

A PICTURE (A STATUE OR A BEAKER) IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS

Teaching Fundamental Chinese Cultural Concepts Through Art

By Elizabeth M. Hammer



FIGURE 1:
Ritual Wine Jar (Zun)
Shang dynasty (circa sixteenth through eleventh century BC), early Anyang period, thirteenth century BC.
Bronze inlaid with black pigment; H. 15 5/8 in. (39.7 cm.)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 43.25.1

We live in a visually oriented culture. Advertisements, television, computer programs, and movies constantly bombard us with pictures meant to inform, attract, and inspire us to buy, eat, travel, vote, or covet. Therefore, students from very early ages are primed to respond to pictorial images. Combine this prominence of visual stimulation in contemporary society with the power of great works of art to awe, to communicate, and to stir emotions, and educators gain a powerful tool to teach about Asian culture and history.

For millennia, Chinese artists and craftsmen have produced objects that are not only visually engaging and beautiful, but also reflect their chief ideas, concerns, and values.¹ To illustrate this notion, I present three Chinese works of art from The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and demonstrate how looking at and closely considering each can help students learn about important Chinese historical developments, cultural concepts, and practices. The material presented here is directed toward educators rather than students, following the model of a teacher's workshop at a museum. Furthermore, the intended audience is primarily social studies and history instructors, as I focus here on the historical and cultural context in which each art object was made and not on its aesthetic

importance or role in art historical development, as these topics are commonly not taken up until university.²

RITUAL WINE JAR (ZUN)

This imposing bronze beaker (*zun*) was presumably made for Shang dynasty (circa 1600–circa 1100 BC) rulers to communicate with their ancestors and spirits during formal banquets (fig. 1).³ While some vessels were used to cook and serve meat and grain, beakers such as this and goblets were made to hold and consume grain-based wine. The production process of this ponderous beaker reveals important features of the technological level, economy, and social structure of the time. The copper and tin used to make the bronze were probably quarried in areas far from the capital cities in north central China and then transported to urban foundries. Once the raw materials were assembled, ancient Chinese metallurgists often used a method unique in the world for casting bronze. Known as the “piece-mold method,” this technology involved the production of ceramic models and molds, which were cut into sections and then reassembled before the molten metal was introduced. The beaker's size, regularity of shape, and intricacy and crispness of design, as well as the complexity of the casting process, indicate that the bronze casters were highly skilled and worked together in a well-organized work-

shop. Only an elite social group could have controlled such a high level of financial resources, raw materials, transportation mechanisms, skilled human labor, and production facilities to produce a bronze vessel like this.

The formality and importance of this beaker are further suggested by its diverse and precisely-crafted surface design, made of geometric and animal patterns arranged symmetrically. There are a variety of abstracted representations of real and imaginary fauna—from top to bottom: cicadas, dragons, bovine heads with antlers, and birds. Placed on the container's midsection and proportionally larger in comparison to the other motifs, is an imposing *taotie* mask. This fanciful beast has protruding eyes that stare at the observer. The raised flange between the eyes acts as a nose bridge, with nostrils curling at either side of its base. Arched horns above each eye complete the creature's mask-like face. However, move slightly to the right or left of the face and observe how the composition shifts—orienting oneself again from the eyes, now we notice that the body is split into two profile representations that have a forepaw beneath each eye, a torso that ends in a scrolling tail, and hind legs beneath the rear quarters. Scholars have long speculated about the meaning and function of this fantastic beast, whose original name is not even known. Han-dynasty (206 BC–AD 220) records refer to it as a *taotie*, a term based on their theory that it served to warn against gluttony and excess. However, contemporary art historians posit that the *taotie* might have facilitated communication between this world and that of the spirits and ancestors, that it might have been a representative of the ruling class, or even that it had no religious meaning at all but served merely a decorative function.⁴

Intermingled with the animal forms, the zun is covered with an intricate pattern of fine scrolling lines rendered in low relief. Linear patterns and a profound interest in the artistic potential of lines comprise a distinctive aspect of Chinese art. Forming geometric shapes or spiraling across an object's surface, linear designs can be found in some painted pottery and jades of the Neolithic period. Centuries after the Shang, the highly regarded art of calligraphy expresses a similar interest in the expressive quality of lines.⁵

Bronze vessels such as this container were often inscribed with a few characters in an archaic script not readily comprehensible to contemporary readers.⁶ Most Shang-dynasty bronze inscriptions are dedications to ancestors or symbols that are interpreted as clan marks. These vessels were likely used as part of ritual banquets meant to honor royal ancestors. The practice of communicating with and paying homage to deceased family members has long remained a fundamental part of Chinese society, and ancestors continue to be revered formally in Chinese communities today during annual festivals and family events.

These inscriptions, which are better represented on other examples than this zun, exemplify the ancient Chinese interest in historiography. The practice of keeping records of historical information was an important official and private activity throughout China's dynastic history. So much did the Chinese value the preservation of this data that craftsmen even wrote it directly on valued and sacred objects.

The great majority of ancient bronzes now have a green patina, caused by interaction of the copper in the bronze alloy with soil and moisture during long centuries buried in tombs. While bronze containers were often used during the owner's life (although some were made expressly to serve as tomb furnishings), they were always at some point placed in graves, continuing the tradition established in



FIGURE 2:
Maitreya Altarpiece
Northern Wei dynasty (386–534), 524
Gilt bronze; H. 30 1/4 (78.2 cm.)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 38.158.1

the Neolithic period of placing valuable objects in burials. This custom indicates that the ancient Chinese conceived of the afterlife as being much like this one and that whatever activities and possessions were necessary in this life were also vital in the next.

MAITREYA ALTARPIECE

Leaping centuries ahead to the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534), we turn our attention to the foreign religion of Buddhism and consideration of a striking Buddhist altarpiece in the Museum's collection (fig. 2). Standing upright in the center of the assembly, the Buddha radiates serenity and stability. Employing a vocabulary of bodily markings developed in India and based on descriptions in sacred Buddhist texts, this Buddha bears the cranial bulge (*ush-nisha*) that signifies wisdom, and elongated earlobes that symbolize nobility. He also makes the hand gesture (*mudra*) of reassurance with his right hand and gratification with the left. The appearance of the Buddha's body, however, is distinctly Chinese. Unlike Indian depictions of full-bodied gods whose rounded physiques (which



FIGURE 3:
Detail of inscription on reverse of figure 2

swell with *prana* or spirit/breath) are encased in clingy, revealing robes, the Chinese Buddha's form is gaunt, minimally described, and hidden beneath thick robes.⁷ The artist's attitude representing the Buddha here recalls the manner used during the Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220) for depicting immortal beings (*xian*), who were shown so thin that they were almost stick-like.⁸

The angular contours of the Buddha's face are consistent with the stiff, extended folds of the hem of his robe, which stand straight out on either side of the figure and look like stylized, wavy lines. This energetic, almost jittery, rendering of linear patterns occurs also in the flame shapes of the mandorla behind the Buddha. Once again, we have an example of the traditional Chinese emphasis on lines.

Just as many Shang-dynasty bronze vessels were inscribed, this altarpiece also bears historical information. Etched into the back of the base are the identity of the central Buddha as Maitreya, who will bring the message of Buddhism in the next epoch; the date the statue was produced; the donor's name; and the dedication to his deceased son (fig. 3). Common in China, inscriptions such as this are rare on Buddhist images in India.

Looking carefully at the two small pairs of figures holding bowls and standing on either side of the Buddha's feet, we find another illustration of Chinese history. During the Northern Wei period, northern China was ruled by the Tuoba people, who had invaded from the north and actively promoted Buddhism in their domain. The four standing figures probably portray the donors of the altarpiece and are shown wearing the tunics and pantaloons (rather than full-length Chinese robes) favored by the Tuoba, who owed their military success to their prowess on horseback.

LIVING ALOFT: MASTER LIU'S RETREAT

Chinese cultural ideas about nature can most clearly be seen in their landscape paintings. At first glance, this scene of a private garden occupied by two gentlemen in a pavilion, painted on paper with pale, water-based pigments, contains the essential elements that a Chinese landscape by definition must have—mountains and water (fig. 4). The word in Chinese for landscape, *shanshui*, is made up of a combination of the Chinese characters for mountain and water, respectively. When one considers the characteristics of these ele-

ments, one realizes they are in many ways opposites. While mountains are unmoving, vertical, hard, and rough in texture, water is cool, dark, soft, and assumes the shape of whatever container it is in. This pair can be expanded to represent the ancient Chinese concept of yin and yang, the interacting polar opposites that together make up everything in the universe.

Landscape paintings were meant to provide opportunities for people to refresh their connection with the natural world, a process considered essential to maintain one's moral integrity and upright character. To facilitate this, these pictures typically contained pathways, bridges, and signs of human habitation that the viewer could use to project himself

into the rustic scene. When we approach this composition, we enter it through the foreground close to us at the bottom of the painting. If we move our eyes across to the left, following the direction in which Chinese books are read, our attention is led to the bridge and in our mind's eye, we cross over. The gateway has been left slightly ajar, so that we may enter into the garden. There we find a copse of trees arranged to form a V, directing us to journey into the painting's interior. Yet, our path is somewhat obscured by the density of the trees in front of us, creating a sense of seclusion. Shifting our gaze upward, we see two gentlemen, surrounded by books, a few art treasures, and a helpful servant in an open garden pavilion, deep in quiet conversation. These men embody the ideals of the Chinese scholar-official—they are erudite scholars and art aficionados, completely at ease with and attuned to nature.

Men such as Wen Zhengming (1470–1559), the accomplished Ming-dynasty (1368–1644) scholar, artist, and poet who created this work, painted and wrote calligraphy as acts of personal expression.⁹ They did not seek to recreate photograph-like representations of actual hills, rivers, and trees but sought to convey their own spirit. What is the message that Wen Zhengming seeks to communicate in this painting? Just as was the case with the bronze beaker and Buddhist altarpiece, this information can be found directly on the work of art itself. In the upper right corner, Wen wrote in a style of regular script that compliments the small, carefully delineated brushstrokes used to form the picture:

*Immortals have always delighted in pavilion-living,
Windows open on eight sides—eyebrows smiling.
Up above, towers and halls well up,
Down below, clouds and thunder are vaguely sensed.
Reclining on a dais, a glimpse of Japan,
Leaning on a balustrade, the sight of Manchuria.
While worldly affairs shift and change,
In their midst a lofty man is at ease.*

Mr. Liu Nantan [Liu Lin, 1474–1561] retired from government, and upon his return home, he planned to build a dwelling—so you will know his noble character. Although

the building is not yet completed, in anticipation of it I have composed a poem and sketched its concept. Another day he can hang it at his right hand to enrich that pavilion-living. Inscribed by Zhengming on the sixteenth day of the seventh month in the autumn of the guimao year of the Jiajing reign era [August 16, 1543].¹⁰

This combination of painting, calligraphy, and poetry is an eloquent example of what is known in China as the Three Perfections, three art forms working together to produce a more revealing and satisfying whole. In this painting by Wen Zhengming, the calligraphy and painting are both created with equally small, controlled, and precise strokes, while the poem's references to residing in a pavilion, refined individuals, and glimpses of distant lands that can barely be seen in the hazy distance, as well as its serene mood, all compliment and enhance the picture.

In this way, teachers and students can examine and consider Chinese works of art to glean an understanding about the time and culture in which they were created. This beaker, statue, and painting are eloquent expressions of the Chinese traditions of ancestor reverence, historiography, and yin and yang, as well as effective illustrations of the importance of writing and the relationship between man and nature in Chinese culture. Furthermore, because of their visual impact, these objects are sure to linger in students' memories and help to remind them of the accompanying cultural concepts. ■

NOTES

1. In this essay, I treat all objects as works of art and do not differentiate between articles made for utilitarian purposes and items viewed by their producers as fine art. Because fine art museums typically collect only objects that were among the highest quality and most sensually pleasing material products of their time, and because museums usually display these items not in a contextual fashion, such as in a recreated Neolithic hut or in an underground tomb chamber, but show them isolated in display cases, I believe contemporary viewers tend to interpret everything they see in an art museum as a "work of art," with special value and aesthetic importance, even when the object was not made with such intent.
2. To adapt this material and strategy for elementary and secondary school students, an educator should significantly shorten and simplify the information as appropriate and as his/her experience dictates. Many museums, including the Metropolitan Museum (www.metmuseum.org), Asia Society (www.askasia.org), and the Freer and Sackler Galleries, Smithsonian Institute (www.asia.si.edu), provide useful and relevant classroom activities and reading lists for teachers on their Web sites or in print.
3. Two useful sources on the art of the early dynastic period are James C. Y. Watt, "The Bronze Age and the Early Empires," in *Possessing the Past: Treasures from the National Palace Museum, Taipei*, Wen C. Fong and James C. Y. Watt (New York and Taipei: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and National Palace Museum, 1996), 73–95 and Jessica Rawson, ed., *Mysteries of Ancient China: New Discoveries from the Early Dynasties* (London: British Museum Press, 1996). The latter text provides a useful summary of the piece-mold method of casting with a diagram on page 250.
4. Ladislav Kesner provides a thoughtful and succinct summary of these various theories in "The Taotie Reconsidered, Meanings and Functions of Shang Theriomorphic Imagery," *Artibus Asiae*, LI, 1/2 (1991), 29–53.
5. A fine example of a painted pottery jar that is gracefully ornamented with simple lines is the Metropolitan Museum's Jar (*guan*), made of painted earthenware during the Banshan phase (circa 2500–2300 BC) of the Majiayao culture (1992.165.9). Objects referenced in these notes can be found on the museum's Web site.
6. The single character inscribed on the floor of this jar might be a clan symbol, although its authenticity has been questioned.
7. The Museum's carved sandstone Standing Buddha (1979.6) from northern India, which was made during the Gupta period (circa 321–500) in the fifth century, offers an effective comparison between these two approaches to the depiction of the body.



FIGURE 4:
Living Aloft: Master Liu's Retreat
 Wen Zhengming (1470–1559), dated 1543
 Hanging scroll, ink and color on paper; 37 1/2 x 18 in.
 (95.2 x 45.7 cm.)
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art
 Promised Gift of Marie-Hélène and Guy Weill

8. An example of such an immortal is found perched atop the roof of the Museum's limestone Relief Carving of a Pavilion (20.99), made during the Eastern Han dynasty between the first and early third century and possibly depicting figures from the Daoist pantheon.
9. Wen Zhengming's biography is related in Anne de Coursey Clapp, *Wen Chengming: The Ming Artist and Antiquity* (Ascona: Artibus Asiae, 1975). It should be noted, however, that although painting was considered by scholar-gentlemen ideally as a means of self-expression, financial circumstances sometimes obliged them to sell or barter their art works.
10. This poem is translated in Maxwell K. Hearn, *Cultivated Landscapes: Chinese Paintings from the Collection of Marie-Hélène and Guy Weill* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2003), 166.

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