

Eternal Offerings: A Show of Chinese Bronze at Mia Unfolds with Drama

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Etternal Offerings: Chinese Ritual Bronzes' is another bold and fresh exhibition of creativity presented by the Minneapolis Institute of Art (Mia). It follows 'Power and Beauty from China's Last Dynasty' (2018), a show produced in collaboration with Robert Wilson that was hailed by the media as an important move towards enlivening tired exhibition models typically used by museums.

This time, we have teamed up with Tim Yip, the Oscar-winning art director and film designer, to shed new light on the museum's acclaimed collection of archaic Chinese bronzes dating from the late Shang to Han dynasties (13th century BCE to 2nd century CE). Rather than presenting the objects in typical chronological order and focusing on forms and techniques, as conventional exhibitions would, this show highlights key facets of the ritual ceremonies in which these bronzes were used. It is designed to be a wholly immersive experience of the body and mind.

The exhibition progresses through a series of galleries that leads visitors into a world where art collides with the aesthetics of theatre and film. Although each room is its own production, they are thematically connected; the visitor will be placed into a temple environment and participate in various stages of a full ritual ceremony. In

addition to this spiritual experience, visitors will also be informed of the forms, ornaments, and symbolic meanings of the imagery seen in the displayed objects.

The experience begins in an entrance lobby bathed in blue light, evoking a primordial, aqueous atmosphere. The entrance portal features a stylized phoenix pattern taken from a vessel in Mia's collection that was produced in the early 10th

Fig. 1 *Gui* food vessel
Western Zhou dynasty (c. 1046–771 BCE), early 10th century BCE
Bronze
15.8 × 30.2 × 22.4 cm
Minneapolis Institute of Art, Bequest of Alfred F. Pillsbury



century BCE (Fig. 1). The evocative lighting creates a shadowy, mysterious, and metal-like feeling of coldness.

The first gallery is a transitional space that shifts the mood, opening the visitor's frame of mind. In the centre of the room is a transparent rectangular canopy, suspended from above. Hanging at various heights from this canopy by invisible thread is a group of fabricated fragments of various bronze vessels from Mia's collection. As the exhibition is centred around cinematic and theatrical effects, lighting is essential to the immersive experience and overall aesthetic. Here, flickering light projects from the ceiling through the transparent platform, spotlighting the bronze pieces and evoking our fragmental memory of the ancient past. What we know about the ancient world today is shadowy, made up only of bits and pieces.

The walls are sheathed in painted panels depicting images of mountains seen on ancient bronzes, showing a wild, desolate world free of humans and animals. There is a brief didactic about the show; translations of ancient Chinese poems on subjects of ancestral worship, bronze vessels used in related rituals, and ceremonial feasts hint at the journey ahead.

Visitors then begin their trek through the murky marshes of ancient memory into the Chinese Bronze Age (c. second half of 2nd to 1st millennium BCE). The doors open to a series of galleries where exquisite ritual bronzes—including wine and food containers, weapons, chariot fittings, and mirrors—are presented amid dramatic settings that reflect the spirituality and high artistry of the Bronze Age. Soundtracks designed for each room play throughout the exhibition to further invoke the themes.

The visitor then walks into a room that embodies the theme of wildness, where animals and spirits dominate. Here, a liminal space transports the visitor into a realm characterized by animism, shamanism, spiritual control, divination, and the worship of gods and ancestors.

People of the Bronze Age in China believed life continued after death. The *Liji* (*Classic of Rites*), ritual texts compiled in the 5th to 1st century BCE, declared they 'served the dead as they would have served them alive; they served the departed as they would have served them had they continued among them'. In myths, the roles played by animals range from the progenitors of humans to the agents of gods;



Fig. 2 Wine vessel *zun* in the shape of an owl
Late Shang dynasty (c. 1300–1046 BCE), 13th–12th century BCE
Bronze
31.12 × 18.26 × 20.96 cm
Minneapolis Institute of Art, Bequest of Alfred F. Pillsbury

from companions of ancestors and heroes to devilish monsters. Furthermore, some historians believe that nine out of ten ancient sages in Chinese legends are euhemerized versions of animal deities. Others believe many mythological and legendary heroes were actually chiefs of ethnic and social groups in which animals were totemic versions of ancestors (see Chang, 1976, p. 175). To reflect these concepts, this space features bronze objects that take animal forms. Visitors are immersed in a world where the divine and human planes are intertwined.



Fig. 3 Digital visualization of the temple room
Photo © Tim Yip Studios

A curtain of long strips of transparent fabric sections off the first part of the room, flowing and shifting in a breeze, with a film of China's Yellow River projected on both sides. This river is regarded as the cradle of early Chinese civilization as well as the birthplace of the bronze tradition. The flowing curtain gives the film a fluid effect, reflecting the movement and energy of the flowing water. Before the curtain stands an owl-shaped vessel that was cast around 13th–12th century BCE (Fig. 2). Vessels of this form were significant to the people of the Shang dynasty (c. 1600–1046 BCE), as the owl was likely regarded as a totemic ancestor.

Through the curtain is a larger space displaying three groups of ancient bronzes, divided thematically. The first group features five bird-shaped chariot fittings from the Shang dynasty, echoing the spirit and symbolism of the owl seen before. Next is a group of bronzes depicting fantastic animals, including a pair of winged beasts. The last

group consists of zoomorphic figures: creatures that are half-human, half-beast. These figures played an intermediate role in Bronze Age people's beliefs, acting as communicators between human society and the mysterious unknown.

The walls are mounted with painted images of mountains dominated by animals, also taken from ancient bronzes. This further evokes the sense of wilderness in which spirits live, and the idea that animals and nature were a connection to the spiritual world.

The visitor then walks into an 'ancestral temple' (Fig. 3). Huge fabric curtains hang in the centre of this room on both sides of a corridor. They are printed with images of a temple's interior including columns and other architectural details that create a mysterious and awe-inspiring atmosphere. Smaller curtains, also printed with temple interiors, are scattered elsewhere to create a sense of space. On each side of the curtains, rows of bronze vessels of

different types are displayed, including ritual food and wine vessels used within ancient temples (Fig. 4). Along the two side walls are two rows of bronze daggers, spears, and other weapons, each mounted on a shaft against the wall. The lighting on the curtains invokes daytime within the first half of the temple, and night-time in the other half.

Numerous inscriptions cast on Shang and Zhou bronzes, along with contemporary literature such as the *Shijing* (*Book of Odes*)—the earliest anthology of Chinese poetry written in the Western Zhou dynasty (c. 1046–771 BCE)—underscore the significance of the ancestor worship cult in ancient China, a practice based on the belief in an afterlife and reciprocity between deceased and living kin. Thus, ancestral spirits needed to be taken care of to ensure communal good. Ancestral temples were established to accommodate such needs, and bronze vessels were used to offer food and wine to the spirits in elaborate ceremonies. These ritual bronzes served as a means to communicate with the invisible, shapeless spirits, thereby giving the living a chance to convey their good will to their ancestors and to recognize the deeds and virtues of the deceased. By extension, temples and rituals marked the royal clan's political status and preserved memories of its past, thereby linking it to a larger social network (see Liu, 2011, pp. 32–41).

This space allows visitors to experience an ancestral temple setting where ritual bronzes on high altars signal the inseparable tie between temple, ritual paraphernalia, and ceremony. The setting evokes a sense of serenity, solemnity, and submission; a feeling of being watched over by ancestral spirits.

The next room encompasses the theme of ritual. At the centre of the space is an earthen altar resembling a cruciform or the Chinese character *ya* 亞. This mysterious symbol often appeared in Shang dynasty bronze inscriptions. It may have been an official title but also resembles the layout of ancestral temple complexes of the period; a typical structure of the ruler's tomb featured a rectangular shaft with four entrance ramps leading into the main chamber. It is also thought to have been symbolic of the earth, as it consists of four lands surrounding a central square, reflecting

sifang, or four quadrants, the shape of the earth as it was understood by the Shang people (see Allan, 1991, pp. 74–111).

Suspended above the altar is an oval-shaped screen, onto which is projected a film of blue sky with floating clouds. This simulated-fire altar represents a typical ritual ceremony of the Western Zhou dynasty known as *liao*, meaning to burn and create smoke.

Fig. 4 Wine vessel *he*
Early Western Zhou dynasty (c. 1046–771 BCE),
11th–10th century BCE
Bronze
29.21 × 23.97 × 16.83 cm (diameter)
Minneapolis Institute of Art, Bequest of Alfred F. Pillsbury





Fig. 5 *Shengding* tripod
Spring and Autumn period
(c. 770–476 BCE), 6th century BCE
Bronze
53.02 × 60.96 × 68 cm
Minneapolis Institute of Art,
Gift of Ruth and Bruce Dayton

The smoke would rise to communicate with heavenly deities. On the altar are clusters of different ritual bronze vessels, with the focus on a large tripod cauldron *ding* in the centre (Fig. 5). Corresponding to this are four smaller *ding* vessels, displayed in cases in each corner of the room. Like the previous gallery, the walls are covered with painted mountainous scenery taken from bronze ornaments, but this time human figures are present, fighting with animals. This represents a development in Bronze Age peoples' perception of nature and status within the world.

The installation in this space evokes a sense of the performance and procedures of various ceremonies dedicated to heavenly divinities and ancestral spirits. Moving through the room, the visitor experiences ritual activities involving different bronzes that each fulfil a distinctive function (e.g., containers for wine and food, water vessels for ablutions, vessels for cooking, ceremonial weapons).

'For a state, ritual ceremonies and military affairs are the two primary missions'—so stated the historian and thinker Zuo Qiuming (early 5th century BCE) in his historical narrative *Zuozhuan* (*Zuo's Commentary*) (in the chapter '13th year of Duke Cheng'). For people of Bronze Age China, ritual was vital. Ceremonial rites dedicated to ancestral deities within temples encompassed numerous goals, from honouring ancestral spirits to seeking approval from the deities for various decisions and activities such as going to war, praying for rain, celebrating harvests, hunting, marriage, and so on. Through performance rites, they transformed the invisible into the visible, and created correspondence between the human world and the terrestrial and celestial realms, keeping all three in harmony. Ritual ceremonies always involved lavish displays of food and wine, and ritual vessels were solemnly revered along with the temples that housed them. Some vessel types such

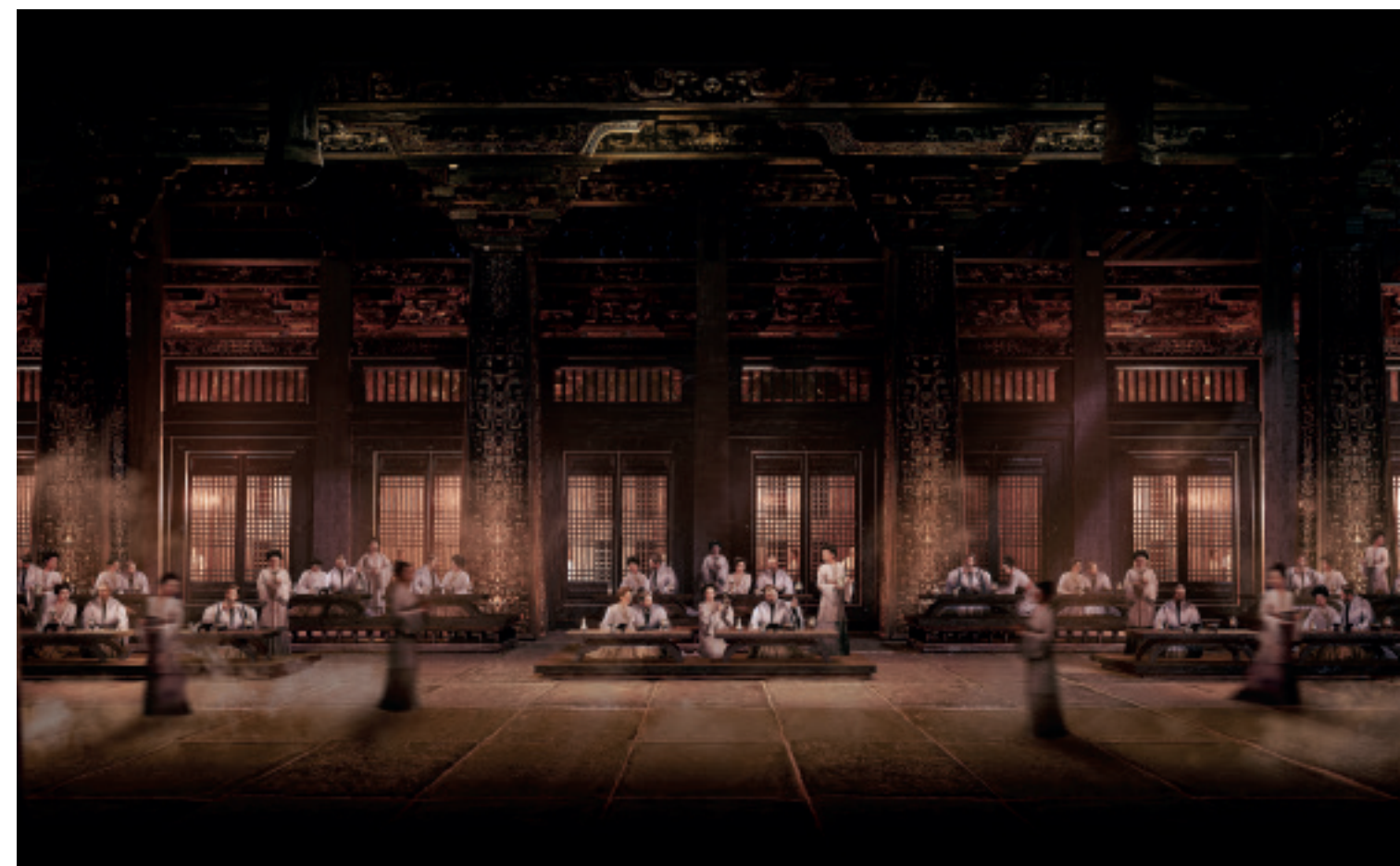


Fig. 6 Digital visualization of the room with the feast scene
Photo © Tim Yip Studios

as the *ding* tripod gradually became symbols of state power and mandates to rule.

Turning to the next gallery, an ancestor worship ceremony's feast is portrayed as in the ode 'Chuci', possibly written during the reign of King Zhao or King Mu (r. 995–77 and 976–22 BCE, respectively) of the Western Zhou:

We proceed to make spirits and prepare viands,
For offerings and sacrifice;
We seat the representatives of the dead, and
urge them to eat:
Thus seeking to increase our bright happiness.
.....
Their Spirits happily enjoy the offerings;
Their filial descendent receives blessing:
They will reward him with great happiness,
With myriads of years, life without end.

As told by this ode, the living fed their ancestors with offerings held in sumptuously decorated bronze vessels, and the ancestors in turn blessed their descendants with food, children, and fortune. This reciprocal relationship between the natural and supernatural worlds was maintained through ancestral ritual ceremonies and was closely attached to the hierarchy of lineages.

When the formal and solemn sacrificial ceremony drew to an end, the boisterous feast began. The same ode cited above continues:

The ceremonies having thus been completed,
And the bells and drums having given their
warning,
The filial descendent goes to his place,
And the able priest makes his announcement,
'The Spirits have drunk to the full.'

The great representative of
the dead [*shi*] then rises,
And the bells and
drums escort his
withdrawal,
[On which] the Spirits tranquilly
return [to their place].
All the servants, and the presiding wives,
Remove [the trays and dishes] without delay.
The [descendant's] uncles and cousins,
All repair to the private feast.

(Legge, trans, *The Book of Poetry*,
1931 reprint, pp. 186–90)

At the end of the ceremony, living participants enjoying the food placed in ritual vessels symbolized a communication with the unseen world. Living lineages appreciated the wealth and fortune their ancestors bestowed upon them through the feast. Moreover, the feast also strengthened communications and hierarchical order within society.

The mood within this gallery is boisterous and joyful. The walls are mounted with images of lavishly decorated halls that are overlapped with impressionistic images of people in period costumes, dining and celebrating (Fig. 6). Aided by special lighting, the room evokes the night-time lit up by warm fires. Scattered throughout the room are cases designed in stepped formations, displaying groups of bronze vessels that were used in presenting, serving, and consuming food and drink (Figs 7–8).

The next room is devoted to *li*, which originally meant religious rituals (such as ancestral worship), but during the Western Zhou dynasty, with the ruler's regulation, came to encompass multiple concepts such as ritual, decorum, rules of propriety, and more, and has even been equated with natural law (Chan, 1969, p. 790). It could be understood to mean ethical norms, social etiquette, and even internal moral impulses. *Li* was present across the entire spectrum of society, from military exercise to dressing and eating to one's relationships with parents, children, and the ruler. At the heart of *li*, however, was a moral and social code maintaining the order and hierarchy that emerged during this period. The purpose of *li* was to promote the continuation of the ruler's lineage by ensuring that no one could disrupt the hierarchy.



Fig. 7 Wine vessel *zun*
Late Shang dynasty (c. 1300–1046 BCE), 11th century BCE
Bronze
33.4 × 29 × 28.7 cm
Minneapolis Institute of Art, Bequest of Alfred F. Pillsbury

As *li* became the conventional code of civility that defined and regulated human conduct during the Western Zhou and thereafter, its impacts began to be reflected in bronzes as well. Thus, this gallery features thematically grouped bronze objects of various forms, reflecting different aspects of the impact of *li* on ritual art.

In the same way that court elites used *li* to control the minds of the people, their influence also dominated forms in ritual art by using their own aesthetics to enhance their prestige and authority. For the ruling class, maintenance of symbolic values also acted as maintenance of their political and economic influence. A food vessel *gui* decorated with a pair of large, plumed birds attests to this influence (see Fig. 1). Large, symmetrically arranged birds or phoenixes suddenly proliferated as ritual bronze decoration during the mid-Western Zhou period. Perusing literature of this time, one can find the phoenix praised and likened to the Zhou king himself (see, for instance, the ode 'Juan a' in the *Shijing*; Legge, 1931, pp. 247–49). This ruler's preference clearly promoted the sudden enthusiasm for the phoenix motif.

A grand assemblage of various musical instruments, including massive bell sets, came to be important adjuncts to the ritual ceremony as music became an integral element of the *li* system. The *Liji* states that music comes from within, producing stillness within the mind, whereas ritual ceremonies are external, producing elegancies of manner. Music was thus emphasized as a means to regulate moral and social conduct while promoting harmonious synthesis.

Li retained a strict hierarchy based on a patriarchal clan system and an individual's duties; power and incumbency were confirmed by one's respective social status. Whereas some bronze objects in this room were symbols of wealth and status, such as the aristocratic chariot fittings and belt hooks, the increasing presence of human figures in bronze decoration also attests to a hierarchical society. Some figures are representations of dignitaries, proven by their gorgeous, well-fitting costumes (Fig. 9); while others are men of low status or menial slaves, commonly sculpted as vessel stands (Fig. 10).

Li also influenced dress codes, dinner-table etiquette, and attitudes of propriety. The bronze mirrors dating from 5th–1st century BCE on view reflect this idea on a symbolic level. In addition to their practical uses for personal grooming, mirrors were also believed to reflect the inner character of the person, and thus were often used to contemplate one's behaviour and actions. The act of grooming before a bronze mirror was seen as a method of cultivating self-awareness and inner harmony.

Domestic animals are symbolically associated with *li*. For example, the bronze horses in this room (Fig. 11) were not only symbols of power and strength, but also implied the attitude officials were expected to possess and direct towards the ruler. In legend, King Mu once embarked on a journey to the West to meet a powerful goddess, Queen Mother of the West. During these travels, the king's chariot was pulled by eight horses, each named for the colour of its coat. The horses came to symbolize loyal officials recruited in court service.

Fig. 8 Ladle
Early Western Zhou dynasty (c. 1046–771 BCE), 11th–10th century BCE
Bronze
5.4 × 21.11 (length) × 4.29 cm
Minneapolis Institute of Art, Bequest of Alfred F. Pillsbury





Fig. 9 Standing figure
Warring States period (c. 475–221 BCE), 5th–4th century BCE
Bronze with gold inlay
13.18 × 5.08 × 6.35 cm
Minneapolis Institute of Art, Gift of Ruth and Bruce Dayton

Finally, visitors enter the last gallery where they come across the group of bronze vessels whose fabricated shards they encountered in the very first room. Now fully intact, the exquisite, splendid bronzes are displayed on a mirror that sits upon a rectangular table (Figs 12–13). A larger mirror of the same shape hangs from the ceiling directly above the bronzes. The vessels on the table reflect upward to the mirror above, which then reflects down again to the mirror on the table. This creates the illusion of the vessels occupying a space below the table so viewers can look down at them as though they were still buried in a tomb. The symbolic journey through the exhibition is metaphorically complete, with memories of the past replacing fragmented ones. The illusion also hints at the significance of modern Chinese archaeological excavations, which make possible the reconstruction of the hazy ancient past.

Fig. 10 Water vessel *pan*
Late Western Zhou dynasty (c. 1046–771 BCE),
9th–8th century BCE
Bronze
17.15 × 49.21 × 53.98 cm
Minneapolis Institute of Art, Bequest of Alfred F. Pillsbury



Fig. 11 Horse
Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), 1st century CE
Bronze
113.98 × 87.63 × 36.83 cm
Minneapolis Institute of Art, Gift of Ruth and Bruce Dayton



Fig. 12 Wine vessel *fangyou*
 Shang dynasty (c. 1600–1046 BCE), second half of 13th century
 BCE
 Bronze
 32.54 × 14.6 × 12.86 cm
 Minneapolis Institute of Art, Bequest of Alfred F. Pillsbury

Enlarged images and three-dimensional digital models of the vessels are projected onto the walls to show details of surface ornamentation and views from different angles. This presents visitors with an even closer look at these mysterious motifs and patterns, allowing them to fully understand and appreciate the imagination and creativity of the ancient artisans.

As noted, bronze vessels facilitated communication with invisible beings. This function was fulfilled through mystical decorations, particularly metamorphic animal images such as the dragon and phoenix. Animal faces, known as *taotie*, were one of the most popular motifs on ritual objects of Bronze Age China. Many interpretations of *taotie* have been offered, but one early tradition, in a passage from 'The third year of Duke Xuan' in *Zuozhuan* by Zuo Qiuming, referred to them as images of harmful spirits. Their presence on ritual vessels allowed people to familiarize themselves with their appearance—a forewarning should they encounter these spirits in person—based on the belief that a danger confronted through a visual image gave one protection against it.

At journey's end, these huge vessels loom over the visitor via projections, gradually appearing and disappearing at different stages, visually reinforcing recovered memories of ancient history and bronze culture.

In this way, the exhibit involves a cluster of immersive spaces, each equipped with a soundscape, dazzling projections, painted images, and dramatic lighting (designed by the lighting specialist A. J. Weissbard), evoking a multisensory experience. Beyond the first room, no panels or labels will offer explanations. This allows the visitor to focus instead on the surrounding dramatic setting and their own sensory interactions with the objects. A pamphlet with brief introductions of each room will be available to visitors before entering the exhibition. If they wish to explore more, a full object checklist with extended labels will be available on Mia's website.

Thus, the installation moves away from ordinary exhibition experiences, instead shifting perspectives by displaying a new approach to exhibition design through the power of our senses. By collaborating with Tim Yip, Mia is once more boldly moving away from an academic approach to curation, which has largely defined the histories of most US museums. Director Katie Luber and Deputy Director Matthew Welch's support allowed the undertaking of such an innovative approach, and set us up for success with the museum's top assets.

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'Eternal Offerings: Chinese Ritual Bronzes' is on view at Mia, 4 March – 21 May 2023.

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Fig. 13 *Lei* wine vessel
 Warring States period (c. 475–221 BCE), 4th century BCE
 Bronze with gold, silver and copper inlay
 24.61 × 31.27cm
 Minneapolis Institute of Art,
 Bequest of Alfred F. Pillsbury

