
Title of Object

Cong

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: Unknown

Culture: Chinese (Shang Dynasty)

Date of Object: 1122-722 BCE

Country: China

Accession Number: 50.46.302

File Created: 5/2/2016

Material/Medium: Mottled dark green jade

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Tour Topics

Group 2 tour, ancient culture, funerary/afterlife, innovation/avant-garde, power, ritual/ceremony, spirituality/sacred, symbolism, carving

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

If you won the lottery, what would you buy that would be precious to you? (Describe Ancient Chinese attitude toward jade)

Take a minute to look at the rectangular objects from 1100 BCE. If you inherited this object, how would you use it? (What impresses you about this object? (Abrasion process.)

Compare these to the cosmetic case you just saw, what are some differences that strike you? Any similarities?

What 2016 tools would you want to use to make a duplicate of this object?

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

For the ancient Chinese, there was nothing more precious than jade. Of course it's beautiful and it comes in variety of translucent colors: white is most valued but also comes in all shades of green, brown and even black. It is hard to find and hard to carve but to the Chinese, jade is a link between the physical and the spiritual worlds. It is a precious stone with 5 virtues: Benevolence, integrity, intelligence, bravery and trustworthiness. It brought blessings, good health and protected them from bad things. It was much more valuable than silver or gold. There is Chinese saying: Gold is valuable but jade is invaluable.

Mia's ancient Chinese jade collection includes each of the four primary uses of jade: weapons & implements, burial rituals, court ceremonies and ornaments or charms.

Jade is too hard to carve or even scratch so the innovative ancient Chinese used abrasion. They would slice a boulder down to a narrow slab and then work to create the desired shape. They would pound, grind and sift hard rocks (like quartz) into abrasive sands. By adding water they would create a sludge or paste which would be applied to a wooden or bamboo stick. Possibly artists dipped the end of wooden stick into animal fat and then into the pulverized powder. The stick could be rotated between palm of hand or a simple bow mechanism with downward pressure. Once they got into the stone they would turn it over and start again to meet in the middle. Fine lines, that were repetitive and parallel and the high degree of polish on the surface were technical feats.

Hard to believe the precise, repetitive and parallel design of this cong was achieved by rubbing sand. Extremely difficult and time consuming to produce which reflects the high level of the jade work and the importance of jade that so much time was invested in this shape. Complex objects could have taken 2-3 years to carve and of course the time required to produce such a beauty only added to the value. How does this remind you of the lacquer ware?

The trend for Jade gifts and ornaments continues to be extremely popular and the process has been modernized with diamond saws and high speed air tools.

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

The tall rectangular block with the cylindrical tube inside is known as ts'ung or Cong. It is one of the most common objects recovered from Neolithic cultures and the most mysterious.

They vary in size and their round shape suggest they might have evolved from bracelets. They are frequently found in tombs. One tomb had 33 congs encircling the body.

Some congs like this one, were decorated with lines and circles that could be interpreted as faces. This face pattern is sometimes seen in the corners of the rectangle. Animal, spirit or monster faces –we don't know.

Some scholars believe these congs were used in worship ceremonies and was an emblem of rank. Other scholars wonder if the outer rectangle was a symbol of earth and the interior cylinder represented heaven. But those symbols were developed in later cultures and it is really impossible to know for sure what these congs represented at the time.

Despite this mystery, we can appreciate the workmanship; how precise the lines were carved, the parallel lines and all because of rubbing sand. Modern artists are impressed with the refinement of the work produced.

Quick fun fact about one of jade pendants: The ancient Chinese believed that the body's orifices should be closed at death to preserve the vital spirit or Qi. Mouth amulets originally were designed in shape of the tongue but over time artists began to use the form of a cicada. The cicada is a symbol of transformation and resurrection because of its life cycle (Living underground for 17 years, emerging in their final larvae stage to shed their skin and reveal their mature form). As it turns out, the cicada are due to emerge this spring in the northeast. They haven't been around since 1999! Be sure to stop back and check out this wonderful little pendant when you have time.

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

1. Ancient Chinese Jade

China has a 7,000 year history of jade carving. The expensive and beautiful mineral has stood as a symbol of wealth and power since the earliest dynasties when it was used primarily as a personal ornament, ritual implement or as a funerary object to exorcise evil spirits. The natural properties of jade have long held both personal and moral significance to the Chinese who associated its antiquity and luster with human virtue. Nearly all ancient jades have been recovered from tombs where they were placed to protect and accompany the deceased in the afterlife. All of the ancient jade here displayed were collected and donated by Alfred F. Pillsbury.

2. Ritual Jades of the Neolithic Period (5,000-2,000 BC)

During the China's long Neolithic (Stone Age) period, various regional cultures produced their own characteristic jade ritual implements and ornaments. The most distinctive were the animal shaped ornaments of the Hung-shan culture in the Liao River Valley; the circular pi discs, cylindrical tubes (Ts'ung) and axe shapes (fu) of the Liang-chu culture of the T'ai-hu basin and the knife (dao) and scepter (chang) shapes of the Lung-shan culture of the Yellow River Valley. Jade is an extremely hard substance and very difficult to carve. The regularity of shapes and beauty of decorative designs are notable for such an early period.

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

From the Freer Sackler museum, information page on ancient Chinese jades:

<http://www.asia.si.edu/explore/china/jades/default.asp>

From the Khan Academy, information on Jade Cong and Bi:

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-asia/imperial-china/neolithic-art-china/a/jade-cong-and-bi>

From the Freer Sackler, a link to teachers' resources, including great information on art and archaeology from ancient China:

<http://www.asia.si.edu/explore/listByArea.asp>

<http://www.asia.si.edu/explore/teacherResources/chinapacket/chinacover.pdf>

Stokstad, Marilyn and Cothren Michael W. *Art History A View of the World: Part One*. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc. 2014) p. 333-334.