

Chinese Ritual Bronzes at the Minneapolis Institute of Art



Zun wine vessel in the shape of an owl
13th-12th century BCE
Shang Dynasty
50.46.116



Jian water basin
500-400 BCE
Eastern Zhou Dynasty, Warring States Period
50.46.103

Wine Vessel

Zun is a type of bronze wine vessel used by Shang-dynasty (c. 1600–1046 BCE) aristocrats during ritual ceremonies to honor their ancestors. This owl-shaped *zun* is divided into two sections: the removable owl's-head lid and the bird's hollow body. Vessels shaped like animals constitute virtually the only bronze sculpture known from the Shang period. Besides this owl, vessels in the form of buffalo, boars, rhinoceroses, elephants, and rams have also survived. This owl is one of the oldest and most naturalistic of the few remaining owl-shaped *zun*. Its form exhibits the influence of the Shang capital, Anyang, in the North, but the style and casting technique of the vessel (the indentation on the interior walls corresponds to a relief found on the exterior) indicate that it is related to the bronze tradition of the middle Yangzi region in southern China.

Water Basin

This *jian*, a large bowl-shaped vessel with a deep body and heavy rim, is decorated with a dense serpentine pattern and four attached animal-head ring handles. The interlocked serpentine relief appears in three bands encircling the neck and the main body, separated by a frieze of braided ropes. Intertwined dragons wriggle within these bands, their bodies embellished with incised spirals and meanders. The vessel bears an inscription on the interior wall, which reads: "The jian for amusement of the son of Lord Zhi." Zhi was a ruling family of the Jin state, and Zhi Yao, the last member of its lineage, was killed in 453 BCE. The decorative style, together with the inscription, identify the vessel as cast at the foundry of the Jin state.

Key Ideas

1. The use of bronze is a watershed in the development of any civilization. The manufacture of bronze requires a settled, specialized, and tightly organized community. Copper and tin must be found, mined, smelted and transported. This requires elaborate kilns, fire of high intensity, and control of the casting process, especially when cooling the metal.
2. Bronze vessels, together with jade carvings and ceramics, were the principle art forms of early Chinese history. Bronze casting was perfected in China with remarkable speed. In only a few generations bronze work displayed a high level of technical virtuosity and a compelling aesthetic power and sophistication. This was due to several influences:
 - Bronze was a very precious commodity in China and its use and distribution was a monopoly of the ruling class. A Chinese king might give a gift in bronze in the same way a European king would give gold.
 - Bronze was used to create majestic vessels that played critical roles in state rituals and ancestor worship and, as a result, became the principle art form epitomizing the artistic accomplishments of early China.
 - By the end of the Neolithic era Chinese craftsmen had developed exceptional technical skills such as the production of exquisite thin-walled ceramics requiring many of the techniques of bronze casting. Here are some examples of ceramic stem cups:



2500-2000 BCE
Longshan culture
2000.156.1



3000-2000 BCE
Longshan culture
94.63

3. The earliest development of Chinese ritual bronze art began around 1800 BCE, flowered during the Shang Dynasty (c.1600–1046 BCE), continued through the Zhou Dynasty (c.1046–256 BCE), and began to decline during the Western Han period (200–8 CE). By this time the intense involvement of the artisan in shape and surface design—the essence of the bronze vessel from Shang to Eastern Zhou— had disappeared.
4. The remarkable collection of Chinese bronze vessels at Mia is due to the generosity of Alfred Pillsbury and is part of over 1000 pieces of an Asian art collection given by his estate as a bequest. The bronze vessels in Mia’s collection can be misleading because, compared to bronzes in other collections, they are smaller in size. (Some Chinese bronze objects are over five feet high and weigh as much as four tons.)
5. The Chinese piece mold process developed independently from the lost wax method used by all other Bronze Age cultures. This process allowed for precision and definition in creating intricate designs. Piece mold casting involved:
 - A clay model was made with decoration.
 - Clay was shaped over the model and dried to a leather hardness.
 - The outer layer was sliced into sections and the decoration was finessed with carving.
 - The carved mold was pieced together.
 - The original mold was sanded down and used as an interior form to make the vessel hollow. The outer model was attached to the inner mold at a few points.
 - The bronze was poured in.
 - After cooling the inner and outer molds were broken away from the vessel.
 - Spurs and imperfections were filed away.

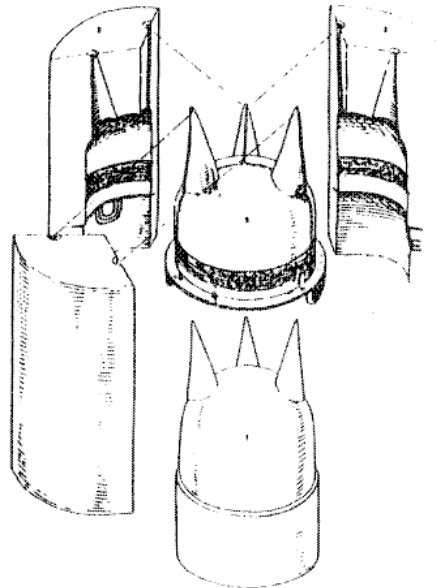


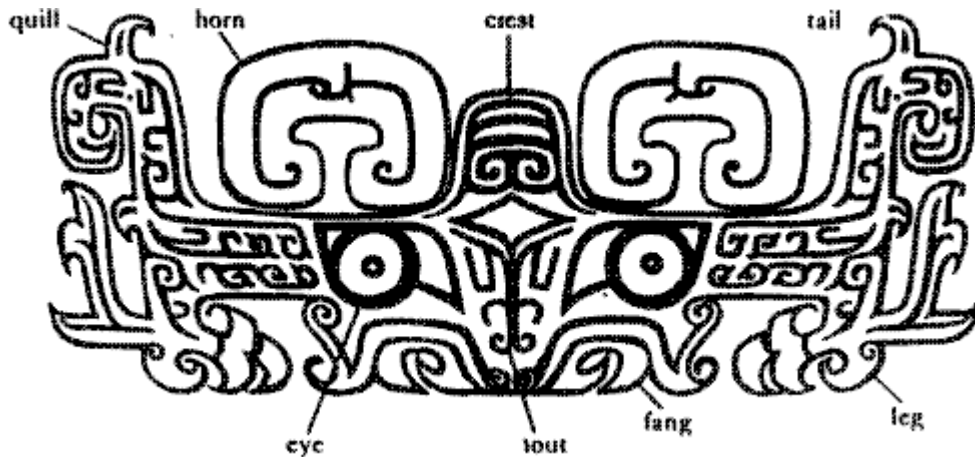
Diagram of a food caldron showing the core, the model section and the complete vessel

Examples from early Shang and late Zhou periods

6. During the Shang period, bronzes were cast for ritualistic purposes and for burial. In the earliest periods, most of the bronzes were designed for preparing and serving food and wine. The vessels were based upon Neolithic ceramic prototypes. Also common in the Shang period were animal designs. These zoomorphic designs reflect the desire for protection by powerful spirits or the desire to propitiate them. A frontal animal mask, *taotie*, with a prominent pair of eyes, appears on almost every Shang vessel. The exact meaning and significance of the *taotie* and other decorative motifs used remain unknown.



Taotie mask from *ding* vessel in late Shang era



Taotie mask diagram: can also be seen as two dragons in profile

7. The owl was the most important bird represented in early Chinese bronzes. It was a symbol of darkness so was interpreted as a protector of the dead. The Mia example seems to be a burrowing owl which is especially important because it protects crops from destructive vermin. Note stylistic details:
 - silhouette is clean and uncluttered
 - plumage covers its plump body
 - square tail and feet balance the object

8. The Zhou dynasty succeeded the Shang dynasty in 1046 BCE. The Zhou applied themselves to the task of appropriating Shang culture in order to identify themselves with the defeated culture as closely as possible. In this way they accepted what was seen as the superiority of Shang culture and took responsibility for carrying it to even greater heights. The use of bronzes for religious purposes became less important and secular uses increased. In addition, the complex designs of the *taotie* became increasingly abstract and less connected to the zoomorphic tradition.
9. By the Eastern Zhou period (770–256 BCE), the royal family had lost power and prestige. China was divided into many smaller states without political or cultural unity. Chinese bronzes began to reflect this diversity. Their importance as ritual vessels declined. Instead, rulers commissioned bronzes that were technically and visually impressive to their living contemporaries.
10. The great water basin (*jian*) is a tour-de-force of piece mold casting. Its delicate interweave, fine lineation, and granulation have seldom been equaled even in modern foundries. Note the bands of interlaced dragons circling the body of the vessel. Since the ceramic carved molds are destroyed in the casting process, each vessel is unique. In this case, however, a nearly identical piece can be found in the Freer Gallery of Art. Both carry the same inscription, stated earlier.
11. Casting during the Zhou period advanced rapidly. Artisans became interested in the possibilities of flat design facilitated by the inlay of other precious materials such as silver, gold, turquoise and glass. This resulted in a very different spirit from the ideas of sculptural piece mold castings. This “cold working” process resulted from leaving grooves and holes in the castings for the inlay so the precious, softer metals could be pushed in the grooves and smoothed down.



**Ding food vessel inlaid with silver, late Zhou period
5th century BCE 50.46.76A,B**

12. By the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) bronze vessels of the beauty and design of the Shang and Zhou periods began to decline and were replaced by iron objects and glazed ceramics.

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