
Title of Object

Ceremonial stem cup

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: Unknown

Culture: Chinese

Date of Object: 3000-2000 BCE

Country: China

Accession Number: 94.63

File Created: 5/31/2016

Material/Medium: Burnished earthenware

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Tour Topics

Group 4 tour, ancient culture, ceramics, food and drink, funerary/afterlife, innovation, power/status, ritual/ceremony

Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

1. Take a few minutes to look at the Ceremonial Cups. Keeping in mind that they are very old – as old as 4,000 years – what do you notice about their shape and shape?
2. Noticing that these cups are egg-shell thin, imagine how and where you would use or display them in present-day culture.
3. Notice that the design of the cups. They have a relatively small base and high cup portion on a long stem, thus the center of gravity is high and the cup could be unstable. Describe how well cups with a similar design would function today at a crowded and animated New Year's Eve party.

4. Notice the fine burnished surface of these cups. Describe how the elegantly burnished surface would probably make these cups more suitable for ritual and carefully-planned events than for everyday home use.

Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

These cups are from the Longshan culture in the period from 2500 to 2000 BCE. They were turned on a fast-moving potter's wheel. They had access to well-refined clay and used high-fire kilns. It is likely that they were made in three sections – base, stem, and cup – and then assembled together in the final stage before firing. The cups were burnished (polished) in a final step before firing with small, smooth stones.

Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

We know very little about the Longshan culture. It was located in the middle and lower Yellow River areas. They seemed to have been the most technically advanced Chinese culture of this time in relation to their skills in pottery. They are often referred to as the “Black Pottery Culture”. Ironically, in contrast to their egg-shell thin pottery, it has been seen that they also protected their settlements with sturdy rammed-earth walls.

These egg-shell thin cups were preserved and are intact today because they were placed in tombs. We know little about their religious practices, but it is assumed that since these cups were so finely designed and produced and of obvious special quality, that placing them in tombs of loved ones indicates a desire to honor the deceased – perhaps an indication of a belief in an afterlife. We do not know the identities or names of the artists.

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

(Label for the other stem cup in the grouping, 2000.156.1): The Longshan culture (3000-2000 b.c.) of north and northeast China is best known artistically for its thin, hard, black-burnished pottery. Formed on a fast turning potters wheel, this fine black ware is relatively rare. Ceremonial in purpose, the best of it is eggshell thin and highly burnished like the three libation cups shown here. Common Longshan pottery included coarser black, grey and red wares. The potters have taken advantage of the new wheel technology, well-refined clays, and high-fire kiln to create one of the most technically accomplished wares of the Neolithic era.

Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Wikipedia link: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Longshan_culture

Britannica link: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Longshan-culture>

Article from the Asian Art Collection at Princeton University:

https://etcweb.princeton.edu/asianart/timeperiod_china.jsp?ctry=China&pd=Neolithic

Prop Ideas:

1. Have available some pieces of egg shell to illustrate the thin walls of the cups.

2. Blow out the liquid insides of an egg leaving the shell walls intact; then color the outside to roughly imitate the look of the ceremonial cups. If the docent has a dramatic side, display the empty egg shell in a thin plastic bag and crush the egg shell to demonstrate the fragility of something so thin.