THE ART OF BRONZE AGE CHINA

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COMPTON VERNEY is a young, independent art gallery in Warwickshire, within the heart of the United Kingdom. Nine miles southeast of Stratford upon Avon, Compton Verney opened to the public in 2004. It represents a unique venue in the UK as its traditional rural setting, in a Grade I listed Robert Adam mansion within 120 acres of Lancelot “Capability” Brown landscaped parkland, belies the clean, contemporary art gallery aesthetic that is immediately found within. Alongside an engaging programme of temporary exhibitions, the gallery’s collections comprise Neapolitan Baroque Paintings from the Golden Age 1600–1800; Early Northern European Painting and Sculpture 1450–1650; British Portraits; British Folk Art and the Marx–Lambert Collection, and Archaic Chinese Bronzes. These diverse and fascinating collections reflect the interests of the gallery’s Founder, Sir Peter Moores, and are intended to highlight areas that are under-represented in British galleries.

Sir Peter’s interest in Chinese art grew in the early 1980s following a visit to the Arthur M. Sackler Museum at Harvard University, where he found himself captivated by four or five particular bronzes. Supported by the Chinese scholar, Professor Dame Jessica Rawson, he began acquiring archaic Chinese bronzes for Compton Verney from 1993 onwards, a collection that now ranks in the top three in Europe, after the British Museum, London and the Guimet Museum, Paris. The vessels in the collection were produced over a period of more than 3000 years under many different Chinese rulers, and date from the early Shang dynasty (circa 1500–1050 BC) to the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). Alongside the bronzes, many of which are unique, the collection also includes pottery and cloisonné in order to illustrate the relationship between the traditional bronze shapes and other media that echoed their forms.

Chinese bronze art of the second and first millennia BC was one of the most distinctive landmarks in the history of world art. It began with the invention of a new material, bronze, an alloy of copper and tin. Through the mixing and melting of different ores in various proportions, a substance was created that was harder, more enduring and more colourful than anything ever seen before. We are not sure whether the secret of making bronze was discovered independently in China, or whether it was brought to China from the West and from Central Asia, where bronze seems to have appeared earlier than in China. Nonetheless, from the beginning, bronze was used very differently in China than elsewhere; while in the West it was employed for weapons and production tools, in China it was mainly used for ritual objects and vessels. This gives a different perspective to our view of the “Bronze Age”.

Early Chinese bronzes were made using the piece-mould method. This innovative technology usually (though not always) involved a clay model and a variety of ceramic moulds and cores. From a technical point of view, it was closely associated with pottery traditions of an earlier period. The potters of the Neolithic cultures were highly
skilled in shaping and firing a range of pottery vessels that included bowls, cups, ewers, jars and tripods. These vessels were richly decorated—either painted or incised—and with a wide range of motifs. For example, the Yangshao culture (circa 5000–3500 BC) was known for its hand-built pottery that was painted and fired at a high temperature, while the Dawenkou and Longshan cultures (circa 4000–2000 BC) developed a skilful use of advanced wheel-throwing techniques and, by reducing the atmospheric control in the kiln, produced fine eggshell-thin black vessels.

While these techniques laid the foundations for the development of bronze art, the production of a bronze vessel was quite different from that of a pottery one: it required a substantial investment of resources, including the coordinated mobilisation of skilled craftsmen. The extraordinary effort involved in the production of bronze vessels, and the contexts in which they have been discovered, indicate that they were intended for special ceremonies and rituals, rather than for everyday use.

The modern viewer who tries to appreciate Chinese bronzes comes across an immediate obstacle: that of function. This difficulty is reflected in the traditional classification of bronzes. In Chinese texts they are given names such as ding, gui, dou, jue, jia, hu, you and zun, which are known from classical literature. The textual records also provide explanations of how the vessels were employed in early rituals. For example, in the Zhouli (“Rites of Zhou”), the ding-tripod is described as a meat-offering vessel, and the stemmed dou-bowl as a vessel for meat sauces and pickled vegetables. Other texts such as the Yili (“Book of Rites”) and Liji (“Records on Rites”) also contain detailed
Late Shang dynasty (about 1700–1050 BC)
Ritual food vessel, gui
Bronze, about 1100 BC. Height 15.3 cm

Late Shang dynasty (about 1500–1050 BC)
Ritual food vessel, ding
Bronze, about 1200 BC. Height 24.5 cm

Late Shang dynasty (about 1550–1050 BC)
Wine vessel and cover, fangjia
Bronze. Height 30.7 cm

Shang dynasty (about 1500–1050 BC)
Ritual vessel in the form of an owl, xiaoyou
Bronze, about 1300–1100 BC. Width 22.9 cm
information about the ways in which the ritual vessels were used. But, while this information is vivid, we must use it with caution. There are many cases in which the nomenclature is incorrect and descriptions state how certain vessels should be used, rather than how they were actually used.

Thanks to modern archaeology, we can now analyse the changes and transformation of bronzes over the long period of their production and use. This period of about 1500 years includes the Xia, the Shang and the Zhou dynasties. At the Erlitou site in central China, which dates from the early to the middle of the second millennium BC, bronzes were discovered both in tombs and in residential remains. The Erlitou culture may, or may not, be representative of the Xia dynasty; this is still under scholarly debate. Bronzes from Erlitou include a few tools, weapons and small bells, but mainly consist of vessels such as tripods, ewers and goblets. The bronze vessels still bear certain characteristics of the primitive stage: they are always round or oval in cross-section, with thin walls, mostly plain or very simply decorated. In the final phase of the Erlitou culture, ritual vessels began to appear in matching sets, suggesting that a reasonable scale of bronze production was already in place. In addition to the bronze vessels, there are bronze plaques with face motifs and dragons created with turquoise inlay, which were probably worn by religious leaders.

The establishment of the Shang dynasty (circa 1600–
1045 BC) in central Henan brought with it some further innovations in bronze art. Ritual bronze vessels from the metropolitan areas, such as Zhengzhou and Anyang, had a more stylised design and decoration, and were usually made in regular sets. In terms of decoration, the taotie (or two-eyed motif) was dominant. This is essentially a hybrid face. There were also a number of animal motifs, in particular the ox, sheep, tiger and dragon. Close observation shows that the motifs first appeared in thread-like low relief on the surface of the bronze vessels, suggesting that they were carved directly into the moulds with a knife before casting. However, the decoration on bronzes soon became more elaborate. The taotie appeared in bold designs, and other motifs such as stylised dragons and abstract geometrical patterns became prominent. In Shang art, anthropomorphic motifs were rarely seen in a representational manner. We can be fairly certain that no life-size bronze statuary was made in Anyang, although the skills, materials, knowledge and technology were certainly sufficient and advanced enough had the Shang wanted to do so. The absence of life-size bronze statuary at Anyang may be associated with stylistic fashion, or, more probably, with the social and religious systems of the Shang people.
However, there were human representations in bronze from places outside Anyang, in particular from the south. “Shang style” bronzes have been found at Funan (Anhui), Xingan Dayangzhou (Jiangxi) and Huangpi Panlongcheng (Hubei), all in the south; but also in the north at Gaocheng Taixi (Hebei), Pinggu Liujiahe (near Beijing) and Huixiang (Henan). These were either colonies established by the Shang people or cultures under the Shang influence. In each case, there is a local element in the bronze art and the decoration is more naturalistic. The amazing discovery in the mid-1980s of the bronze heads and statuary at Sanxingdui (Sichuan) confirms that a distinctive Bronze Age culture, roughly contemporary with the Shang dynasty, flourished in southwest China. The figurative art of the Sanxingdui culture was very advanced: there was a life-size standing figure cast in bronze and a number of heads showing different features, all of exceptionally high sculptural quality. The heads were originally painted with pigments or covered with gold foil and may once have been fixed to wooden bodies. Many scholars believe that the figures were originally placed in a temple and that the standing figure represented the high priest. In other words, the models may have represented “real” people. But even if we follow the theory that the majority
of the figures and heads were intended to represent the participants in a ritual, we cannot ignore the fact that they are highly stylised and uniform. The striking larger bronze masks, measuring between 70 and 134 cm, with huge ears and with the pupils of the eyes protruding, are more likely to represent deities than men. These may originally have been fastened to trees or wooden poles for worship. The figurative art of Sanxingdui gives us a very different visual impression of early Chinese art than was previously recognised. But the religious belief of the Sanxingdui people is even more remote from us than that of the Shang, and art historians have found it difficult to interpret the meanings of these bronze images.

The Shang dynasty was overthrown in the mid-11th century BC by the Zhou people from the northwest, who established their own new dynasty. Surprisingly, although the Western Zhou dynasty (1045–770 BC) lasted a long time and produced a large number of bronzes, there was little innovation in the production of bronze vessels. Wine sets, in particular the jüe, jia and gu, gradually disappeared, probably as a result of reforms to rituals that were instituted by the Zhou kings. The main change during the
Zhou dynasty was the attention given to inscriptions in bronze art. These recorded important ceremonies or special dedications to the ancestors, and even legal cases and state legislation. We also see more bronze musical instruments, indicating the increasing use of music in ceremonial contexts.

The Eastern Zhou period (770–221 BC) saw enormous and rapid social changes. These stimulated new fashions in artistic production. Creative experimentation with materials opened up greater possibilities for both decorative and representational art than ever before. There are examples of human figurines made in jade and lacquered wood, as well as in bronze. Growing commercialisation and interaction between different ethnic groups also contributed to changes in ritual bronzes. By 600 BC, iron began to be used for weapons and agricultural tools. Precious metals such as gold and silver were used as inlays or gilding and occasionally for making vessels, but bronze was to remain the metal of prestige.

Why was bronze so important in China? Bronze artefacts, in particular ritual vessels, played a significant role in the conceptualisation of the political legitimacy of the
rulers of dynasties and were perceived as spiritual objects that bestowed heavenly blessings. The significance attributed to bronze ritual vessels is illustrated in the well-known story in the *Zuo Zhuan* ("Zou’s Commentaries"), written around the 7th century BC, at the beginning of the final phase of the Bronze Age. In the third year of Lord Xuan (605 BC), the Duke of Chu attacked the nomads in the north, then took his army to the Zhou capital at Luoyang for a military parade, with the intention of taking power from the weakened king of the Zhou dynasty. He was greeted by the Zhou king’s minister, Wangsun Man. The Duke of Chu opened their meeting by asking the size and weight of the bronze ding tripods at the Zhou court. In his reply, Wangsun Man explained that the size and weight of the tripods were of little relevance; what mattered was the virtue that they possessed. He explained that in ancient times, when the Xia dynasty was distinguished by its virtue, the people of distant regions made drawings of many creatures. The nine governors (of the nine provinces) sent these drawings to the king, along with the metals that they paid in tribute. The tripods were cast with all the creatures as decorations so that the people might recognise the outward forms of spirits and demons.

Therefore, evil could be averted when people went to the rivers, marshes, hills and forests; they would be able to avoid the spirits of the waters and mountains and all sorts
of other monstrous things. The tripods were used to harmonise the world above and the world below. But when Jie (the Xia king) lost his virtue, the tripods were transferred to the Shang and remained with them for 600 years. When King Zhou (the Shang king) became violent and obsessive, the tripods were passed on to the Zhou. Wangsun Man further explained that, when virtue is massive and brilliant, the small tripods become heavy; but when virtue is obscured with wickedness and deception, the large tripods become light. Heaven blesses brilliant virtue and will stay with those who possess it. King Cheng (of Zhou) had settled the tripods in the capital and divination had predicted that the dynasty would last for thirty generations and over seven hundred years. This was the mandate of heaven. Although the Zhou dynasty’s virtue was now in decline, the mandate had not yet changed. Therefore, there was little point, concluded Wangsun Man, in asking the weight of the tripods.

The archaeological notion of the “Bronze Age” is a western invention, but it largely coincides with three dynasties in Chinese history: the Xia, the Shang and the Zhou. It was during this period that “state” formation entered a crucial stage and the basic characteristics of Chinese civilisation developed. Historians regard the three dynasties as the “golden age”, whose institutions, philosophy and ritual vessels serve as models and inspiration to later generations. The bronzes are not only physical evidence of the glorious past, but also make a long-lasting visual impact on the modern viewer.
Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220)

Bird-shaped finial
Bronze on a wooden stand.
Height 9.5 cm

Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220)
Wine vessel and cover, zun
Bronze. Height 29 cm

(Right) Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220)
Heavenly horse, tian ma
Bronze. Height 116 cm