A GIFT OF CHINESE BRONZES

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This museum’s collection of early Chinese bronzes has been enlarged and enriched in a most remarkable way through the generosity of Mrs. Otto H. Kahn and her children, Gilbert W. and Roger W. Kahn, Mrs. John Barry Ryan, and Lady Marriott. A visitor inspecting the two cases temporarily set up in Gallery E 11 will not fail to be impressed by the magnificence of this gift—even more by the taste of the late collector as certified by the quality of the objects displayed. Only a selection will be described in this article.

Mrs. Kahn collected bronzes of not too large a size which she could display in a drawing room fitted for this purpose with glass cases and lighting but without the somewhat overawing solemnity of a museum gallery. In fact, she managed to preserve its character of a habitable and lived-in room which bore the mark of her taste and personality. The room does not exist any more, but, in a more lasting way, her taste remains expressed by the discriminating selection of her collection. Nearly all her bronzes are distinguished by quality of design, unusual shape, rare ornamentation, or dazzling patinas. Of course this last feature—varying shades of green, red, brown, and blue—is an incidental embellishment which the soil of China, through centuries and millenniums, patiently added to the work of the artist. But why should we deny ourselves the pleasure of appreciating it, especially when, as here, it only serves to enhance the artistic qualities inherent in the object.

Much has been written about the early Chinese bronzes, much progress has been made in classifying and dating them. But many fundamental problems still remain unsolved, partly due to the lack of an archaeological survey of China and to the scarcity of even remotely scientific excavations. In the earliest stage known to us, this craft already shows unsurpassed mastery of technique and a wide variety of shapes and ornamentation. We do not know where it sprang from. We do know, from their inscriptions, that the vessels were used for ritual and ceremonial purposes; mainly for sacrifices to ancestors. The famous Tuan Fang altar set in the Metropolitan Museum may serve to give an idea of the utensils that once adorned the ancestral temple of a feudal lord. We do know that they were cast in honor of certain individuals and, somewhat later, to commemorate certain feats and events; that they were not made to be buried but to be used by, and bring good fortune to, successive generations. Why, then, and on what occasion were they put into a grave?

Various studies have been made to interpret the strange decoration of the early bronzes,
ing minor representative of his). Mountains, streams, lakes, and forests were inhabited by local deities, and there was also the Count of the Wind, the Master of Rain, the Mother of the Sun, the Mother of the Moon. None of these, however, seem to have had a clearly defined personality, except for the Count of the River (the dangerous and powerful Yellow River), a cruel and arbitrary god to whom young girls were sacrificed—married—by drowning.

The cult of the peasants, centered around the local God of the Soil, was marked by the seasonal rhythm of rustic life and toil, as well as by its purpose and technique, its necessities and dangers. At the great autumnal feast, after harvesting and before the beginning of the dead season, spirits like the First Laborer and the First Harvester, and also those of the cats who kill the mice and of the tigers who kill the boars, received sacrifices and were represented in wild masquerades. The local nobles assisted at these ceremonies, dressed as peasants.

Towards the end of the Chou dynasty the process of personalization of religion and individualization of the gods seems to have progressed rather far. The ruler over the yet uninhabited earth had been a monster with the body of a serpent, a human face, vermilion hair, and horns. His son, God of the Soil of the empire (each community, each state had its own), is described by a poet of the early third century B.C.: “Count Earth is nine times coiled up; his horns are sharp, his muscles thick, his claws are gory; he chases man fast, fast; he likes to feed on man.” The Sovereign on High was an anthropomorphous giant, the Count of the River a huge fish, the Count of the Wind a bird with a stag’s head, the Master of Thunder a dragon with human head who beat his belly to produce the roll of thunder, the Master of Rain perhaps a toad. Above this weird and uncanny world the great philosophers of the late Chou period rise like peaks. In the religious development described, they represent a contrary trend and try to reduce the willful and capricious gods to the impersonal magic forces they had been.

The deities as described above can only serve as general comparative illustrations for the re-

Covered wine vessel (ho), inscribed. Shang Dynasty. Height 7 inches

drawing on Chinese literature, Pacific anthropology, and other relevant and irrelevant source material. Some attempts probably shed more light on the neuroses of their authors; others have some good points but are not altogether satisfactory either. The general trend seems to be that in a predominantly agrarian society the main concern would have been fertility of the soil—rain—, fertility of the race, fertility of the domestic or edible animals, protection from—or by—dangerous spirits of nature, protection by ancestors who, perhaps, were originally identified with totem animals.

What do we know of the early religion? The nobles—and mainly they concern us here as only they had ancestors, only they had the prestige and wealth to use bronze vessels in their cult—brought regular sacrifices to their powerful ancestors (as well as to the Sovereign on High who reigned over them, over the souls of the dead); they brought regular sacrifices to the God of the Soil, the deified earth of their domain (who, in the royal sacrifices was joined by Sovereign Millet, god of harvests, the grain deified; in those of the nobles by a correspond-
ligious background of the great bronze periods, Shang and Early Chou. Their religion was determined by the cult of ancestors and of the forces of nature, the latter barely individualized. Prominent among them was the God of the Soil, but beside and below him many minor deities, spirits, and demons existed. We cannot trace back most of the individual traits to the earlier periods. Nor do we know how far the popular or peasant religion of those days might have influenced the repertoire of the bronze-casters, who may have formed a semi-independent caste of artisans but probably were serfs or in bondage to the feudal lords for whom they worked. The often quoted dualistic theory of Yin and Yang (as well as that of the Five Elements and others) certainly cannot be used to explain the ornamentation of the early bronzes. It was a late construction which the philosophers mentioned above and their followers needed to explain the world as they saw it, many hundred years later.

However little we know about them, the early Chinese bronzes appeal to us directly and immediately as truly monumental works of art. So monumental, indeed, that all later vessels and utensils look petty and playful next to them, even though they sometimes express more clearly the virtues of their materials, serve more efficiently their functions and purposes.

Among the earliest pieces of the collection there is a small wine jug (ho) of unusual shape (p. 98); in keeping with its elegant character and size the artist gave it pointed slanting legs. Neck belt and lid are adorned in low relief by a band of the meander-like spirals which the Chinese call thunder pattern or cloud pattern and which are closely related to the archaic graph for lightning or for the rainbow (Kuo Mo-jo). We shall meet them again on many of our vessels. A chain fastens the lid to the handle, which ends in an animal head. The inscription, under the handle, contains a ya-hsing symbol, which places the vessel before the Chou conquest (1028 B.C.), and a dedication to an ancestor. The patina is of a light mottled gray-green, with green, blue, and brick red incrustations (malachite, azurite, and cuprite).

The libation cup (chüeh) shown above, carries an inscription, a name, which consists of the dagger-axe, ko, with an ear on its left. This evokes the ancient Chinese custom of cutting off an ear of the slain enemy as a token of victory. The Japanese adopted this tradition, like many others, and in Kyoto we can still admire the Mimi-zuka (“Ear Hill”), formerly called Hana-zuka (“Nose Hill”), a mound six yards high in which are buried the noses and maybe the ears of the Chinese and Koreans, supposedly 38,000, killed in the Korean campaign of 1592-1598, which Toyotomi Hideyoshi sent home as trophies. For a similar inscription compare the ku described below. The decoration, in clear, precise high and low relief, shows the horned monster which we are used to call t'ao-t'ieh, here in an abbreviated or summary form, flanked by vertical dragons, with rising blades above. The main zone is divided by vertical segmented flanges. A smooth milky gray-green patina, with some rough green patches, adorns the vessel, which is very similar to one in the Freer Gallery (Cat. pl. 3) called Shang. There is another libation cup of this type in the Kahn collection (not illustrated here) which
is only 4½ inches high. The small size is perhaps indicative of the limited wealth of the patron’s family. It seems more likely, however, that these miniature vessels (like the miniature pottery replicas of bronze vessels from the Late Chou period) are ming-ch’i, objects made for the tomb and not ceremonial vessels. Examples of these have been found at Anyang (Creel).

The delightful and unique small jar on page 97 does not fit any of the conventional—and rather arbitrary—categories. Maybe we should call it yu, like the one on page 103, in view of the two loops for a strap handle. But it is too small to have been a wine container; it would more likely have held spices or some other precious tidbits. Between belly and foot it has the
sunken zone typical of a ku (see p. 104), adorned with the same parallel raised lines and pierced by the same cruciform openings in the hollow foot, which probably have a magical meaning. The foot is decorated with a spiral band, the neck by deformed dragons, the main zone, as well as the lid, by a mask t'ao-t'ieh. The deep incisions of the low relief were once filled with inlay; the smooth patina shows varying shades of green. The vessel is said to come from Anyang; a small hu from the same tomb and, apparently, the same workshop is in the Freer Gallery.

The large round tripod (ting) illustrated on page 100 was excavated at Anyang, the site of the last Shang capital (1300-1028 B.C.); this is
Food canister (fang-i), inscribed. Shang Dynasty. Height 87\(\frac{1}{8}\) inches
Covered wine vessel (yu), inscribed. Shang Dynasty. Height 10\(\frac{7}{8}\) inches
certified by Huang Chün, who published it in his Yeh-chung pien-yü (II, A, 5). It is inscribed with an ancestor name. The body is covered by en face views of a t'ao-t'ieh, executed in strong high relief and intaglio on a meander background. The legs bear the so-called hanging-blade motif. The heavy and forceful vessel has a gray-green, black, and brown patina, with green, blue, and earthy incrustations.

The rectangular food vessel (fang-ting; see p. 101) shows traces of black inlay in the background decoration. This inlay—pigment or lacquer—has been found on many Anyang pieces (Yetts). A mask t'ao-t'ieh flanked by vertical dragons stands out clearly in strong high relief and intaglio; so do the pairs of jawed, bottle-horned dragons facing each other on the neck belt. The patina is of a smooth bluish gray-green, with some incrustations. The inscription begins with an emblem (two bundles of bamboo writing slips with some kind of house or tower in the middle) which may indicate that the family of the patron had something to do with the archives of the city-state designated by the central graph; as Dr. Britton suggests, they may have been "bookmakers"—a gentlemanly profession. Then there is a dedication to an ancestor. The vessel is strong and powerful with a clear and accurate design of ornamentation.

The rectangular food container (fang-i; p. 102), covered by an even green and light brown patina with some incrustations, is decorated by a summary t'ao-t'ieh whose horns have become trunked, bottle-horned dragons; above and below this main zone pairs of dragons facing each
other and back to back, with C- and comma-shaped horns. The gabled cover repeats the main motif, upside down. The fairly well-known inscription shows a hand holding a brush, a name known in this form from oracle-bone and bronze inscriptions. Down to the smallest detail of decoration and, as far as can be seen on the reproduction, of incrustation the vessel is identical with one published by Huang Chün (I, A, 15), who, however, reproduces a different inscription—possibly by mistake. Two similar vessels known to us (Jung Keng, T'ung-k'ao no. 597, and Karlgren, BMFEA, g, pl. 27) also belong to the Shang period.

The beautiful wine jar (yu) on page 103, the shape of which reminds us of a bamboo vessel, has often been reproduced and is now unanimously dated in the Shang dynasty. J. Trübner brought this vessel from China, where it was found in Honan. Only three other yu of this variety are known to us. The inscription shows a family emblem, a human figure in profile with large head or headdress, and an ancestor's name. Foot and neck of the vessel are bare; the main decor zone is divided into five belts, the middle one with vertical ribs, the others with fabulous crested birds in delicate and clear high relief. The top bird belt is divided by plastic animal masks, the other three by the hooked shields which Alan Priest interprets as birds. We can recognize this puzzling pattern on other vessels, particularly the fang-ting, but also the chüeh, the ting, the fang-i, and the chih below. The lid repeats the body motif in three belts; the handle, between raised rims, has two-headed S-dragons. (On the oracle bones, the double-headed dragon seems, according to Kuo Mo-jo, to be a graph for the double rainbow.) The surface of the vessel is smooth and glossy, of a mottled metal color, with scattered green and some blue, pink, and rust-colored incrustations. The splendor and measured elegance of this bronze has seldom been equaled.

The tall, slender wine beaker (ku; p. 104, left) still has preserved its inlay, which now is black and red, the red, according to Creel, produced by red (cuprite) patina. The inlay accentuates the neat and elegant design and contrasts beautifully with the smooth, milky gray-green surface patina mottled with red. The decoration shows, on the bulb, a somewhat deformed monster mask; on the foot dragons which obviously are the left halves of a bodied or dragonized t'ao-t'ieh; above, snakes. The zone between bulb and foot is the same as on the small jar (p. 97) with the strange cruciform openings in the hollow foot. The neck carries a spiral band, above which long eyed blades rise towards the rim of the cup. The inscription is
Food vessel (ting). Late Chou Dynasty, about 650-256 B.C. Height 3 1/2 inches

the same as on the chüeh (p. 99) but with the ear on the right of the weapon.

The small wine cup (chih; see p. 104, right) covered with a milky gray-green patina, is decorated in smooth high relief on a bare surface. The dissected decor elements on the belly form an abbreviated bodied t'ao-t'ieh. On the foot belt we see gaping dragons, on the neck turning ones, above them rising blades. Similar pieces are in the Freer Gallery and in the Kano collection. In the absence of any distinguishing criteria we call our vessel Shang or Early Chou.

The covered food bowl (kuei) on page 105, left, with handles or ears carries an inscription which seems to connect it with the Anyang period. It is executed in the script style of the Shang and contains a very unusual name, tentatively read hsi-en, which, in this form, only occurs on some oracle-bone inscriptions as the name of a late Shang diviner (Britton, Fifty Shang Inscriptions, p. 74, and Kuo Mo-jo, Pu-t'suan). Tung Tso-pin has proved that these names must be assigned to individuals. If the name was or became a family name, it may have still existed in early Chou times; the identity of the graph with the bone form, however, makes us feel that this is a Shang piece. The patina is of a smooth, milky gray-green with some green and red incrustations and rough patches; at one point the black, shiny metal surface shows. The inside is beautifully mar-

bled in blue-green, green, red, and brown. The decor, in smooth high relief, shows vertical ribs on the belly, alternating turning dragons and whorl circles on the neck belt, and jawed dragons, following each other, on the foot. The cover, which serves as an eating bowl, repeats the design of belly and neck.

The kuei without handles, on page 105, right, shows a shape current to our day. Among the early bronzes it is rare though. The decoration in low relief has a broad neck belt with a bottle-horned t'ao-t'ieh, flanked by snakes; below, it is bordered by a spiral band, under which we see hanging blades. The lid repeats neck belt and spiral band. This decor seems to be unique. In lid and bottom we find an inscription which also commands interest, as it states that this sacrificial vessel was cast by (the workshop of) the prince of Yen—a feudal state in the region of Peking. This is decisive proof that the vessel dates from the Early Chou period. Other inscriptions mentioning a prince of Yen have been listed by Lo Chen-yü and Karlgren.

The Middle Chou period is represented by a gourd-shaped wine flask (hu) with bird cover, which is not illustrated here. The Stockholm Museum possesses a very similar hu with the same unusual decoration (BMFEA 20, pl. 26).

The small elegant tripod on this page, resembling the li-ting type, shows an elaborate decor: a double band of plait rectangles which enclose quatrefoils on a granulation back-
ground; below there are pairs of confronted stylized dragons which form heart-shaped hanging blades; the same on the face of the handles; on their outside, plaits. The cover has in its center a whorl circle on a granulation background, surrounded by alternating bare and decorated bands, the decoration repeating that of the belly. We trust that the little stylized flowers are innocent of the connotations they may evoke in the minds of some of our authors! The intricate and minute features are well designed and executed; this is indeed a charming piece and shows the Late Chou artisan at his best. These later vessels clearly reveal a change in the character of their ornamentation, and also their shapes, which had begun already in Middle Chou times. The fierceness and forcefulness, the magical power that characterized the early ritual vessels have waned; richness and elegance, a more worldly spirit, have gained the ascendancy.

The little recumbent stag (p. 106) is supposed to come from Shou-chou, which, in the fourth and third centuries B.C., was the cultural and eventually the political center of the state of Ch'ū. The chalky rough patina, blue-green with light and dark blue incrustations, would support this. There are traces of incised decoration. The stylized head recalls the Sino-Siberian animal style of earlier periods, as exemplified by the beautiful knife with ibex head (not illustrated) which closely resembles specimens found at Anyang and in the Ordos region. The bowl originally had a cover, perhaps of some perishable material—not a shell in any case, like the similar stags of a later period. Only three other pieces of this type are known to us, one of them in a New York private collection. In spirited elegance and poise the little stag has no peer.

Among the latest pieces of the collection there is a small flat bowl with handle, from the Han dynasty (not illustrated). It is probably a secular utensil. However, by then the old religion had disappeared or thoroughly changed, the empire had powerfully spread far to the West, whose spiritual and material influences soon became noticeable, on a much larger scale than before. We have covered roughly a millennium and a half; small wonder we find ourselves in a different atmosphere at the end.

Throughout this article, we have endeavored to use Karlgren's terminology, stylistic analysis and dates. It should be pointed out, however, that if we follow to the letter the latest strict rules laid down by this eminent scholar (BMFEA, 20), we may assign a Shang date only to the ho and ting and maybe the fang-i and an Early Chou date only to the kuei of the prince of Yen and should call all other vessels of this group Shang or Early Chou.

The description of early Chinese religion is largely borrowed from the posthumous works of Henri Maspéro.