

China of bronze and gold: The Dong Bo Zhai collection

The remarkable Dong Bo Zhai Collection, brought together by a Chinese business man from Hong Kong, covers three emblematic fields of the Chinese cultural heritage. Discussed here are the important archaic bronzes reflecting the evolution of these remarkable sumptuary vessels, from the Shang (circa 1550-1050 BC) to the Han dynasty (206 BC-221 AD), and an ensemble of worked gold presenting a panorama of imperial wares and gold jewellery from the 13th to the 18th century. The collection also includes a white marble statue of the Buddha, which still bears traces of coloured paint, exemplifying the heights achieved in Buddhist sculpture in the 6th century.

Monique Crick

The Dong Bo Zhai Collection

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THREE OF THE TEMPORARY EXHIBITION ROOMS are devoted to the ritual bronzes. Thanks to an abundance of raw materials, a highly original form of bronze casting developed in ancient China, and was to dominate the arts for over a millennium. The worship of the royal ancestors was an important component of the religious and political activities of state, and bronze vessels, as well as jade, were the symbols and attributes of power. Limited to the aristocratic elite, bronze vessels were used to present offerings of food and water as well as libations of alcoholic drinks. The formation of an early state in China and the discovery of bronze metallurgy are traditionally dated to the mythical Xia dynasty (c. 2070-1600 BC), today tentatively identified with the Erlitou culture, located in the north of the country, near Luoyang (Henan). The Shang dynasty (c. 1550-1050 BC), which followed, is divided into two periods, distinguished by the shape and decor of its bronzes: the Erligang culture (c. 1500-1300 BC) and the Yinxu phase, at Anyang (c. 1300-1050 BC). The earliest works of art in the Dong Bo Zhai collection date from the last phase and include vessels for holding or offering alcoholic drinks, *you*, *gu*, *jue*, *jia* (fig. 1) and for offering food, *ding* and *fangding*. The ritual vessels are decorated with relief lines of stylised zoomorphic ornaments, which become denser and more vigorous towards the end of the period. Among these are a mythical beasts known as *taotie*, shown as a frontal animal mask with large, raised eyes, *kui* dragons, cicadas, birds and other animals, often placed on a background of square spirals (*leiwen*). Many of these vessels bear simple inscriptions indicating the clan name of their owner.

Towards the middle of the 11th century BC, the Zhou overthrew the Shang and founded their own dynasty, with its capital located near the present-day city of Xi'an. For a century, the bronze vessels retained the shapes and motifs of their Shang models. Inscriptions now became longer and frequently commemorated non-ritual events such as military campaigns or royal gifts. Important changes are apparent in the bronzes of the middle (975-875 BC) and final (late 9th-early 8th BC) periods, which are more massive, with high relief ornaments. Vessels for offerings of food become more numerous, while the earlier *jiao*, *jia* and *gu* drinking vessels disappear almost completely. Treated in a stylised manner, a variety of animal-based motifs intermingle with geometric designs as the tendency towards increased abstraction gains momentum. The *taotie* mask loses its dominant position and frequently gives way to crested birds and dragons.

In 771, driven from their homeland by a nomadic group sweeping down from the North-Western steppes, the considerably weakened Zhou abandoned their ancestral temples, thus losing their legitimacy among their vassals, and set up a new capital further east, at Luoyang. As the Zhou feudal system broke down, rivalry between clans led to incessant warfare and the formation of a multistate system with increasingly regional ties. Gradually, the larger states annexed their weaker neighbours, even declaring their independence from the Zhou. During this period known as the Spring and Autumn Period, or *Chunqiu* (770-481 BC), bronze vessels slowly lost their previous religious function to become symbols of local aristocratic wealth. Of the ornaments inherited from the Western Zhou, the dragon became a major source of inspiration, and was reinterpreted in a variety of stylised forms, including a complex interlace of serpentine

bodies. From the 7th century on, several distinct regional styles developed. The bronzes often take on extravagant forms, with a richly textured surface effect created by raised decorative elements, characteristic of those regions that fell under the influence of the great state of Chu. Intended mainly for burial purposes, some bronzes were low-quality replicas (*mingqi*) of the vessels used in temples and showed little originality in design as shown by the almost complete contents of a tomb from Southern China, dated to the 6th-5th century BC.

From the middle of the 5th century BC, seven major political centres emerged in China. This marked the beginning of a new era, called the Warring States Period, or *Zhanguo* (481-221 BC), during which conflicts grew in intensity due to the use of iron weapons and crossbows. Despite the political instability, the rival courts made an ostentatious display of their wealth. Bell chimes were played during official banquets or ceremonies held in honour of the ancestors (fig. 2). The southern culture of Chu was to maintain a distinct identity well into the Western Han dynasty (206 BC-9 AD) and was also an important production centre for lacquered wooden sculpture and vessels. These would in turn inspire new designs for bronzes, frequently decorated with inlaid stones and metal – turquoise, malachite, gold, and silver – thus producing new chromatic effects, which lasted all through the Western Han dynasty (206 BC-9 AD). The country's political expansion and the opening of the Silk Roads also stimulated a taste for the exotic, and encouraged the development of a sophisticated and luxurious court art (fig. 3).

The great originality of the Dong Bo Zhai Collection is that it includes exceptional examples of luxury ware and gold adornments, dating from the Southern Song (1127-1279) to the Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, presented in the last exhibition room. In ancient China, gold was mainly used for ornaments before becoming a sign of wealth from 6th century BC onwards. The first gold vessels did not appear until the Warring States period (481-221 BC), and utilitarian objects made of or decorated with gold only became more common in the Eastern Han (25-220 AD), reaching a highpoint in the Tang dynasty (618-907). From the Song dynasty (960-1279) on, the use of gold and silver ware spread both geographically and socially. Gold wares remained the prerogative of the imperial family and high dignitaries. Dishes and bowls took on lobed, floral shapes, and the calligraphic fluidity of the incised or *repoussé* decoration reflects the sophisticated taste of the scholar. Under the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1279-1368), large quantities of gold and silver ware in a variety of shapes and designs inspired by Song styles were used at court, but these pieces, probably recycled later, have only rarely survived to this day. During the Chinese Ming dynasty (1368-1644), gold became one of the most prestigious materials alongside jade and silk, as well as an important symbol of rank and wealth. Gold was the favourite metal used for the jewellery of the aristocracy (fig. 4). The use of gold vessels was reserved for the emperor and his family (fig. 5). A new taste for rich and colourful decoration encouraged the widespread use of inlaid stones, such as diamonds, rubies, sapphires, emeralds, amethysts, and opals, as well as pearls and jade. Several of the pieces of the Dong Bo Zhai collection belonged to the same tomb and bear inscriptions dating to the year 1601, to the reign of Emperor Wanli (1573-1620). Many of these were made in gold filigree (fig. 6), a technique originally intended for the aristocracy but which was also much appreciated by the European courts.



1: *Jia*, cup for alcoholic drink Bronze. H. 25.07 cm. Shang dynasty, end of Anyang period (c. 1300-1050 BC).
2: Nine bells from a twelve bell bianzhong chime. Bronze. Warring States period (481-221 BC).

3: Wine jar Gilt bronze, inlaid with silver and stones H. 39.4 cm. Western Han dynasty (206 av. J.-C.-9 ap. J.-C.).



4.



5.

6.

The Baur Foundation, Museum of Far Eastern Art, is a private museum housed in an elegant late 19th century town house in Geneva. The collections comprise some 9000 Chinese and Japanese art objects. Acquired by the Swiss collector Alfred Baur (1865-1951) over a period of some 45 years, these works of art include Chinese jades, snuff bottles and imperial ceramic ware from the 8th to the 19th centuries, as well as Japanese prints, lacquer, ceramics, netsuke and sword fittings. Since 1995, several donations have further enriched the museum's holdings. (<http://www.fondation-baur.ch>)

4: Detail of hairpin decorated with five-clawed dragon Gold and rubies. Ming dynasty (1368-1644), Wanli (1573-1620) period.
5: Ewer Gold, jade and rubies H. 20.5 cm Ming dynasty (1368-1644), Wanli (1573-1620)

mark and period Inscription dated 1601.
6: Detail of flower basket Gold and rubies. Ming dynasty (1368-1644), Wanli (1573-1620) mark and period Inscription dated 1601.