

The are the product
of a casting method



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The bronze vessels, including the You, as they are on display together, represent simultaneously art objects, objects of ritual significance, and a medium of social exchange. Created during the Western Zhou dynasty (1046 – 771 BCE), they were used for funerary and other ceremonies involving wine and possibly food. As such, they reveal something about the craft and artistic sensibilities of their makers, but they also may show relationships between individuals, families, and the living and the dead. In their display in the Metropolitan, they share with other objects of religious value on exhibit there an ambiguous position.

This is because the museum itself functions as a surrogate temple to the aesthetic and intellectual deities of modern life (Duncan 1995, 478). The assemblage of funerary vessels, container, and altar table are arranged in what appears to modern western eyes as a tea or coffee set, either set out for a reception, or offered for sale. All the pieces are together, none are in use, and everything is placed to show at optimum advantage. It seems, however, that this may not have been the way these objects would have been seen by the Bronze Age folk who crafted, commissioned, traded, presented, and buried them. The archeological evidence is still murky regarding the specific uses of all these items although it is known that they figured prominently in funerary, commemorative, diplomatic, and kingly ceremonial activities (Yan 2011). These bronzes are the product of a casting method quite different from that of other Bronze Age peoples. They are cast in pieces, and then assembled.

This allows for more elaborate and detailed decoration on the interior of the mold (Metropolitan Museum of Art 2011). In addition, since these are very

heavy items, easily reaching 50 pounds, this technique sounds like it might have made the casting process easier on the arms of the craftsman. The piece under specific discussion here is the You, or wine container. It apparently functioned as an individual serving piece for wine.

The wine would have been heated up, perhaps on the small ritual altar table. There is room underneath for a brazier or dish of hot coals and it looks somewhat like more modern Asian bed warmers. Wine, when heated up, gives off fumes that alter consciousness. It is tempting to speculate that there was some mental connection between the evanescent fumes of the wine, and the persistent but non-corporeal aspects of the human spirit. The use of wine in all sorts of ceremonial activities was not new, and had been present in the previous Shang dynasty.

The Zhou, however, apparently tried to reduce the amount of drunkenness by changing the shape and size (Travel China Guide 2011)(and presumably therefore, the capacity) of the containers. The wine container has a decorated heavy strap handle, which terminates in a mask-like face of some sort of creature. This mask is typical of such bronze pieces, and such masks were termed taotie. The exact significance of such figures is not fully understood (Metropolitan Museum of Art 2011). However, it is tempting to draw a comparison with the presence of totemic animals throughout native American spiritual beliefs and practices. The totemic animal represents the characteristics of the person or family, e. g., cleverness, bravery, persistence, etc.

This one has some of the look of a fox or other member of the family canidae, although it is highly stylized to the point that it is not recognizable to modern eyes. It also has some resemblance to certain modern dragon faces. The eyebrows are raised, and prominent, as are the eyes. The mouth is open and the ears are up and alert. The possible animals shown in taotie masks might include tiger, dragon, deer, sheep, ox, bird, human beings, phoenix, or cicada (GG Art 2011). There are repeating designs all around the lowest register, and the top one.

These may have been stamped into the interior of the mold before casting, representing an advance in mass-production (Metropolitan Museum of Art 2011). It is possible these designs had symbolic significance, perhaps as invocations or messages to the dead (GG Art 2011), or were actually characters in early Chinese pictographs. Certainly, some similar pieces can be ‘read’ this way, revealing how these pieces were presented, or captured, or left as legacies from one person to another (Yan 2011). However, whether the repeated symbols around the middle of the piece constitute symbolic images or writing, the ability to reproduce them accurately and clearly over and over again would have offered obvious advantages.

The symbols, repeated precisely and in volume, might well have seemed more ritually or magically effective to those who cast these pieces and those who used them. Both this piece and the larger wine vessel have protruding ‘horns’ which are very reminiscent of the shape of more modern pagodas. This shape, as used in house and temple design, has been popularly believed to duplicate the shape of mountains. The protrusions also look as though they could help in lifting these objects to move them around. They also add

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to the conspicuous complexity of the overall design, which was doubtless a marker of status and prestige for whoever commissioned this piece, presented it, or received it. As noted earlier, the museum display may not reflect at all what their use would have been like in real life. They are known to have been buried with prominent individuals, and presented as gifts and to seal treaties. They were also used in banquets to honor the dead, termed sacrifices (Rawson 1967).

Where did these take place? Did they occur in the ancestral hall? How many people would have been involved? Did they involve a seated meal together? None of such applications would necessarily have involved the arrangement shown in the glass case. The altar table, for example, is of a size to allow it to be carried to a gravesite in order to carry out commemorative or appeasement rituals to the ancestors and the recently deceased[1]. On the other hand, these items were passed from one family member to another (Yan 2011) , and presumably, before they were interred with the deceased, they were on display, but how, and in what setting? The piece termed You is for individual service, although it seems not significantly different in mass from the largest piece in the display.

All these pieces must have been examples of conspicuous consumption, given the immense amount of fuel and raw material that needed to create these objects. In the Metropolitan Museum, the You and its companions are presented as a ritual assemblage imprisoned in a glass case inside a building that thousands come to with greater regularity than their church, synagogue. There is a great deal of layering of meaning in this.

The original meaning of the vessels as funeral furniture is long lost. However, the beauty of the artisanship allows viewers to appreciate them as sculpture rather than as either utilitarian (which they are) or ritual (which they also are). The museum functions as a frame (Duncan 1995, 476) that permits viewers to place their own meaning on these fascinating examples of ancient Asian craft, art, and spiritual observance.

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“ Inscribed Bronzes in Early Western Zhou Tombs: Funerary Gifts, Gifting and Social Network.” University of Chicago. 2011. [http://cccp.uchicago.edu/downloads/2010FanBronzesConference_SunYan.](http://cccp.uchicago.edu/downloads/2010FanBronzesConference_SunYan.pdf)

pdf (accessed February 2011). The weight of all these items, however, suggests that some help was needed to haul them around. Since human sacrifice was apparently a feature of funeral practices, perhaps the unlucky individual who was left in the grave with the deceased could help to carry the items.