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## Art That Inspires Artists

### Ai Weiwei on his favorite work



Shang Dynasty jade from the tomb of Fu Hao, 1300-1046 BCE, Courtesy of the National Museum of China, Beijing

By  Charlotte Burns

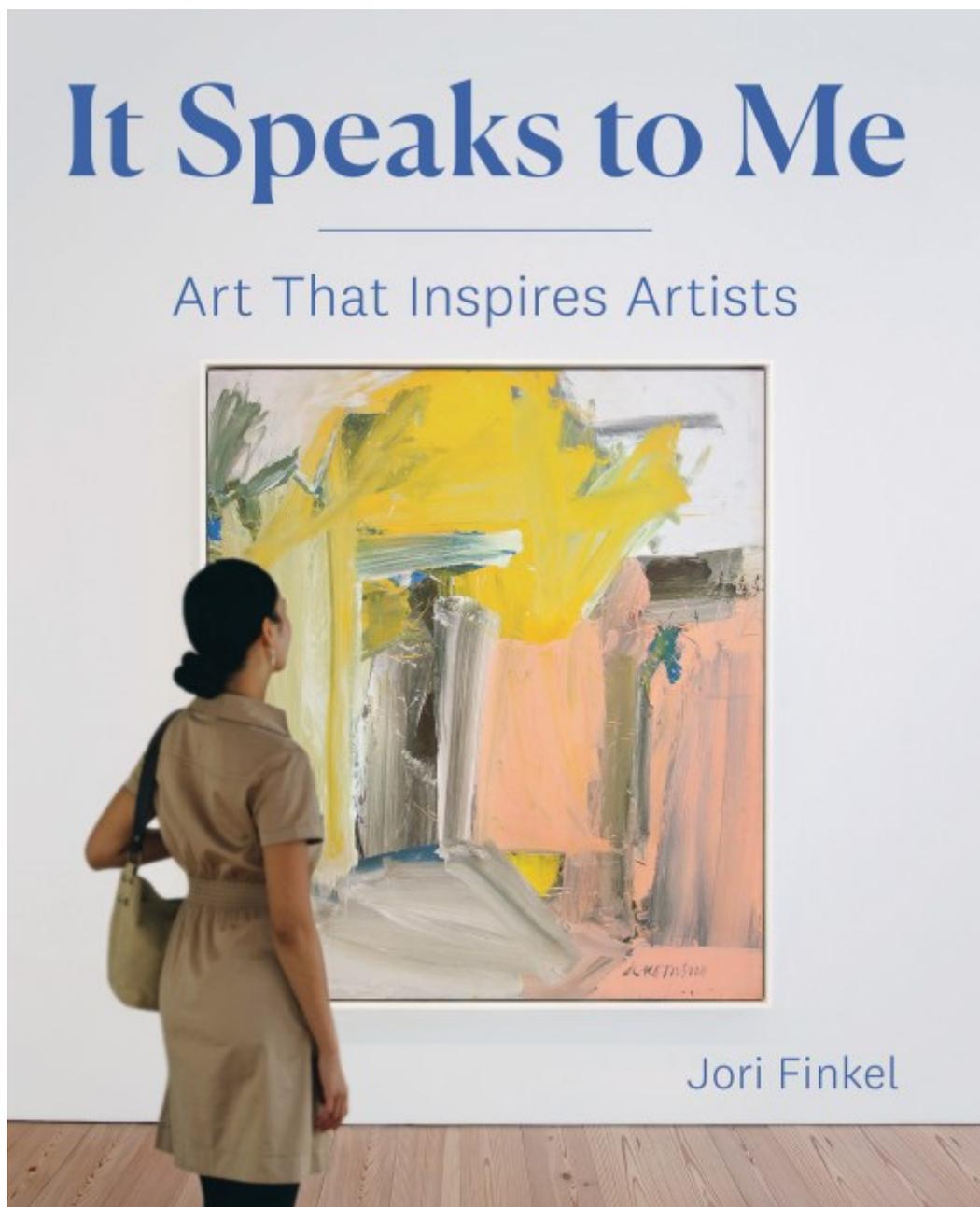
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Ai Weiwei lives such a public life, at least on Instagram, that it's hard to imagine he has kept anything private. But there is one thing he has long kept under wraps: his personal collection of Chinese jade, which experts say is first-rate and now runs

to hundreds of objects.

In Jori Finkel's new book *It Speaks to Me*—which comprises interview with 50 leading, international artists about a work of art that truly moves them—Ai opened up about his lifelong interest in jade, which dates back to his childhood during the Cultural Revolution when collecting the material was forbidden.



In Jori Finkel's new book *It Speaks to Me*, Weiwei opened up about his lifelong interest in jade. Image courtesy Prestel USA

"Of all the artists I interviewed for the book," Finkel said, "[Ai Weiwei](#) is the only one who truly had a connoisseur-level knowledge of the work he chose to discuss. I learned so much about the different qualities of jade just talking to him."

Each of the interviews in the book focus on works in museums which have inspired artists— from a painting by [Mark Rothko](#) at the [Museum of Contemporary Art](#) in Los Angeles, chosen by [Mark Bradford](#), to one of [Rembrandt's](#) final self-portraits at the [National Gallery in London](#), selected by [Gillian Wearing](#). Ai's focus was a small jade figurine in the [National Museum of China](#) that came from the tomb of [Fu Hao](#), a powerful female ruler from the Shang Dynasty.

Finkel—a veteran arts journalist who is appearing on an upcoming episode of our [In Other Words](#) podcast—says she got to know the artist during her [New York Times](#) coverage of his 2014 Alcatraz project, but securing his participation in the book

was a hard get. “When I first asked him to choose a museum piece that inspires him, he chose the New York City skyline.”

She decided to wait it out for a few months. “It was tricky, because he’s very good at pushing up against authority, and I didn’t want to become that person enforcing some rule,” she says. But, when she got back in touch, Ai was more responsive. “He had so much to say about this piece and his passion for jade—I was really surprised,” Finkel says.

*The following is an excerpt from “Ai Weiwei on a Shang Dynasty jade from the tomb of Fu Hao” published in It Speaks to Me: Art That Inspires Artists (DelMonico Books-Prestel) © 2019 Prestel Verlag, Munich, Texts © Jori Finkel. Reprinted by permission of DelMonico Books-Prestel.*

My interest in classical Chinese artifacts started very late because I grew up during the Cultural Revolution, and the Communist Party was trying to erase ancient traces from Chinese history. They were trying to destroy the older culture to establish the new world. You couldn’t have a jade piece at that time; it would be confiscated or you would be destroyed yourself.



Growing up, Chinese artist Ai Weiwei really only saw one piece of jade—now, he says, he probably has one of the world’s largest collections of the material

Growing up I really only saw one piece of jade—a seal given to my father before he went into exile that had five characters on it: “If you know how to endure hardship, you might find the way.” He later tried to smooth down the characters for fear the words would give him away. It wasn’t until 1993, when I moved back to China from the U.S., that I really started going to antiques markets to buy jade. Beijing has an ocean of antiques. Now I probably have one of the largest jade collections.

This kneeling figure comes from the [tomb of Fu Hao](#), the most complete archaeological discovery made by the Chinese government, one undisturbed by tomb thieves. Fu Hao was a remarkable military leader, maybe the most powerful female ruler in that period of Chinese history. Archaeologists found 755 jade pieces in her tomb, which speaks to her status. Jade is a very hard stone, so think about the amount of time and energy needed to carve these pieces—this incredible manpower.

Some people believe this small carving represents Fu Hao herself, but I believe it’s more mythological than memorial in function—a ritual object related to a higher power. The piece protruding from her back looks like a fishtail, which would mean she’s a god or ghostlike figure. In the Shang Dynasty, you often saw depictions of humanlike figures with a dragon’s head or a fish’s tail. They are images of transformation. The kneeling position is common, but the tail and headdress are unique; they don’t repeat in thousands of objects that come later.

Jade carries such weight in Chinese culture that every dynasty has used it. In the Chinese language, there are a few hundred words just to describe the qualities of jade, whether black, fine, small, or transparent. This figure is an example of white jade, so it has this feeling of translucency and softness. When you touch it, it’s extremely smooth, like silk.

