Chinese ceremonial bronzes have been a subject of admiration and interest to Western scholars for some decades and to the Chinese for some millennia. In truth, these bronzes (the best of them) are wonderful and extraordinary from any point of view. Their craftsmanship is unsurpassed; I doubt if it has even been equaled. They have the thing called beauty so deeply ingrained that it is germane to any scheme of aesthetics. In the patterns and designs which adorn them they have a complicated iconography that is still far from explained and that is a delight to those infected with a passion for riddles. In these riddles lie clues to the fundamental religious thinking of a people whom otherwise we know largely through scratched oracle bones and books written down hundreds of years later. Chinese bronzes are exciting things any way we wish to take them.

Interest in them is increasing in the West. There have been special exhibitions of them on the Continent, in England, and in America, as well as in the Orient, and private collections have been mounting even during the war. They have been shown sometimes as part of a general exhibition, as in Berlin in 1929 and in London in 1935, and sometimes alone, as in Paris in 1936 and in New York in 1938. The New York showing at the Metropolitan Museum, drawn entirely from American collections, was to date the most comprehensive and brilliant of all. It also made clear, alas, that this museum was far behind many other museums and private collectors in the business of collecting Chinese bronzes. We still are, but we are now well on our way to building up our collection. Our acquisitions since 1938, and especially a group acquired in 1943, give good evidence of healthy growth both in the matter of ancient ceremonial bronzes and in that of the later Buddhist bronzes.

It is to show the additions to our collection since 1938, along with the star pieces which we have had for a longer period and a few notable pieces which have been for a considerable time on loan at the Museum, that an exhibition of Chinese bronzes is being held in Gallery E 15. Though it overflows a little into Gallery E 8, it is a relatively small display.

In 1938 the Museum acquired two of the three great Buddhist altarpieces so far discovered. Both altarpieces, formerly in the collection of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., date from the Wei dynasty (A.D. 386-557), and the larger one is inscribed and dated A.D. 524. Their history is clear and untrammled. To the end of time there need be no question about it. They were dug up in a small village near Chêngting-fu, in what is now called Hopei province, and carried to Peking. They were acquired first by Yamanaka, next by Mrs. Rockefeller, and finally by the Museum. These works were among the great glories of the London exhibition. The only comparable piece known is the altarpiece of the Sui dynasty (A.D. 589-618) in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

Two years ago the Museum acquired another work which has no peer—a seated figure of Buddha dating from the T'ang dynasty (A.D. 618-907), formerly in the collection of the late Mrs. Christian R. Holmes (ill. p. 107). Mrs. Holmes had one of the great collections of Chinese bronzes of our time. It is a sad thing to have it dispersed, but it is a satisfaction to see much of it entering museum collections. From this source the Museum acquired five pieces in addition to the T'ang Buddha. These include a great gong of the Shang dynasty (about 1550-b.c.; ill. p. 109), a square vessel with cover, called a fang-i, and a vessel with an animal cover, called a kuang. These vessels carry the same inscription and are certainly part of the same set as a fat beaker, called a tsun, in the collection of Alfred F. Pillsbury. In 1938 they were ascribed to the Early Chou
Gilt-bronze Buddha. Early T'ang dynasty, A.D. 618-907. Height 8 inches. Rogers Fund. Photograph by Charles Sheeler. This piece and those on the following pages are shown in a special exhibition of the Museum's collection of Chinese bronzes in Galleries E 15 and E 8.
The Museum has also acquired Mrs. Holmes's covered wine cup, called a chüeh (chio), which has a lid in the shape of a swallow with wings and tail outspread. There are a number of wine cups of this type but very few with covers. Only three are as yet known: the cup from the Holmes collection, which we think is the one depicted in T'ao chai chi chin hsü lu ("Supplement to the Catalogue of the Collection of Tuan Fang"), volume ii, page 12; a second (the whereabouts of which we do not at present know), which is illustrated in Hsi Ch'ing ku chien ("Illustrated Catalogue of Bronzes in the Collection of Ch'ien Lung"), chapter 26, page 46, and which has the same inscription as a ho in the collection of P'an Tsu-ying; and a third which appeared out of nowhere and which the Museum acquired in 1943 (see above).
The date of these cups is by no means certain. We think they are Shang but are not as sure of them as of the Pillsbury bird finials. Whatever their date they are things of extraordinary beauty.

Of a much later period is a gilt incense burner, one of the most splendid and well preserved of its kind, also from the Holmes collection. It has been ascribed to the Six Dynasties (A.D. 222-589) or the early T'ang dynasty.

Another important acquisition is a set of three bronze vessels bearing similar inscriptions. One, a huge wine beaker, is of the type discovered at An Yang, with the black inlay described by Yetts practically intact. The second is a squarish, four-footed vessel called a ting, with a pattern cast in deeper relief than that of the first vessel but with the inlay missing—a later product, one would think. The third piece has variously been supposed to be the cover of the aforesaid ting and a separate small altar table. It is neither. It can be used either way, and possibly has been, but it is in reality a makeshift composite of ancient date.
Wine vessel (kuang), with cover. Shang dynasty, about 1558-about 1050 B.C. Height 12 inches. Rogers Fund

which is going to be a pleasant puzzle for some time to come. The inscription which links the three vessels—an inscription which has been cut, not cast—appears with a Sung dynasty reference but has no older tradition. These three pieces are good—they are related—they are relics of the Shang dynasty; but whether they were intimates three thousand years ago or were forced together a mere eight hundred years ago is an open question.

One of the simplest and grandest in the whole galaxy of Chinese bronzes, a kuang discovered by the late Jörg Trübner in 1929, has finally come to the Museum (see above). Though corroded and deeply patinated by time, the essential design is clear. At one end of the cover rises a wonderful animal head with horns; at the hinder end there is still a noble buffalo head. Otherwise, save for a plain band at the top and foot, the vessel is without ornament. It has been ascribed by various interested people as Shang or Early Chou. One school of thought, working from the conventionalized animal monster masks of the Shang dynasty, believes that animal forms became more and more naturalistic as time went on.
There is much to support this idea when we reach the animals of the Han dynasty. But too often in the past we have been misled by easy theories. “Bottle” horns like those of the animal on the lid of our kuang certainly appear in vessels called Shang. A similar animal (on Mrs. William H. Moore’s pole terminal) has been ascribed to Early Chou for no very good reason, and it is our belief that both pieces belong to the earlier period.

The water-buffalo head at the back of the vessel is likewise of a type which appears on vessels variously ascribed to Shang and to Early Chou. In 1938 we preferred to call the wine vessel in the form of a water buffalo in the Fogg Art Museum a work of the Shang dynasty because the little dragon on its back was exactly like those of the chariot furniture belonging to Kansas City called Shang. In 1945 we still prefer the earlier dating for these pieces. Whichever period time proves our vessel to belong to, it will continue to stand out as one of the noblest of all the Chinese bronzes.

Among other notable additions to the Museum’s collection are a small double-owl vessel (yu) ascribed to the Shang dynasty and a wine vessel (kuang) of great magnificence (see below). The entire front of the latter vessel is a bird form, and the main theme of the sides are the wings of the bird; but within the wings themselves dragons or serpents appear, and the spaces around the wings are filled with powerful animals and a fish. It is likely that some powerful animal also appeared on the missing cover. The design stands out of the bronze in the fashion we are wont to call Early Chou. Since the An Yang discoveries it has been a general temptation to call all the most elegant vessels in low relief, with or without inlay, Shang and to ascribe the bolder forms to Early Chou. It is quite possible, however, that we shall find that this bolder style appeared in the

_Wine vessel (kuang). Shang dynasty, about 1358-about 1050 B.C. Height 8 7/8 inches. Rogers Fund_
earlier period and that the present vessel, like the Trübner piece, will take its place among the Shang bronzes.

This summer the Museum had the good fortune to receive as a gift from Dr. F. H. Hirschland, in memory of Georg S. Hirschland, a wooden vessel of great merit, dating from the Shang dynasty. A notable feature of the piece is its exceptionally fine patination.

Two interesting pieces which have been described as "bricks" have also been added to the collection. These belong to the Middle Chou period (946-about 770 B.C.). Like a group of similar pieces in the Field Museum, Chicago, they have been pierced and put to some use for which they were not originally intended. We do not know as yet what purpose these things served, but the most likely suggestion is that they were parts of joining pieces for the wooden beams of carts or chariots.

With these acquisitions of recent years are shown many pieces which have long been in the Museum's collection. A number of these are of the first rank. A set of bronzes known as the Tuan Fang altar, which the Museum acquired in 1924, is recognized as peerless all over the world. There is only one other similar altar table known and it is lost in some private collection in China, divorced from the vessels that belong with it. The Museum's set as acquired from Tuan Fang comprises twenty pieces. Tuan Fang himself was once proudly photographed with the whole group. Though the pieces vary in period marks, on the surface of the table there are proofs that a number of them were buried together for a very long time. In 1935 we ascribed some of the vessels to the Shang dynasty, the table and other vessels to Early Chou, and the six ladles to Middle Chou, but we confidently expect the three most splendid vessels, the small surrounding vessels, and the table itself to take their places as works of the late Shang dynasty.

In view of the burning interest of scholars and dilettantes in Chinese ceremonial bronzes it must be remembered that we are a long way from a complete understanding of their chronology, iconography, and fundamental meanings. Karlgren's brilliant analysis, published in 1935, and his subsequent writings have brought about a reappraisal of the problems and started a new way of thinking. H. G. Creel in *The Birth of China* and other publications has thrown much light on the Shang period and the symbolism of the bronzes, and the valuable contributions of the Chinese scholar Ch'en Meng-chia are rapidly bringing order out of chaos. Make no mistake—the problems of Chinese bronzes are far from resolved. While this may be irritating to the public, who like their facts cold and on toast rather than on the wing, the process of solution should make fine entertainment, for in its esoteric way it has all the excitement of a bear pit and sometimes even that of the Roman Colosseum complete with gladiators, Christians, and lions, and an occasional clown divertissement thrown in.

At this stage the only honest advice a museum curator can give to the public, who trust us to find out the truth for them, is to ask them to look at the bronzes themselves. They are supreme things, wrought and fired with an intensity of feeling by a people whom we only dimly understand as yet—a subject which we shall report on from time to time as we learn more.

We are indebted to Dr. Ch'en Meng-chia for his references on the inscriptions and other valuable observations concerning the Museum's bronzes.