

Bronze vessels held great ritual significance in ancient China.

Symbols of power, they were used to make offerings to the heavenly and ancestral spirits, a practice based on the belief that life continued after death, and that the deceased communed with their living kin. Ritual and ceremony maintained the rigid hierarchy that flowed from the heavens to the king, and from the courts to the people.

In this exhibition, Mia's Chinese art curator Liu Yang and world-renowned art director and film designer Tim Yip (*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*) together have created an experiential progression to engage your senses. Featuring some 150 Chinese bronze objects from Mia's world-renowned collection, "Eternal Offerings" offers you an immersive experience designed to evoke the mystery of heavenly and ancestral worship.

'Eternal Offerings' is a journey.

This is an exhibition of dualities: light and dark, ancient and present, heavenly and earthly. Each gallery embodies a facet of the rituals enacted to honor the divinities, from the solemnity of the temple, to the intoxication of lavish banquets. The progression leads you into a world where art collides with the aesthetics of theater and film. Though each room is its own production, they are sequential and thematic; across seven galleries, you will participate in stages of a full ritual ceremony. A soundscape, dramatic lighting, dazzling projections, and painted images animate each multisensory space.

About Tim Yip

Tim Yip is a visual artist, costume designer, and art director for theater and film. Using ancient culture as inspiration, he works in contemporary art, costume, film, and more. His work on *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2001) won him an Oscar for Best Art Direction and the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) award for Best Costume Design; he is the first Chinese person to receive such awards. His costumes have appeared in stage productions of *The King and I* and *Rite of Spring*, the Netflix production *Marco Polo*, the Hong Kong Ballet and the English National Ballet, and the Chinese Olympic team. His art has been featured in exhibitions in Taiwan, France, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United States.

About Liu Yang

After completing his PhD at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London in 1997, Liu Yang served as the senior curator of Chinese art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney. There he mounted an impressive number of major exhibitions, including shows on Chinese painting, Buddhist sculpture, jades, and bronzes. Since joining Mia as Chair of the Department of Asian Art in 2011, Liu has curated several popular exhibitions, including "China's Terracotta Warriors: The First Emperor's Legacy" (2013), and "Power and Beauty in China's Last Dynasty" (2018), an unprecedented collaboration with theater artist Robert Wilson highlighting the drama, rituals, and opulence of the Qing Empire.

Lighting Design by A.J. Weissbard



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Image: China Zun wine vessel at the top of the page and 18th-19th century BCE bronze ritual vessel of about 1500-1600 BCE.



Minneapolis Institute of Art

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Exhibition Guide

Eternal Offerings Chinese Ritual Bronzes

March 4–May 21, 2023

<p>6 RULES OF PROPRIETY</p>  <p>Standing figure, Warring States period, 5th-4th centuries BCE 2003.140.3</p> <p>Gui food vessel, Western Zhou dynasty, 10th century BCE, 50.46.119</p>	<p>5 BANQUET</p>  <p>Jue wine vessel, Early Shang dynasty, 16th-15th century BCE 98.80.2</p>	<p>4 RITUAL</p>  <p>Gui food vessel, Early Western Zhou dynasty, 11th century BCE 50.46.8</p>	<p>3 TEMPLE</p>  <p>Wine vessel he, Early Western Zhou dynasty, 11th-10th century BCE 50.46.107</p>	<p>2 AN ANIMISTIC WORLD</p>  <p>Wine vessel zun in the shape of an owl, Late Shang dynasty, 13th-12th century BCE 50.46.116</p>
<p>7 COMING FULL CIRCLE</p> <h1>Key Themes by Room</h1> <p>1 SETTING THE SCENE</p>				

1 Setting the Scene

Welcome to a space designed to shift the mood and open the mind. Here, shards of bronze dangle from the ceiling to evoke our fragmental memory of the ancient past, through the murky mists of history, ritual, and culture. An introduction and ancient poems provide context as you embark on a journey into this mystical realm.

2 An Animistic World

You've arrived into a world of wildness, featuring bronze birds, tigers, and mythical beasts. This liminal space represents animism, shamanism, divination, and the worship of gods and ancestors. Here, no division between the human and the divine exists. In myth, animals birthed groups of people, acted as agents of the gods, and were companions of ancestors; their roles ranged from hero to monstrous foe.

A scrim with an image of the Yellow River shifts in a breeze, forming a backdrop for a *zun* wine vessel in the shape of an owl from the Late Shang dynasty, 1200s-1100s BCE. In Shang culture, animal forms such as Mia's iconic "Pillsbury" owl were likely seen as totemic ancestors. In Bronze Age beliefs, zoomorphic figures—half human, half beast—acted as communicators between human society and the world of the unknown.

3 Temple

You've entered an ancestral temple. Rows of bronze containers for food and wine serve as ritual objects. Bronze daggers and spears line the walls. Curtains printed with a temple interior hang at the center, with lighting that evokes daytime in the first half of the gallery, and nighttime in the second.

For the communal good, ancestral temples were essential. Royal ancestors, often represented as existing somewhere "on high" in the presence of the heavenly deity, were believed to exercise power over the living and influence the fates of their descendants. A clan's ancestors were worshipped in elaborate ceremonies featuring bronze offerings of food and wine. The casting of ritual bronze vessels also gave the living a way to acknowledge their debt to the ancestors, and to recognize the deeds and virtues of the deceased. Here, alone with the art, you are never really alone at all.

4 Ritual

An earthen altar shaped in a cruciform, or the Chinese character *ya* (亞), leads the eye upward to a projection of a moving sky. This simulated-fire altar represents a ritual activity of ancient China: employing smoke to communicate with heavenly deities. Such communications might focus on celebrating the harvest, praying for rain, or requesting permission to go to war or the hunt, or to get married. Bronze vessels,

believed to ease communication with the spiritual world via their mysterious ornamentation and the offerings of food and wine, are presented on the altar. At center is a bronze tripod cauldron (*ding*), with four smaller cauldrons in each corner; they represent the primary ritual vessels and were seen as symbols of power and a mandate to rule.

On the walls are mountain scenes taken from bronze surfaces. In them, human figures fight with animals, reflecting Bronze Age peoples' changing perceptions of themselves in the world.

5 Banquet

Let's have a toast! You've left the solemnity of the temple visit and have entered a boisterous, joyful banquet hall lit up at night by warm fires. Impressionistic images of people in period costumes, dining and celebrating, adorn the walls. Bronze vessels for serving food and drink take center stage here. Ancestral ritual ceremonies held in ancient China always ended in banquets, in which the descendants of the ancestors being worshipped consume foods and wine prepared for the spirits. This was a way to connect with and seek ancestral spirits' blessing for the family's wellbeing. The feast also strengthened hierarchical order within society, underscoring the clan lineage.

6 Rule of Propriety

This gallery is devoted to the "rule of propriety," emphasizing the concept of *li*, a moral code used to maintain social structures and hierarchies that emerged from the period in which bronzes were used. *Li* covers every aspect of society, from military exercise, dressing, and dining etiquette, to one's relationships with parents, children, and the ruler. Its purpose is to promote the continuation of the ruler's lineage by ensuring that no one could impede the hierarchy. Percussive music was a means to regulate moral and social conduct while promoting harmony. Some motifs, such as the phoenix, were metaphors for the ruler himself. The increased presence of human figures in bronze decoration attests to a hierarchical society; some represent dignitaries while others, enslaved people. Belt hooks and chariot fittings of aristocrats were symbols of wealth and status. Grooming before a bronze mirror was a way to cultivate self-awareness and inner harmony. Some animals, such as horses, came to symbolize the loyal officials recruited to court service.

7 Coming Full Circle

You've entered the ultimate gallery, where you are surrounded by still pictures and 3D scans of the intricate surface ornamentation of various bronze vessels. This offers you an even closer look at these mysterious but significant motifs. Intact objects set on a mirror correspond to the bronze shards seen in the first gallery, a metaphor for your completion of the spiritual journey through "Eternal Offerings." The illusion created by the mirrors also hints at the impact of modern Chinese archaeological excavations, which make possible the reconstruction of an ancient history shrouded in the mists of memory.