Ma, 2020). Its meaning lies in the materialisation of good governance, historical merit, and civic order. At the same time, the article avoids over-defining its commissioning mechanism because the surviving evidence does not support a more precise institutional claim. This case illustrates how Han human sculpture can transform a historical role into a stable public image through mass, posture, and commemorative context.

Figure 4.3 Worked exemplar of the human theme



Statue of Li Bing, Eastern Han Dynasty, Stone.Views: Front, Right,Left,. Source: Author's photograph, Fulongguan Hall, Dujiangyan, Sichuan, 2024.

Dancing figures reveal a different pathway. Sleeve-Swinging Dancing Female Figurine constructs movement through raised arms, long sleeves, bodily rotation, and the visual opening between sleeves and torso. The lower body stabilises the work while the sleeves extend movement into surrounding space. Here, the garment is not secondary to the body; it becomes the main formal medium for rhythm. The symbolic identity of the figure depends on the long-sleeved performance type, while broader ritual or institutional meanings require caution unless supported by contextual evidence (National Museum of China, n.d.; Zhang, 2024; Deng, 2012).

Performative and entertainment figures extend this role-based logic further. Drumming and Storytelling Figurine integrates posture, facial expression, drum, stick, and forward-leaning action into a single performative structure. The open mouth and smiling expression do not function as minor details but as elements that intensify the bodily act of storytelling and drumming. Museum and scholarly interpretations usually identify this type with Eastern Han entertainment or storytelling scenes (Pan, 2015; Chen, 2023).

The everyday and service-oriented pathway is represented by works such as Stone-Carved Horse-Riding Figurine, nursing figures, attendants, and human-object composites such as the Changxin Palace Lamp. This work, the horse forms the main supporting mass, while the rider, carried objects, and expression create a scene of everyday return or service. The human figure is not isolated but activated through a relation between rider, horse, carried items, and narrative gesture (Chinese Complete Works of Fine Arts Editorial Committee, 2015, p. 34). Similar logic appears in nursing figures, where enclosed arms and seated posture create an intimate bodily space of care.

The human theme therefore contributes several resource characteristics. Human figures are often organised through posture and role rather than individual portraiture alone. Costume, sleeve, prop, attribute, facial expression, and gesture can become structural parts of the image. Human sculpture also visualises social relations: public commemoration, performance, family care, service, entertainment, and everyday life.

Mythological Sculpture: Anomalous Bodies, Protection, and Transcendence

The mythological theme is the smallest group in the sample, but it clarifies an important dimension of Han sculptural imagination. The four works—Painted Wooden Unicorn, Tiger-Patterned Unicorn, Stone Bixie, and Gilded Bronze Winged Figure—show that mythological sculpture does not constitute a single supernatural type. Instead, it includes tomb guardians, spirit-path beasts, and supernatural anthropomorphic figures. These works are identified through clusters of anomalous bodily features rather than through ordinary naturalistic resemblance.

Painted Wooden Unicorn demonstrates the tomb-guardian pathway through assembled wood construction, a long projecting horn, tense forelimbs, and a forward-oriented body. The horn is not merely an accessory; it defines the creature's supernatural identity and directional force. Tiger-Patterned Unicorn develops a related but distinct mode. Its tiger-like body, horn, arched back, and patterned surface produce supernatural intimidation. In both cases, symbolic meaning depends on the relation between horned animality, funerary setting, and the role of tomb protection (Chen & Kang, 2014; Guo, 1991).

Illustrative case 4: Stone Bixie. It represents the monumental spirit-path guardian-beast mode. Its large stone mass, open space beneath the belly, raised head, open mouth, protruding tongue, and forward-reaching limbs create a protective and intimidating presence. Unlike the crouching tiger, the bixie is not organised through compressed stillness alone. It projects force through an expanded body, open mouth, raised head, and forward movement. The carved surface and monumental body work together to mark its extraordinary status.

The symbolic function of stone Bixie as a bixie is linked to tomb protection, boundary maintenance, and spirit-path order; however, its meaning arises from the entire configuration of mass, movement, surface, and funerary placement rather than from the label alone (Gong, 2011; Zhong, 2023). This case shows why mythological sculpture requires a cautious but visually grounded reading: the supernatural identity is not carried by one feature only, but by the combination of anomalous body, guardian posture, spatial setting, and surface articulation.

Figure 4.4 Worked exemplar of the Mythological theme



Stone Bixie, Eastern Han Dynasty, stone. Views: front, left, right, back Source: Author's photograph, Luoyang Museum, Henan, 2024

Gilded Bronze Winged Figure introduces a different mythological pathway: the supernatural anthropomorphic figure associated with transcendence. Its human-like body is transformed by wings, anomalous facial traits, kneeling posture, and gilded surface. Unlike the guardian beasts, it does not primarily communicate protection through intimidation. Instead, it visualises a movement beyond ordinary human form, suggesting a field of transcendence, immortality, or supernormal existence (Gong, 2011; He, 2010).

Across the mythological theme, formal identity depends on anomalous bodily configuration: horns, wings, hybrid bodies, fierce patterns, open mouths, and extraordinary faces. Symbolically, these features require contextual placement within tombs, spirit paths, and funerary or transcendence-related systems. Interpretively, the works point to protection, apotropaic force, boundary maintenance, supernatural presence, and immortality. The small number of samples requires caution, but the theme remains crucial because it shows how Han sculpture visualised the continuity between the human, animal, and supernatural worlds.

Cross-Theme Synthesis: A Feature Library of Han Sculpture

Cross-theme synthesis shows that Han Dynasty sculpture cannot be reduced to isolated themes. Animal, human, and mythological works differ in motif and context, but they share comparable organisational strategies. These strategies can be summarised as a feature library of formal, symbolic, and interpretive resources.

At the formal level, the first shared characteristic is the priority given to overall mass, outer contour, and structural relationship. Large stone beasts, monumental figures, and mythological guardians all establish visual identity through bodily mass and compositional order before local detail. The second shared characteristic is the coexistence of stable structure and directional tension. Han sculptures often suggest movement through low centres of gravity, forward thrust, twist, extension, raised limbs, arched necks, or wing-like expansion while maintaining structural legibility. The third shared characteristic is the integration of surface language into form. Gilding, patina, weathering, painted garment traces, cloud patterns, tiger patterns, and carved textures all participate in making the image visible and meaningful. The fourth shared characteristic is the composite

relation between image and object. Animal bodies can become vessels or lamps; human figures can be integrated into functional objects; mythological forms can be embedded in tomb or spirit-path systems.

At the symbolic level, the three themes share a system of typification. Animals are identified through species motifs, human figures through roles and actions, and mythological sculptures through supernatural feature clusters. In each case, symbolic meaning depends on the relation between type and context. A tiger in a tomb precinct, a dancer with long sleeves, a mounted servant carrying objects, and a horned guardian beast are not meaningful through motif alone. Their symbolic roles emerge through bodily configuration, attribute, placement, object category, and use context.

At the interpretive level, recurring directions include funerary order, social hierarchy, public commemoration, bodily performance, everyday life, protection, technical ingenuity, ritualisation, and transcendence. These directions do not form a single unified doctrine. Instead, they show how Han sculpture translated different aspects of social and cosmological life into visible and material form.

Table 3 Compact feature library of Han Dynasty sculpture as representational resources

Analytical level	Feature cluster	Key significance
Form	Overall mass and outer contour	Images are established through mass, contour, and structural legibility rather than dense local detail.
Form	Stable structure and directional tension	Movement is often compressed, implied, twisting, ascending, or forward-thrusting within a stable body.
Form	Surface as part of form	Pattern, polychromy, gilding, weathering, patina, and texture contribute to the image itself.
Form	Composite spatial and functional organisation	Bodies may integrate with vessels, lamps, attributes, supports, open spaces, or relational systems.
Symbol	Typological recognisability	Species motifs, social roles, and supernatural types remain identifiable even when simplified or stylised.
Symbol	Context dependence	Symbolic meaning emerges through tomb, ritual, public, everyday, utilitarian, or spirit-path contexts.
Symbol	Open higher-level interpretation	Basic identification is often clear, while cultural interpretation must be limited by available evidence.
Interpretive meaning	Funerary and social order	Works participate in tomb space, afterlife imagination, hierarchy, commemoration, service, and public memory.
Interpretive meaning	Vitality, performance, and technical agency	Animal movement, human performance, and object mechanisms produce vitality and agency.
Interpretive meaning	Protection and transcendence	Guardian beasts, bixie, feathered figures, and anomalous bodies articulate protection, boundary, immortality, and supernormality.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that Han Dynasty sculpture should be understood as a relational visual system rather than as a collection of isolated motifs. Its representational force is produced through the interaction of material body, surface treatment, motif or role, object type, placement, and cultural context. These case studies clarify how this

interaction operates at the level of individual works, while the cross-theme synthesis explains why these individual observations can be organised into a broader feature library.

First, the analysis challenges any simple opposition between realism and abstraction. Han sculptures may include realistic animal anatomy, recognisable human roles, or clearly legible supernatural types, but their formal logic is not governed by imitation alone. Many works prioritise structural effect: mass, contour, compression, twist, frontal stability, or directional thrust. This is visible in the contrast between the stone beasts, which use block-like mass and rough surface, and the bronze horse, which uses anatomical credibility and gilded surface. Both modes produce recognisability, but they do so through different sculptural logics.

Second, the study shows that symbolic meaning is contextually produced. A tiger, horse, dancer, servant, mother, bixie, or winged figure cannot be interpreted adequately as a self-contained image. Symbolic meaning emerges through the relation between image type and cultural setting: tomb assemblage, commemorative space, ritual vessel, lamp function, public memory, everyday service, or supernatural guardianship. This means that Han sculptural symbolism is best approached as a contextual mechanism rather than as a fixed dictionary of motifs.

Third, the meaning layer requires particular evidential caution. Some interpretive directions are strongly supported, such as funerary order, public commemoration, protective function, or the link between animal-shaped objects and practical mechanisms. Other readings, especially those concerning auspiciousness, ethnic memory, emotional tone, or specific ritual beliefs, may remain plausible but not fully demonstrable. The feature library therefore distinguishes between stable meaning directions and open interpretive fields. This distinction prevents visual resemblance from being translated into unsupported cultural certainty.

Fourth, the feature library offers a basis for future comparative work. Before discussing whether later or contemporary sculpture borrows from Han sculpture, it is necessary to clarify what the Han resource itself contains. The present analysis identifies this resource not as a set of fixed images but as a layered configuration of formal principles, symbolic mechanisms, and meaning orientations. This makes it possible to compare later works with Han resources at different levels: through mass and contour, through typified motifs or roles, through material and surface translation, or through the reorganisation of funerary, social, protective, or transcendental meanings.

The study also has limitations. The sample is limited to 30 works and does not cover the full geographical, chronological, or material diversity of Han sculpture. The reliability of interpretation varies according to the available documentation for each object. Some works have strong archaeological, museum, or textual support, whereas others require more cautious reading. Future research could expand the sample, incorporate technical analysis of materials and surfaces, and compare the feature library with later sculptural practices or contemporary reinterpretations.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined Han Dynasty sculpture as a representational resource by analysing 30 works across animal, human, and mythological themes. It has argued that Han sculpture operates through a layered structure of form, symbol, and interpretive meaning. Formally, the works privilege mass, contour, stable structure, directional tension, surface language, and the integration of image with object or function. Symbolically, they rely on typified species, social roles, and supernatural forms whose meanings are activated through context.

Interpretively, they point to funerary order, social hierarchy, public memory, bodily performance, everyday life, ritual status, protection, and transcendence.

The main contribution of the article is the construction of a feature library that identifies the transferable characteristics of Han Dynasty sculpture without reducing them to simple visual motifs. This library provides a clearer foundation for future studies of historical resource transformation, sculptural representation, and contemporary reinterpretation. More broadly, the article suggests that the study of ancient sculpture can move beyond object description by asking how formal organisation, symbolic typification, and cultural meaning together produce a resource structure that remains analytically productive.

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