

Highlights of the Chinese Shang and Zhou Dynasty Bronzes at the Burrell Collection

by Emma May

Glasgow Museum's Early Dynasties Chinese Collection is considered to be one of the best in Britain and represents the highest achievement of Bronze Age material culture. Comprising of bronze and jade, this collection is one of the most precious documents of China's material culture dating back to the establishment of the first dynasty (Shang Dynasty c. 1700-1027 BC in North East and North Central China and the Zhou dynasty c.1027- 256 BC in North West China) recorded in Chinese history.

Bronze LiQi (ritual vessels) form a large part of this collection, they were cast using multiple ceramic moulds, a technology that has no parallels elsewhere in the ancient world. Bronzes and jades were used in rituals and ceremonies in veneration of the ancestors and dominated Chinese art from the late Neolithic period to the end of the Early dynasties. During the Shang and Zhou dynasties bronze and jade became a fine media for ritual art, contact with the supreme ancestor Shang-di was gained through elaborate complex ritual acts, offerings were placed in bronze ritual vessels and jades were placed into graves and used in sacrificial offerings to the gods and ancestors.

Sir William Burrell began collecting Chinese bronzes with his first acquisition in 1911, he collected a total of 184, varying in function, shape and age of which there are 4 different classified types: food vessels, wine vessels, water vessels, and musical instruments. Similarly, he began collecting jades in 1912 and collected a total of 136 with the majority of 65 jades being purchased in 1947.

The principal types of object associated with the collection for this period are bronze vessels and jades.

Star objects from the collection:

- 8-1 'You' or ritual wine vessel, Shang dynasty c. 1700-1027 BC
- 8-26 'Gu' or ritual wine vessel, Shang dynasty c. 1700-1027 BC
- 22-123 Jade ceremonial dagger with handle of bronze, Shang dynasty c. 1700-1027 BC
- 8-48 'Zhong' Zhou dynasty bell, Western Zhou c. 1027-771 BC
- 8-164 'Jia' or tripod wine vessel, Western Zhou c. 1027-771 BC
- 8-43 'Fu' or food vessel, Western Zhou c. 1027-771 BC

Bibliography for the collection

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