
Title of Object

Ritual Bell Bo

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: Unknown

Culture: Chinese (Zhou Dynasty)

Date of Object: Late 6th – 5th century BCE

Country: China

Accession Number: 97.81

File Created: 5/10/2016

Material/Medium: Bronze

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Tour Topics

Group 2 tour, ancient culture, animals/birds, celebration, entertainment/music, funerary/afterlife, innovation/avant-garde, power/status, ritual/ceremony

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

This object is cast bronze, a type of art that defines early Chinese art for nearly 1500 years. This bell comes from the Zhou Dynasty, the last dynasty from the Bronze Age in China. What impresses you about this object? (Enormous size – nothing on this scale would be cast in Europe until the Middle Ages, 1500 years later. Bells range from 9 to 40 inches tall; our bell is 24 inches. The heaviest bell found to date is 488 pounds.)

This clapperless bell, hung from a wooden frame as part of a set, would have been struck with long rods or a hammer. What do you think it would feel like to strike this bell? (Would need to use your whole body to strike.)

Because of its size, what would you expect as the tone for this bell? (Deep, long, sonorous tones. Share recording of bell sounds, minute 4:29 – 4:36.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0AFhboNw5U>

What instrument can you think of that was a trendsetter? (For example, the harpsichord was the trendsetter for the piano.)

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

- This bell, pronounced “paw chung,” is an example of a large scale bronze casting calculated to produce an exacting musical note which is a testament to the technical abilities of the ancient artisans who did not yet have the mathematics necessary to calculate an exact formula for the relation between size and pitch (example of technical innovation). (Mia website and audio clip)
- This bell was likely the largest in a graduated set of bells and would have produced deep, sonorous tones that lent gravitas to the ritual ceremonies in which it was used. (Mia website) (Listen to audio of bells.) After the tenth century BCE, during the Zhou dynasty (1046 – 256 BCE), sets of bells were suspended from a wooden frame from their handle like stem. (Heilbrunn Timeline) You can see ritual bells on the end of the Sarcophagus of Prince Cheng Ching at Mia (46.23,1a-d).
- The bell would have been struck externally and, thanks to its unique construction, is capable of producing two accurately tuned tones of intervals sounding a major or minor third (example of technical innovation). The earliest evidence of a chromatic scale is a set of ten bells from the tenth or eleventh century B.C., unearthed in 1993 in Ningxiang, Hunan Province. Tuned bells ranged greatly in size; some were only about nine inches tall, while the largest found to date is about forty inches tall and weighs 488 pounds. (Heilbrunn Timeline) On the outside of the bell there are 18 blunt spikes or bosses that often show marks of filing whereby the bell could be tuned to the requisite pitch by removing small quantities of the metal. (Encyclopaedia Britannica)
- By European standards, these ancient Chinese bronze bells are enormous. Nothing on this scale would be cast in Europe until the Middle Ages, over fifteen hundred years later (example of trendsetting). (A History of the World in 100 Objects)

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

- Few works of art are as remote or alien to western eyes as ancient Chinese bronzes. Nevertheless these beautiful objects constituted the mainstream of Chinese art for nearly 1500 years. Spanning both the Shang (1523-1028 B.C.) and Zhou dynasties (1027-256 B.C.), bronzes represent unsurpassed technical refinement and varied décor and define the very essence of early Chinese art (example of uniqueness of Chinese art). (Art of Asia, Mia website)
- The bells were the chief instruments of Chinese ritual music. They would have been owned by warlords or officials and were a sign of wealth and status. They were probably played in the company of string and wind instruments. The bells were used from the Bronze Age until 1911. The bells travelled beyond the boundaries of China. The closest surviving form of this ancient music is found in Korean

court music that originated in the 12th century (example of trendsetting) and is still played today in Korea now. (A History of the World in 100 Objects and Encyclopaedia Britannica)

- But the role of bells in China could go far beyond the musical. To produce perfect tones they had absolutely standardized shapes, and the consistency of these shapes meant that the bells could also be used to measure volume (example of unique use). You had, so to speak, a pint bell or a quart bell. And as the amount of bronze in each one was also carefully controlled, they could just as well provide standard weights. So you could have, as it were, a hundredweight bell, and so on. So there is a sense in which a set of bells in ancient China could also serve as a sort of local weights and measures office, bringing harmony to commerce as well as society. (A History of the World in 100 Objects)

- When a bell like this was first played, in the 5th century BCE, China was in military and political disarray. There was widespread social instability, but also lively intellectual debate about what an ideal society ought to be, and by the far the most famous and influential contributor to these debates was Confucius. He placed a very high value on peace and harmony. One of his celebrated sayings was: “Music produces a kind of pleasure which human nature cannot do without.” For Confucius, music was a metaphor of a harmonious society. Confucianism was really the soul of the Chinese state for the best part of 2,000 years (example of trendsetting). (A History of the World in 100 Objects)

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

Cast on each side with eighteen bosses formed of coiled snakes, this massive bell from south central China would have likely been among the largest in the graduated set from which it came. It would have produced the deep, sonorous tones that lent gravitas to the ritual ceremonies in which it was used. The tones produced on large bells such as this resonate considerably longer than those struck on the smaller ones.

Like many fifth century BCE bronze vessels and bells from the ancient Chu state in southern China, this work carries detailed and finely cast designs in low relief. The registers alternating between the rows of bosses at the top and the rectangular register centered at the bottom zone are each decorated with tiny raised patterns, probably representing intertwined dragons. Such large-scale castings, calculated to produce an exacting musical note, are testaments to the technical abilities of the ancient artisans who did not yet have the mathematics necessary to calculate an exact formula for the relation between size and pitch.

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

Ritual bell on artsmia site: <http://collections.artsmia.org/search/Ritual%20bell>

Archived material on Chinese bronzes on artsmia: <http://archive.artsmia.org/art-of-asia/explore/explore-collection-chinese-bronzes.cfm>

Chinese bronze bell, similar to the one in Mia collection:
http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=227067&partId=1

Ancient Chinese bell video (play 4:29-4:36) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0AFhboNw5U>

Chinese bronzes. (2016). In Encyclopædia Britannica. Retrieved from <http://www.britannica.com/art/Chinese-bronzes>

MacGregor, Neil. *A History of the World in 100 Objects*. Trustees of the British Museum and BBC, 2010, pp. 190 – 194.

Moore, J. Kenneth. "Music and Art of China." In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000 - . http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/much/hd_much.htm (September 2009)

Cothren, Michael W. and Stokstad, Marilyn. *Art History: A View of the World: Part One*, 5th ed. New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc., 2014, pp. 334-337.

O'Riley, Michael Kampen. *Art Beyond the West*, 3rd ed. New Jersey, Pearson Education, Inc., 2014, pp. 111 – 116.