

Princeton University

Honors Faculty Members
Receiving Emeritus Status



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Robert William Bagley



Robert Bagley, professor in the Department of Art and Archaeology, is transferring to emeritus status after 29 years on the Princeton faculty.

Bob received both his undergraduate and graduate degrees from Harvard University, where the teachers who made the deepest impression on him were Benjamin Schwartz (Chinese intellectual history), Ernst Kitzinger (early Christian art), and his eventual dissertation adviser, Max Loehr (Chinese art). As a graduate student he quickly focused on ancient Chinese ritual bronzes, the subject in which his adviser had made his reputation 40 years earlier, but to his adviser's methodological arsenal Bob added technical studies and a preoccupation with casting techniques. Lucky encounters with the work of John Gettens, head of the technical laboratory of the Freer Gallery of Art, and Cyril Stanley Smith, professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, gave him a lasting passion for how works of art are made. Bob says that it was the example of Benjamin Schwartz that made him a comparativist, while Kitzinger and Loehr have always remained his models for dealing in words with things visual. Smith became third reader of his dissertation.

After a brief stint as assistant professor at Harvard, where he wrote a book that weighs 12 pounds, Bob came to Princeton in 1985. To the end of his time as a teacher here, he overprepared for his classes. As he tells it, this may not have been very good for the students—a polished product leaves the consumer with little to do—but it was very good indeed for his own work. Many of his papers and even his latest book originated in his course lectures and graduate seminars. Recent seminars on ornament and on the historiography of art were the starting points for three articles, and Bob's retirement plans include writing a book for Oxford University Press based on

“The Art and Archaeology of Ancient China,” a course he taught throughout his time at Princeton. As a writer, he is impatient with private language and pedantry, and a relentless reviser.

The publications in which he takes the greatest satisfaction are, he says, mostly relatively recent: the chapter “Shang Archaeology” in *The Cambridge History of Ancient China* (1999), a chapter on the origin of the Chinese writing system in *The First Writing* (2004), a paper on ancient Chinese music theory (2005), his book *Max Loehr and the Study of Chinese Bronzes: Style and Classification in the History of Art* (2008), and a chapter on “Art, 1400 BC to AD 900,” worldwide in scope, forthcoming in volume 4 of *The Cambridge History of the World*. But earlier works, notably his much-cited article “Meaning and Explanation” (1993), are admired as classics by colleagues, and a bilingual book he published in collaboration with the Institute of Archaeology of Shanxi Province, *Houma Taofan Yishu/Art of the Houma Foundry* (1996), won the Freer Gallery’s Shimada Prize.

Bob’s first paper, published in 1977 while he was still a graduate student, put a spotlight on Panlongcheng, an archaeological site that has come to assume a pivotal place in conceptions of the early Chinese Bronze Age. Panlongcheng has never been out of his thoughts for long. He returned to it in a paper published this year in the proceedings of a conference organized by one of his graduate students (Kyle Steinke, ed., *Art and Archaeology of the Erligang Civilization*). Panlongcheng, where excavations have just resumed after a 40-year hiatus, brackets his career.