



Ancient Bronze Vessel

The Bronze Age in China was from about 1700 through 221 BCE, primarily during the Shang and Zhou dynasties. During this early period, the Chinese experimented with and developed bronze casting techniques. As in many other Bronze Age cultures worldwide, the initial motivation for creating bronze objects in ancient China was to produce stronger weaponry and tools.

In addition to weapons and tools, bronze vessels like this one were produced in great quantities for ceremonial purposes, including ancestor worship rituals, during which bronze vessels were used to hold wine, water, and food in honor of the ancestors.

Bronze vessels were also often buried in tombs. Chinese belief held that the deceased continue to live on as spirits and needed to take along worldly possessions for the afterlife (not unlike the ancient Egyptians).

Elaborate bronzes like those in the galleries were very costly prestige items. Wealthy people and royalty had a number of bronze vessels in their tombs—some even had hundreds or thousands! The less wealthy would have had fewer and smaller bronzes and/or ceramic vessels (a less expensive alternative).

Bronze is an alloy of copper (usually about 90%) and tin. The color of bronze is affected by the amount of copper, tin, and impurities, but it is generally reddish-gold. Over time, oxidization causes bronze to develop a typically greenish outer crust called a patina.

Although the Shang and Zhou dynasty Chinese were familiar with the common practice of crafting bronzes by lost wax casting (also used by other Bronze Age cultures), they instead chose to use a much more complex, refined technique called piece-mold casting.

Piece-mold casting consists of a number of steps, summarized below.

1. A simple clay model (without decoration) of the vessel shape is made and partially dried.
2. A second layer of clay is shaped over the model and allowed to dry.

3. The second layer is cut away from the model in sections. The inside walls of these sections are decorated by carving designs into the clay.
4. After wearing down the original model a few millimeters, the outer sections are re-assembled around the model, leaving an empty space between the two.
5. Molten bronze is poured between into the empty space.
6. After cooling, the inner and outer molds are broken away and the finished vessel is cleaned and polished.

The repeated pattern on this small vessel is referred to as “interlocking T’s.” This pattern is common in Shang and Early Zhou dynasty bronze decoration. The motif may have been borrowed/adapted from Shang or Zhou textile designs.

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Standing Figure – Room 3

This small, finely detailed *figure stands* with arms held out. His curling fingers form a socket that would have held the shank of an oil lamp. The *figure* wears a long tunic gathered at the waist by a plain belt secured by a belt hook. The skirt, sleeves, shoulders, and lapels of the costume have been inlaid with gold line decoration and cast with border motifs. The hair is carefully dressed and partially covered by a close-fitting headdress with a double-lobed crest in the center.

Human *figures* in bronze were rare throughout the Shang and Western Zhou dynasties (1600–771 BCE), but several bronze *figures* that served as lamp standards have now been excavated from Warring States-period tombs of the late Zhou era. The strong, sculptural quality of this *figure* anticipates the naturalism encountered in the succeeding Qin (221–206 BCE) and Western Han (206 BCE–25 CE) eras.

Standing Figure, Warring States period, 5-4th centuries BCE, bronze with gold inlay, 2003.140.3 <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/61921/standing-figure-china>

You Wine Vessel – Room 9

This vessel is a variation of the *you* wine vessel. The foot belt displays an eye-like motif and diagonals. The belts on the neck and lid, bordered by bands of circles, display *taotie* with bodies, rows of quills on their backs. The flange marking the center line of the face has been reduced to a narrow ridge. The handle is adorned at each end with a Malayan tapir, or *mo*, a mammal species that today inhabits parts of Southeast Asia.

You Wine Vessel, Late Shang Dynasty, bronze, 11 century BCE, 50.46.97a,b
<https://collections.artsmia.org/art/1159/you-wine-vessel-china>

He Wine Vessel - Room 9

The *he* wine container is an old vessel type that emerged as early as the Erlitou period, dating from the 17th century BCE. During the late Shang dynasty (c. 1300–1046 BCE), its shape evolved—its bulging body, with narrow neck and spout, was supported by three cylindrical legs, as seen in this example. The vessel bears an inscription identifying that it was cast by “Shi” in honor of his father, “Gui.” Recent archaeological activities have established that all bronzes bearing the “Shi” inscription were cast during the late Shang and early Western Zhou periods. The vessel’s main body bears a decorative motif consisting of rows of scales in flat, double-band relief. It is generally recognized that by the mid–Western Zhou period (c. 976–886 BCE) Chinese bronze art began a process of stylistic transformation from that of the waning Shang to that of the distinct Western Zhou. Such change is marked by the replacement of *taotie* masks with patterned decoration. This vessel, however, demonstrates that in the early Western Zhou, the new decorative trend had already emerged.

He Wine Vessel, Early Western Zhou, bronze, 11-10th century BCE
<https://collections.artsmia.org/art/818/he-wine-vessel-china>

Imperial Five-Piece Garniture - Room 2

Standard ritual bronzes cast for the altar comprise five vessels (*wu kang*), a censer, two candlesticks, and a pair of vases. The pair of candlesticks shown here are part of a five-piece imperial *garniture* whose remaining three pieces, a censer and pair of vases, are now on view in the Wu family reception hall. Ritual bronze vessels like these, made for the imperial palaces and temples, were governed by state regulations under a section titled, “Rules for Making Sacrificial Vessels and Ornaments for Temple Use.” The archaic décor including *t’ao-t’ieh* masks and cicada blades against a spiral ground is a revival of a Sung dynasty (960-1279) style which was itself an interpretation of ancient Shang and Zhou (16th c.-221 BCE) ritual bronzes. Each vessel of this large and important set bears the six-character reign mark of the Yung-cheng emperor (1723-35) and the censer and candlesticks bear the additional characters *ching chih* (made with reverence).

Imperial Five-Piece Garniture, bronze, censer, vases, candlesticks, 99.121.1-5
<https://collections.artsmia.org/art/31166/imperial-candlestick-china>