

ELSLEY ZEITLYN LECTURE ON
CHINESE ARCHAEOLOGY AND CULTURE

Artists and Craftsmen in the Late Bronze Age of China (Eighth to Third Centuries BC): Art in Transition

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WE POSSESS VERY LITTLE INFORMATION on the artists and craftsmen of early China. In spite of the large number of written sources transmitted by the literati tradition and their wide scope, no early text provides any clues, even indirectly, concerning the status of these individuals in society or the environment in which they worked. The only information available to us regarding the people involved in artistic production of the Late Bronze Age derives from the artworks themselves. Lasting from the eighth to the third centuries BC, the period I shall consider covers more than five centuries. Naturally, one may expect that important changes occurred in the arts over such a long period. Indeed, particularly dramatic changes in the arts took place around the turn of the fourth century BC, following the evolution of societies in the eastern part of present-day China.¹ The nature of artistic creation was deeply affected, and this in turn had lasting effects on the people involved in the creation process. To some extent, therefore, the study of artistic change should help us understand the way in which artists and craftsmen worked in ancient China, and this is the basis on which I shall approach the topic. To start out, I am using the words ‘artist’ and ‘craftsman’ (or ‘artisan’) in an undifferentiated way,

Read at the Academy 31 May 2007.

¹ See Gernet (1990); Loewe and Shaughnessy (1999).

but later on it will be necessary to consider closely the question of how to refer to the producers of art in early China. I should also note at the outset that most of my examples will be drawn from just two major categories of artistic production, lacquer and bronze. In a more extensive treatment of the topic, however, other media could also be cited in support of the argument I have to offer.

The use of lacquer, a secretion from a tree that grows only in the Far East, appeared in the Neolithic period in south-eastern China around 5000 BC.² In contrast, the first Chinese bronzes were cast a long time after, in the early second millennium BC.³ Although bronze and lacquer were different media and each had specific properties, both played a major role in the development of the arts in ancient China. More precisely, in the Eastern Zhou period (771–256 BC) their respective style systems interacted on several levels. Today, I am going to focus on these interactions with a view to understanding better the role of artists and craftsmen in the art history of this period. Let me begin with a quick overview of the artistic evolution between the late Western Zhou period (c.850–771 BC) and the dawn of the empire, as seen from three artefacts that incorporate human representations. The bronze cylinder box and the water container in Figure 1 come from the cemetery of the Jin princes in Shanxi province and can both be dated to about the ninth century BC.⁴ Respectively four and two naked men bear what look like heavy containers. Although they are of small size and their traits are not very detailed, we can guess that the effort exerted to lift the containers is considerable. Undoubtedly, their humiliating positions indicate that these men were deprived of their identity. One may suspect they were captured enemies, bound and submissive prisoners.⁵ In fact, in Central China very few human beings were shown in the arts of the Western Zhou (c.1050–771 BC) period, in particular on

² For a general presentation of lacquer techniques, see Garner (1979) and Ma Wenkuan (1981). On lacquers of the Warring States period, see Hong Kong (1994) and Tōkyō Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan (1998).

³ See Bagley (1987). On later developments of Chinese bronzes, see Rawson (1990).

⁴ The pourer (c.800 BC) comes from Tomb 31 at Tianma-Qucun Beizhao in Shanxi province (*Wenwu* (1994), 8: 22–33, 68; see front cover and 25, fig. 4.4), and the box (late ninth century BC) from Tomb 63 (*Wenwu* (1994), 8: 4–21; see 14, fig. 24.4). Several other bronze vessels or containers from the Late Western Zhou period (c.850–770 BC) also rest on feet in the shape of naked prisoners. Door guardians whose right or left leg have been cut following a punishment are found on some bronze vessels (*Kaogu yu wenwu* (1981), 4, 31, fig. 3.1, 3.6).

⁵ Another small sculpture of a kneeling man with his hands bound behind his back has a short inscription recording that a Jin prince engaged in a battle against the Huaiyi, a population living in south-eastern China, and captured their king. See Su Fangshu and Li Ling (2002).

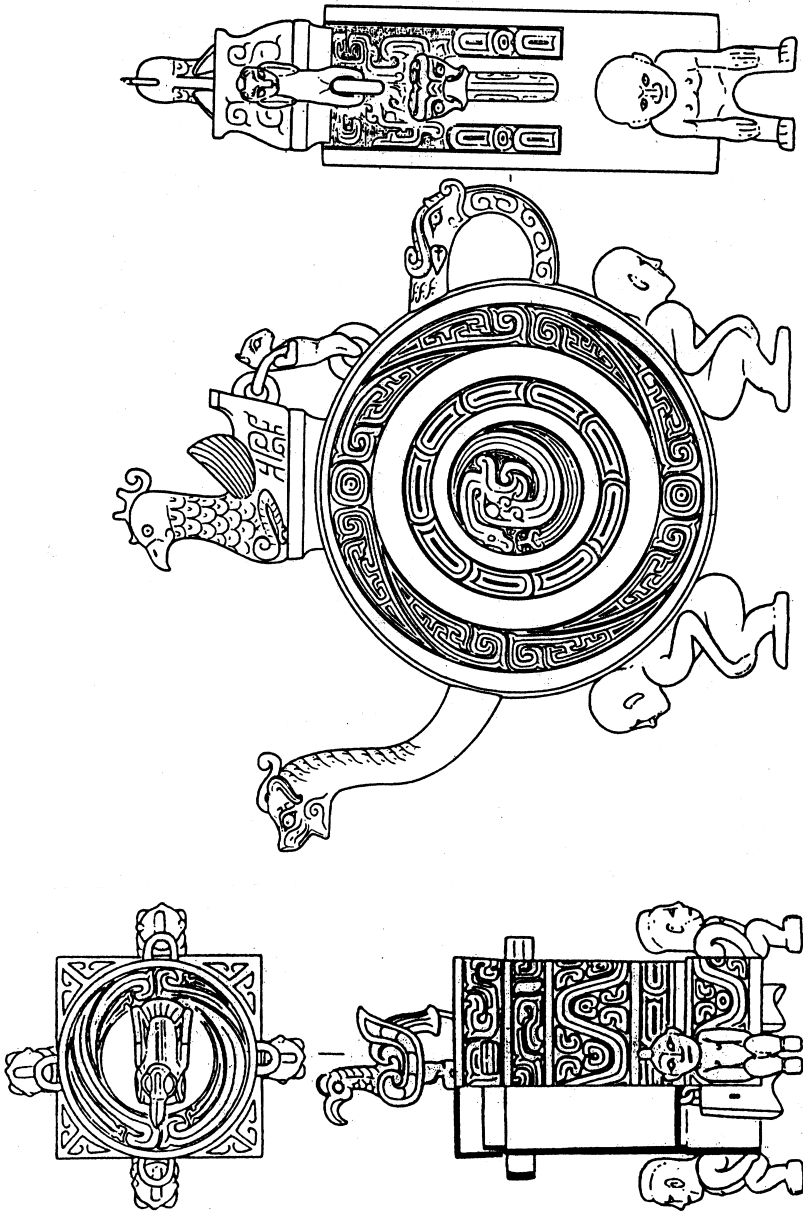


Figure 1. Left side: cylinder box; right side: pourer for water; middle: bronze vessel with a wide rim and a long handle; bottom: cylinder box with a square base. All artifacts are from the cemetery of the Jin princes at Beizhao Tianma-Qucun (Shanxi). Bronze, c. late ninth to early eighth century BC. Height 23.1 cm and 34.6 cm (not exactly the same scale). After *Wenwu* (1994), 8, fig. 24.4, p. 14 and fig. 4.4, p. 25.

bronzes.⁶ Furthermore, the only humans to be represented at that time are kneeling, naked, and even physically handicapped. It seems that for religious reasons artists avoided representing men. And there are almost no examples of female images at this early time.

Four centuries or so later than those bronzes, the object in Figure 2 represents a guard from a palace wearing a long robe and bearing a sword. Both indicate his rank in a noble house. This is not an autonomous sculpture, but part of a chime stand found in the tomb of the marquis Yi of Zeng who died around 433 BC.⁷ In contrast to the former human rep-

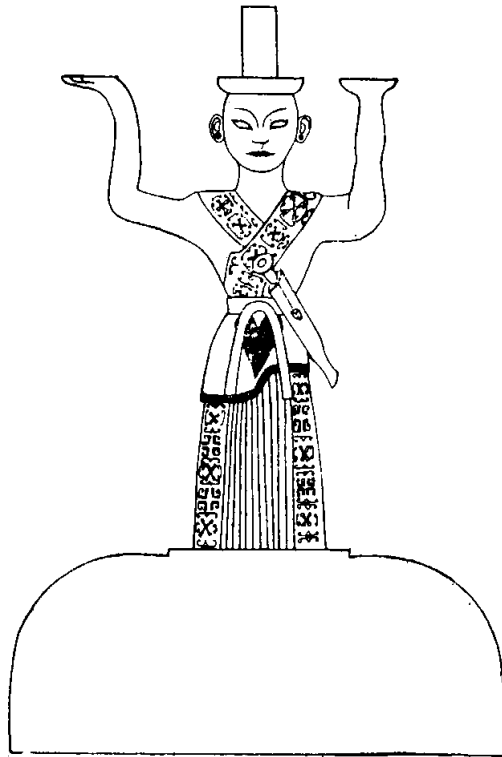


Figure 2. Guardian, detail from the bell stand discovered in Tomb 1 at Suixian Leigudun, Hubei province (tomb of Zeng Hou Yi). Bronze covered with lacquer, mid fifth century BC (date of burial c.433 BC). Height 116 cm (with the stand). After *Zeng Hou Yi mu* (1989), fig. 39.3, p. 79.

⁶ Small carved jades from the Shang and Western Zhou periods show men or women in various attitudes. It seems that at certain periods such themes were sources of inspiration.

⁷ *Zeng Hou Yi mu* (1989), pp. 77–84.

resentation, here the artist has emphasised the soldier's beauty. Lacquer was coated on the dress of the soldier to make him look even more vivid.

At the dawn of the empire, the evolution towards a full representation of man as an individual had been fully achieved. An entire army of life-sized warriors, officers and generals of all grades, amounting to more than six thousand men, was interred close to the tomb of the First Emperor (Fig. 3).⁸ Each of these soldiers had been shaped with individual characteristics, instead of stereotyped features.⁹ This major artistic change, in which the human figure evolved from generalised figures subjected to humiliating positions to figures possessing specific and detailed features, mirrored a comparable social and religious evolution that occurred step by step, culminating with a decisive shift around 200 BC.¹⁰ The three human representations we just saw epitomise three stages in a development toward a concept of autonomous sculpture. At the end of the evolution, one sees a keen interest on the part of the artists for human shapes, which did not exist earlier.

Until the turn of the fourth century BC, the arts in China were mainly of a religious nature, and dominated by bronze production. The vessel in Figure 4 belongs to a set of seven ritual vessels of the same shape and decoration.¹¹ Only their size indicates a slight difference, with height varying between 61 and 68 centimetres. Each of them weighs more than 200 pounds (91 kilograms). This series of tripods was cast for a member of the royal family of Chu who acted as prime minister of the kingdom between 558 and his death in 552 BC. They all come from the Chu royal

⁸ For the content of the first pit (of a total of four), see *Qin Shihuang ling bing ma yongkeng yi hao keng fajue baogao 1974-1984*. The figure of six thousand is an estimate, since only a part of the pit has been excavated to date.

⁹ Ledderose (2000), pp. 70-3, demonstrates that the use of modules for thumbs, hands, heads, details of the faces, bodies, etc., allowed the warriors' makers to produce an enormous quantity of diverse figures.

¹⁰ The first portraits painted on silk appear during the third century BC. Two of them were used in a funerary context at Changsha, in the Chu kingdom. Until now, due to poor conditions of preservation, they are the only testimony of a probably much larger phenomenon, but we are aware of other portraits that have already decayed. These are authentic artworks, and even if we know neither the name of the persons represented nor the names of the painters, each of these portraits is evidence of a specific relationship between two persons, the painter and the person who was represented (or possibly the family of the deceased). They respectively come from Tomb 365 (formerly Tomb 1 at Changsha Zidanku) and from a tomb at Changsha Chenjiadashan. See *Changsha Chu mu* (2000), vol. 1, p. 428, and fig. 340, p. 433; vol. 2: colour plate 48; *Hunan Sheng Bowuguan* (1983), figs. 52 and 53.

¹¹ *Xichuan Xiasi Chunqiu Chu mu* (1991), pp. 114-25. Two more *shengding* come from Tomb 1 in which the spouse of the owner of Tomb 2 was buried (*Xichuan Xiasi Chunqiu Chu mu* (1991), pp. 54, 59-62).



Figure 3. Kneeling archer from Pit no. 1 at Lintong (Shaanxi). Earthenware, c.220–210 BC. Museum of the Terra-cotta Army for the First Emperor of Qin, Qin Shuihuangdi (r. 221–210 BC). Height 118 cm. After *Chine. La gloire des empereurs* (2000), p. 230.

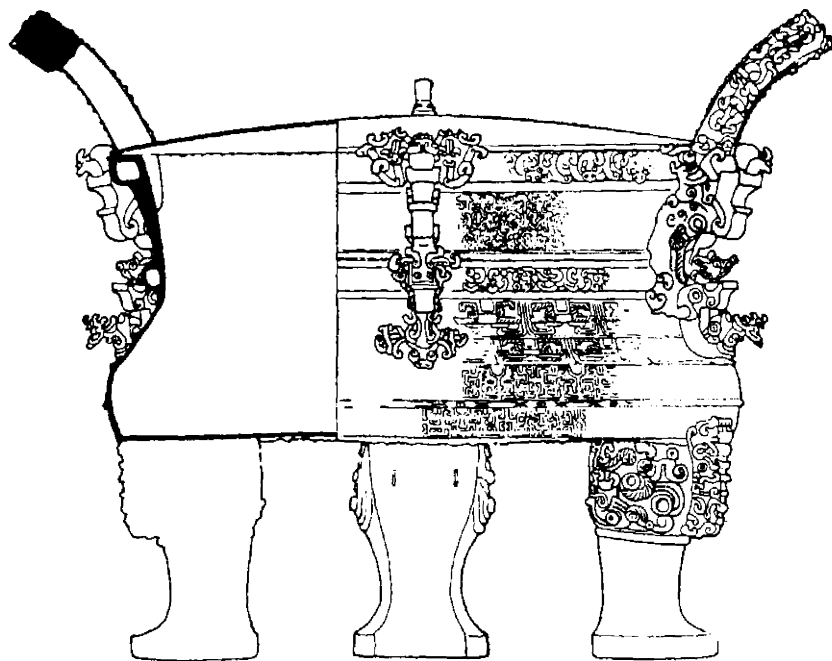


Figure 4. *Shengding* vessel, from Xichuan Xiasi Tomb 2 (Henan). Bronze, c. mid sixth century BC. Height 66 cm. After *Xichuan Xiasi Chunqiu Chu mu* (1991), fig. 93, p. 115.

foundries, as evidenced by the excellent quality of the cast and the identity of the patron himself. At that time, the best craftsmen worked for the king's workshops, and such vessels were made to enhance the power of their owner. The shape itself is typical of the official art of the Chu kingdom, with a constricted belly, and appendages in the shape of living dragons, even if the rendering of these animals is rather abstract. The ritual function of these tripods is expressed in their dedicatory inscriptions of more than ninety characters each, cast on the inner wall of the vessels (Fig. 5). The so-called 'bird-script' used for the calligraphy, with its handsome characters, is a testimony to the perfect mastery of writing by the administrators responsible for the foundries of the Chu kingdom. In the inscription, the owner explains that he has made these vessels to perform sacrifices to his ancestors, and in particular to his deceased father, in order to show his filial piety. He praises the virtues of his way of governing his people, and declares that he displays righteous conduct. At the end of the inscription, he expresses the wish that his sons and grandsons will



Figure 5. Rubbing of the inscription on the bronze tripod reproduced in Fig. 4. After *Xichuan Xiasi Chunqiu* Chu *mu* (1991), fig. 95, p. 117.

in turn perform the sacrifices that he himself will deserve after his death. Only a wealthy and powerful state could possess foundries able to produce such vessels, since they required very large quantities of raw materials, craftsmen who had mastered sophisticated techniques, and a complex organisation of the manufacturing process, with many subdivisions. These workshops employed several hundred specialised workers, skilled craftsmen, designers, and administrators responsible for the production, organised together in a very hierarchical system. It seems likely that the workshops were organised on a model close to the foundries of Houma in the north. Technique, design and factory organisation interacted in the production of bronzes, which appears to be the result of a collective effort coordinating the interventions of each person at a particular moment of the process.¹²

Until the fifth century BC, ritual bronzes were the dominant mode of expression in visual and material culture, and as such they exerted considerable influence on all other areas of artistic production. For example, the main motifs on the lacquer coffin of the early seventh century BC reproduced in Figure 6(a) belong to the same repertoire of motifs as contemporary bronze vessels, such as those seen in Figure 6(b). The artists responsible for the decoration of the coffin painstakingly used their brush to copy the same motifs without taking advantage of the fluid nature of the lacquer. This coffin, made for the wife of a ruler of a small principality in Central China, is one among several other comparable examples that are provided by the archaeological records.¹³ Until the fifth century BC,

¹² Bagley (1993) and Bagley (1995).

¹³ The following examples of lacquer decoration inspired by bronze decoration are taken from different sites dated between the eighth and the fifth centuries BC, distributed over a broad area of northern China, from Shandong to Gansu. Due to bad conditions of preservation, few lacquer wares have been excavated in the Central Plain and its periphery. However, the dating and location of the sites mentioned hereafter tend to support the argument in favour of a situation shared by the artistic production of the main principalities. The sites are listed according to their location, starting from the east. In the Shandong peninsula, mid-sixth-century tombs M 4 and M 6 at Haiyang Zuiziqian contained lacquer furniture and several fragments of objects with dragon motifs and geometric decoration (*Haiyang Zuiziqian* (2002), colour plate 17.1 and 23.1, 23.2). A fifth-century tomb at Linzi Langjiazhuang, Shandong province has provided lacquer trays and *dou* high footed cups with black on red or red on black lacquer decoration closely linked to bronze decoration (*Kaogu xuebao* (1977), 1, fig. 13, p. 82, fig. 28, p. 101, plate 16). By contrast, the fragment of a plate from the same tomb shows a new kind of decoration using lacquer as a painting medium (reproduced in *Kaogu xuebao* (1977), 1, fig. 14, p. 82). In Central China, a seventh- to sixth-century BC tomb at Luoyang Zhongzhoulu, in Henan (M 2415), contained the remains of the cover of a bamboo casket with a decoration that is reminiscent of bronze surface decoration (*Luoyang Zhongzhou lu* (1959), fig. 100, p. 128). In the most western

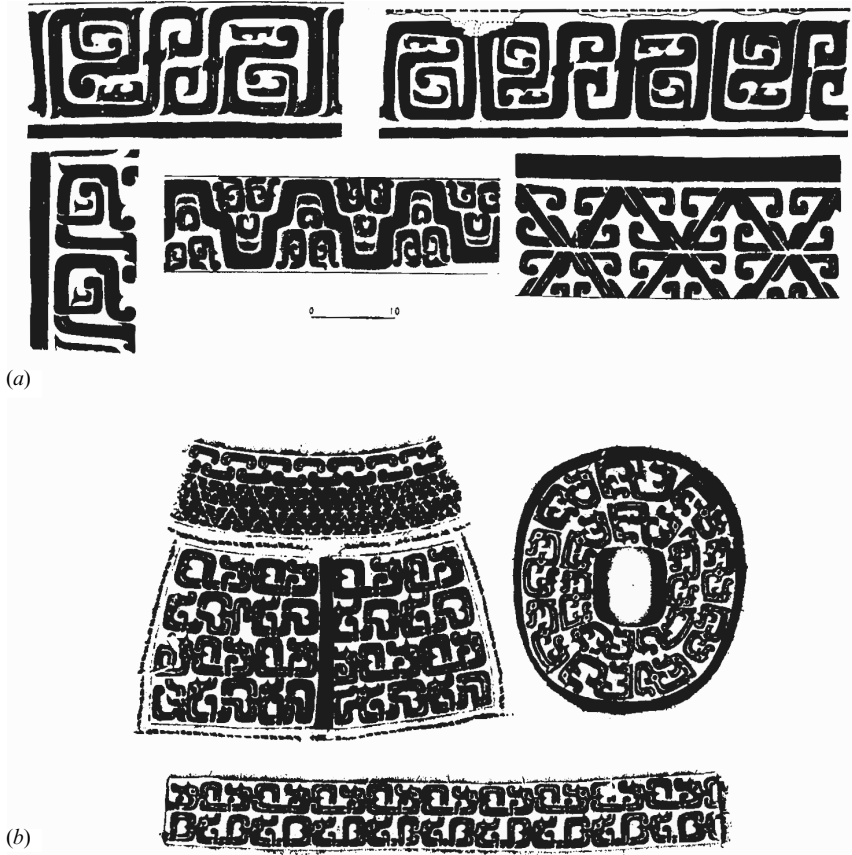


Figure 6. Comparison of motifs from a lacquer coffin (a) and rubbings of bronze motifs of vessels (b) from the tomb of Huang Meng Ji, wife of a prince of Huang. Site of Guangshan Baoxiangsi (Henan), c.700 BC. After *Kaogu* (1984), 4, fig. 6, p. 307 and fig. 22.1–3, p. 321.

part of the Zhou cultural sphere are located two main cemeteries of the Qin rulers. Although both had been severely plundered, they still contained lacquer objects or fragments of the highest interest. Tomb 2 at Lixian Dabaozishan in Gansu, presumably the tomb of Duke Wen of Qin who died in 716 BC contained a lacquer chest with dragon motifs in black against a red background inspired by bronze decoration, though less regular in their rendering (Zhu Zhongxi (2004), fig., p. 15). Two centuries later, the burial furniture of the tomb of Duke Jing of Qin (r. 576–537 BC) at Fengxiang comprised several lacquer vessels and objects decorated in the same style as the textured decoration so common on sixth-century ritual bronzes. See *Zhongguo qiqi quanji* (1997), figs. 32 and 33 (*gui* vessels), 35 (small plate), 38 (spatula), 43, 49–51 (fragments from several different objects).

most of the lacquer artefacts that are part of the burial furniture in tombs of the elites similarly show examples of decoration modelled on the bronze repertory. To this general domination of bronze decoration we find some exceptions. However, these can be explained as the result of the development of contacts and exchanges inside the Zhou cultural sphere and on its periphery. For example, from the tomb of a Duke of Qin, who died in the late sixth century BC in Shaanxi, comes an ornament carved in wood and lacquered (Fig. 7). Although the animal represented, a running boar, has all the characteristics of the animal style of the steppes, this object was clearly produced in a Chinese workshop.¹⁴ In fact, the long domination of bronze decoration over the arts was already weakening by the sixth century BC for several reasons. The contacts with non-Chinese populations living in the peripheral areas of the Chinese principalities are one such reason, and their effects may be seen also in the introduction of copper inlay decoration. It was models foreign to Chinese traditions that inspired the contrast of colours brought by the inlays.¹⁵

In the sixth and fifth centuries BC, bronze art experienced an extraordinary renewal that allowed it to keep its dominant role among the arts, even if a progressive decline of its influence was to be felt. The tomb of the Marquis Yi of Zeng, which I have already mentioned, dates to the late fifth century BC, when the influence of bronze art was challenged by new artistic interests. The furniture of the tomb reflects this turning point in the arts, between tradition and innovation. In continuity with the tradition, bronze ritual vessels and musical instruments for religious ceremonies constitute the main part of its furniture. A set of sixty-five bells on a stand used to accompany the rituals is a true masterpiece of the funerary and religious art of the mid-fifth century BC.¹⁶ This set is, however, one of the last to possess musical properties. In fact, shortly after the bells were made, the technique was lost, and most of the bells cast in the fourth century BC could no longer produce harmonious tones. This can be taken

¹⁴ Thote (2006).

¹⁵ Jacobson (1988) appropriately discusses the artistic interchange between early China and the nomad world of eastern Eurasia, showing how metal inlay reappeared in Chinese bronze casting during the sixth century BC (see pp. 203–8). The first use of appliqué-like inlays of copper can be dated to about the mid-sixth century BC, as exemplified by an oval shaped bronze box, two water containers from Tomb 2 and two wine jars from Tomb 3 at Xichuan Xiasi, Henan province, in a Chu cemetery. See respectively *Xichuan Xiasi Chunqiu Chu mu* (1991), fig. 115, p. 138, fig. 106, p. 130, and fig. 168, p. 227; and Thote (2000), pp. 145–9.

¹⁶ *Zeng Hou Yi mu* (1989), pp. 76–134; Falkenhausen (1993); Bagley (2005).

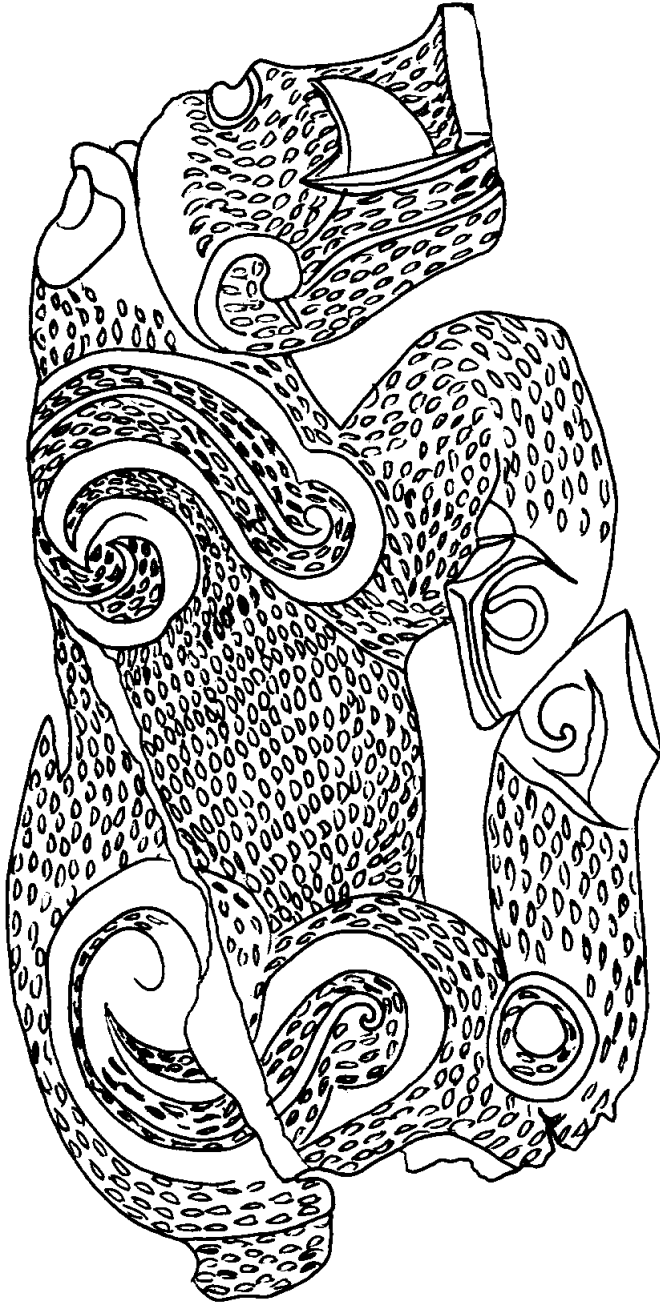


Figure 7. Fragment of a lacquer decoration on wood, from the tomb of the Duke Jing of Qin (r. 576–537 BC), at Fengxiang Nanzhihui (Shaanxi), c. mid sixth century BC. Dimensions unknown. Drawing by the author from *Zhongguo qitai quanji* (1997), fig. 46.

as a sign of the quick decline that the bronze workshops specialising in this particular kind of production underwent after 400 BC.

The burial items from the tomb reflect the taste of the Chu court, and include several artefacts made in the royal workshops, such as a pair of basins to cool or warm wine (Fig. 8). The surface decoration of the bronze, which is composed of small curls, commas in light relief, was invented around the mid-sixth century BC and remained in vogue for more than two centuries without change.¹⁷ On the other hand, the square shape of the basin and its cubic appendages are clearly inspired by wood carving, one of the sources from which bronze craftsmen took inspiration in the Chu kingdom.

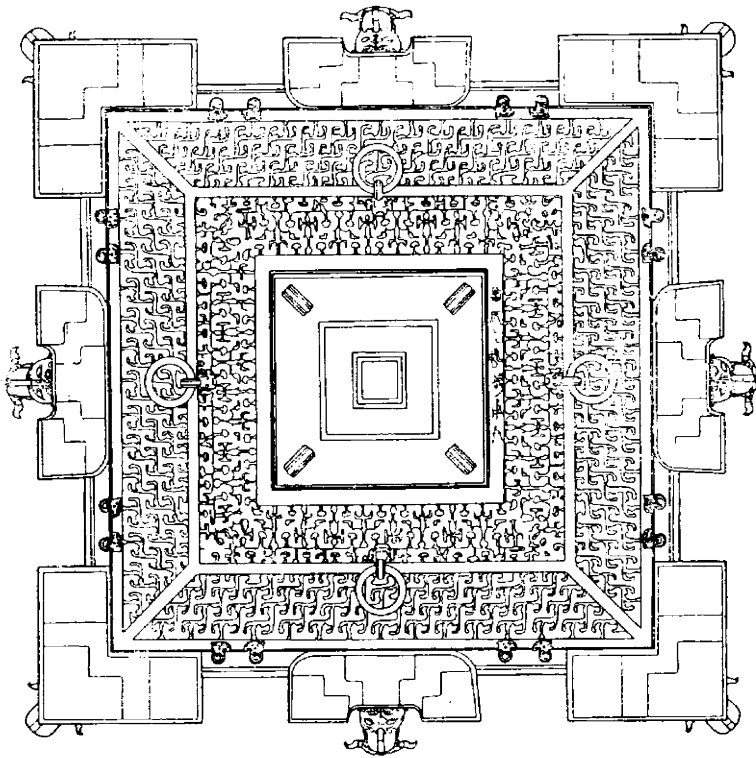
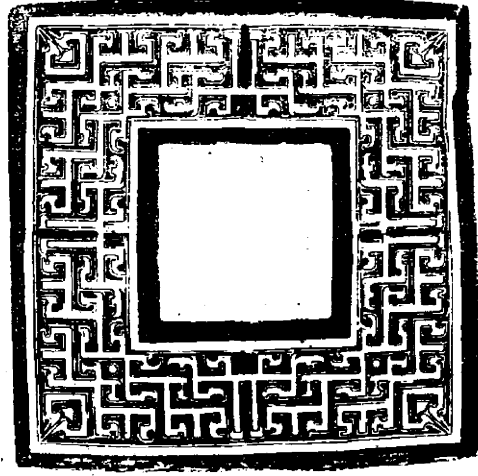
Two pairs of lidded cups were found in the eastern compartment of the tomb, placed close to the owner (Fig. 9).¹⁸ Given the fact that they were not included among the ritual items, they must have been made for the marquis's personal use. Yet, except for the heavy square handles, they are shaped like ritual bronze cups (Fig. 10). Moreover, one part of the decoration on the lacquer cup is modeled on the repetition of the tiny motifs so common on the bronzes. Furthermore, the decoration is framed by bands of motifs commonly used in copper inlay decoration, and the registers on the cup match well the traditional repetitive and geometric patterns of the bronzes (Fig. 11). Finally, the heavy appendages composing the handles also remind us of the dragons from the basin, even though they are rendered in a manner difficult to decipher appropriately. Only the bulging red eyes can guide us in our efforts to see the motifs as dragons.

Another exceptional bronze is a drum stand, also from the tomb of the marquis (Fig. 12).¹⁹ It is composed of eight elements assembled with tenon and mortise—as with more ordinary wooden examples. The drum

¹⁷ Jessica Rawson (1987), pp. 49–52, has articulated very precisely the defining features of southern bronze decoration.

¹⁸ The marquis Yi of Zeng was buried in the eastern compartment of the tomb, while the ritual furniture comprising a complete set of bronze vessels and musical instruments was deposited in the central compartment. The four lidded cups are stylistically very close. See *Zeng Hou Yi mu* (1989), pp. 368–9.

¹⁹ This bronze sculpture is often described as the representation of an auspicious crane, due to the combination of the deer antlers with the bird. Later sources would see a symbol of longevity related to immortals in this sculpture (*Zeng Hou Yi mu* (1989), p. 250). However, the cult of immortals was still unknown in the late fifth century BC, making such an interpretation ill-founded.



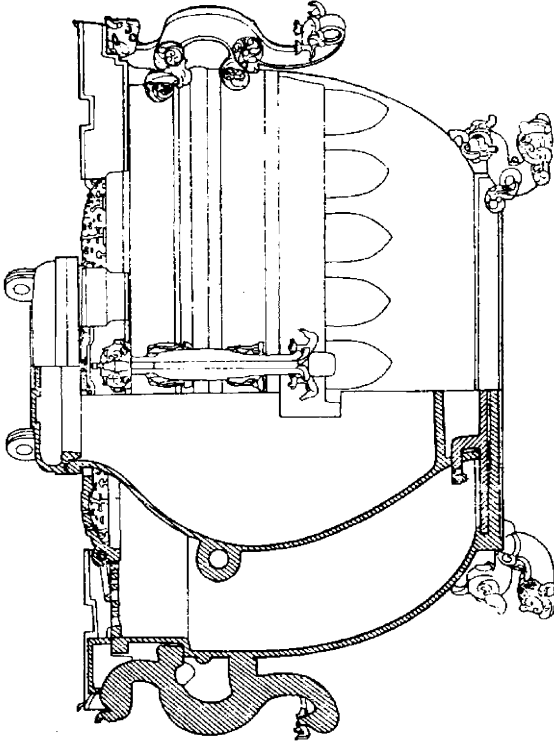


Figure 8. Square basin to cool or warm wine contained in a *fou* vessel, from Tomb 1 at Suixian Leigudum (Hubei) (tomb of Zeng Hou Yi). Bronze, mid fifth century BC (date of burial c.433 BC). Height 63.2 cm (basin), 51.8 cm (*fou*). After *Zeng Hou Yi mu (fou)*, fig. 122, p. 224 and fig. 88.4, p. 185 (rubbing of the lid from the *fou*).

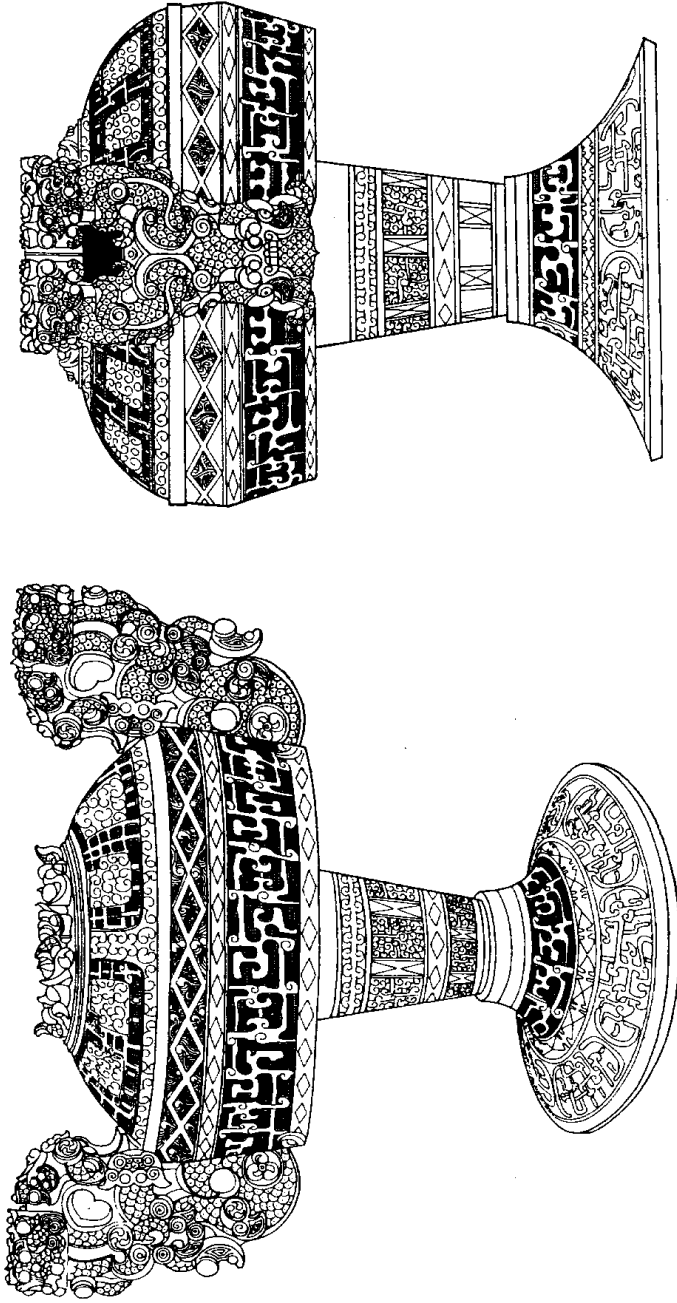


Figure 9. Cup, lacquered wood, from Tomb 1 at Suixian Leigudun, Hubei province (tomb of Zeng Hou Yi), mid fifth century BC (date of burial c. 433 BC). Height 24.3 cm. After *Zhanguo Zeng Hou Yi mu* (1984), p. 2-3.

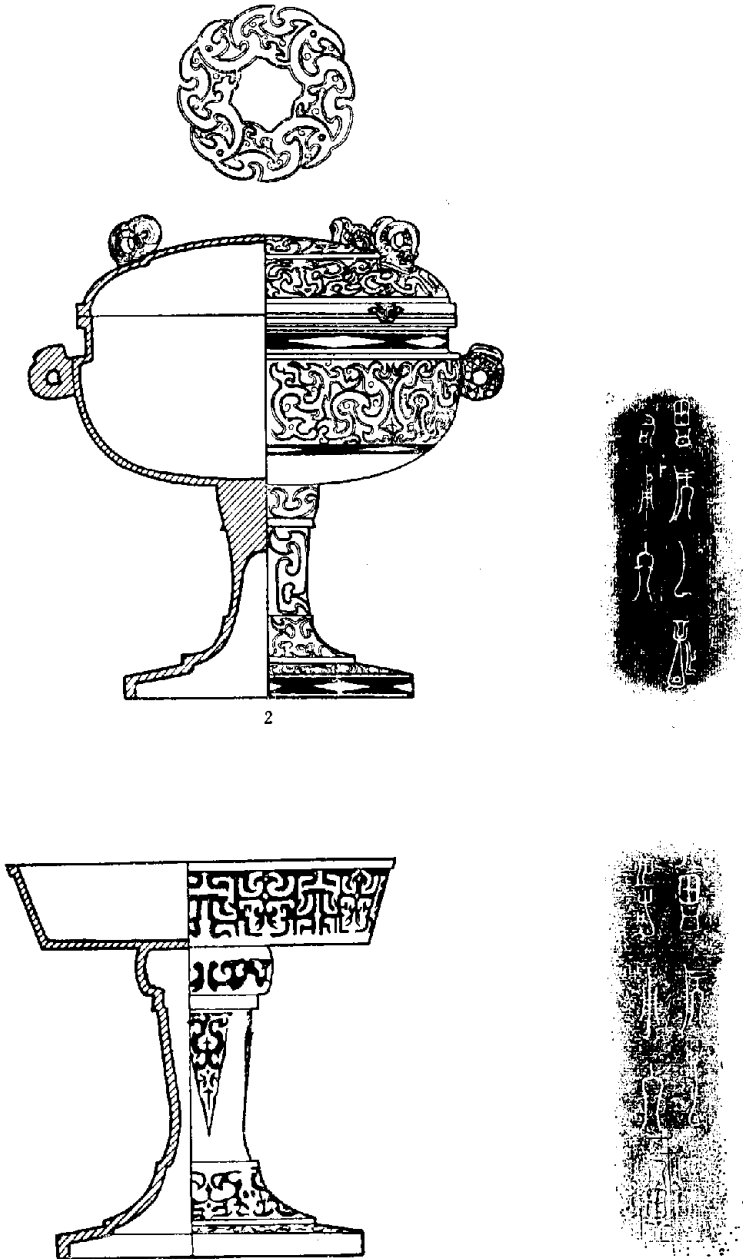


Figure 10. Two cups from the ritual set found in the central compartment of Tomb 1 at Suixian Leigudun, Hubei province (tomb of Zeng Hou Yi). Bronze inlaid with turquoise, mid fifth century BC (date of burial c.433 BC). Height 21.6 cm (top, from a pair) and 26.4 (below). After *Zeng Hou Yi mu* (1989), fig. 111, p. 212 and fig. 112.2, fig. 112.3 (rubblings of the inscriptions).

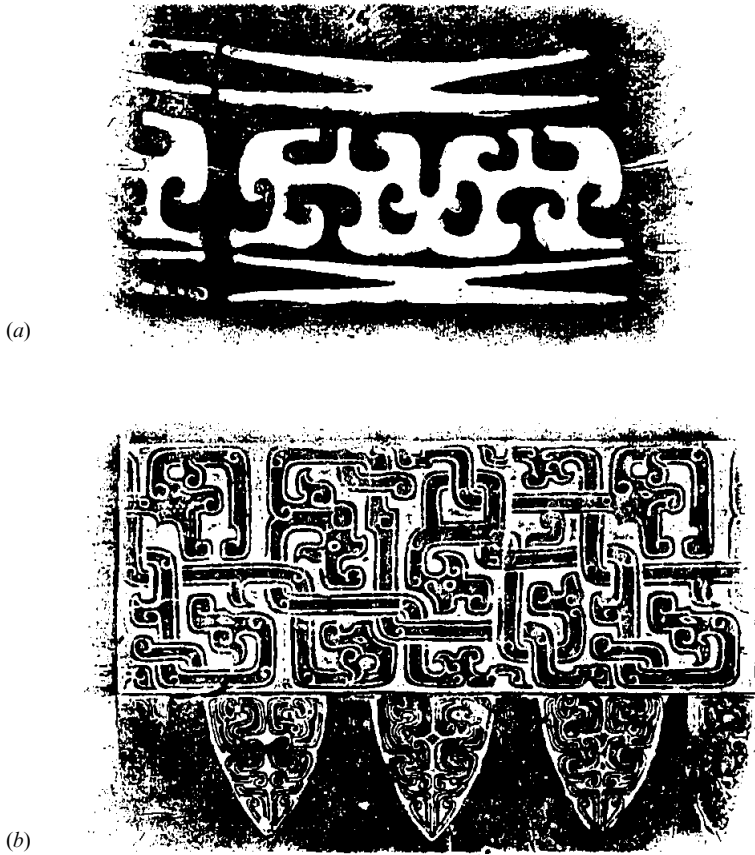


Figure 11. Inlay decoration (a) and surface bronze motifs (b) of ritual vessels from Tomb 1 at Suixian Leigudun (Hubei) (tomb of Zeng Hou Yi), mid fifth century BC (date of burial *c.*433 BC). After *Zeng Hou Yi mu* (1989), fig. 89.2, p. 187 (a) and fig. 83.4, p. 180 (b).

made with wood and leather had already begun to decay when it was discovered. It was suspended by rings at the two points of the antlers and at the beak of the bird. Although the shape of this object has so far proved unique, drum stands made of various zoomorphic elements combined together were often deposited in Chu tombs.²⁰ Not only were they functional, but they probably also possessed a symbolic meaning.

²⁰ On its function, see Thote (1987), *The Golden Age of Archaeology* (1999), pp. 296–8, *Music in the Age of Confucius* (2000), pp. 136–7. Several other drum-stands have been discovered in tombs of the Chu kingdom. In most of the cases, the stand is an animal (a reclining deer, for example), or a combination of animals (long-necked bird and tigers). See Gao Zhixi (2000), pp. 323–7.

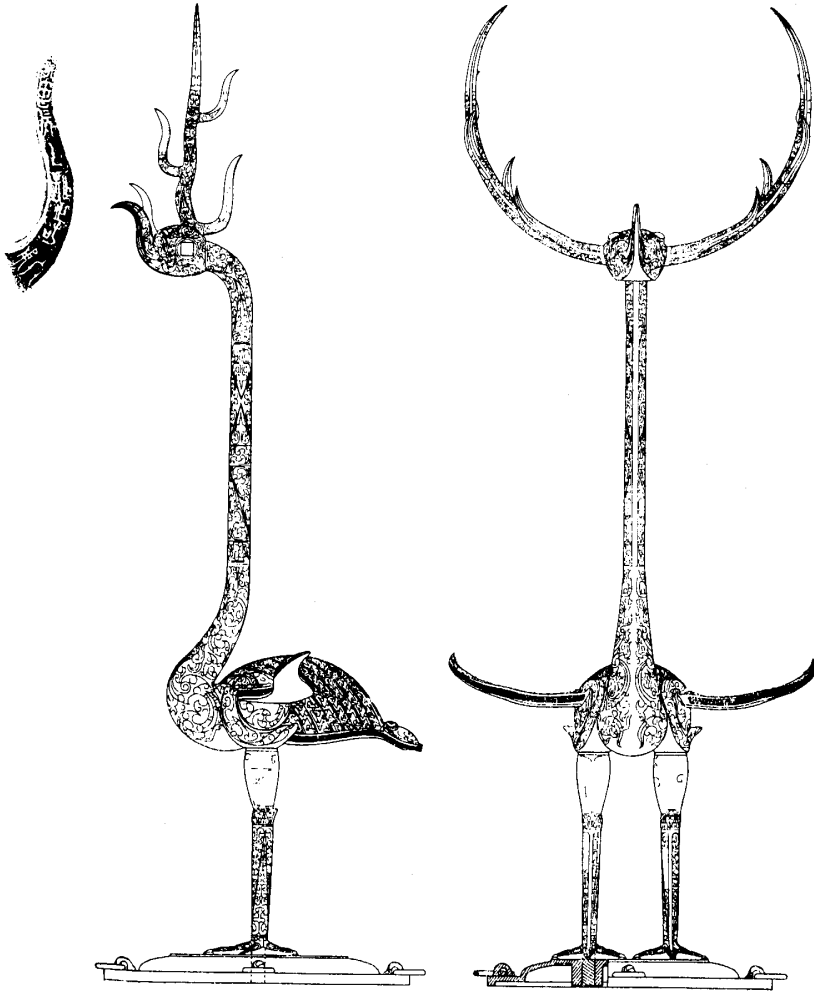


Figure 12. Drum stand, bronze, from Tomb 1 at Suixian Leigudun (Hubei) (tomb of Zeng Hou Yi), mid fifth century BC (date of burial c.433 BC). Height 143.5 cm. After *Zeng Hou Yi mu* (1989), fig. 147, p. 251.

All of the objects just reviewed, all from the tomb of the Marquis Yi of Zeng, exemplify the complex relationship, with mutual borrowings, that had been established between the two very different modes of artistic expression in bronze and lacquer by the fifth century BC. In itself, the existence of a relationship is not surprising, given that at any time we may find several correspondences in various arts that can define an overall style. However, the particular interest of the examples I have given is that

at this time, and even as late as the fourth century BC, borrowings were more likely to go from bronze to lacquer than the other way.

Yet another example from the tomb of the marquis is even more striking. The two encased coffins in which the deceased was buried show contrasting modes of decoration. On the walls of the smallest coffin the complex iconographic program is for the most part independent of bronze decoration. The paintings reproduced in Figure 13 show that lacquer craftsmen had at that time begun to exploit lacquer as an independent medium. When looking at the larger coffin, however, it appears that bronze decoration still exerted a strong influence on lacquer painting (Fig. 14). Its main motifs are careful copies of interlace decoration from bronze vessels and objects of the eighth or seventh century BC that were no longer in use in the fifth century BC.²¹ How can we explain such a phenomenon? It seems to me that as long as the traditional religion based on the cult of the ancestors and the use of ritual vessels was influential in the life of the elites, artists and craftsmen had few choices in their work, at least for religious art. Their creativity and their sources of inspiration were monopolised by the needs of the ancestral cult. Their artistic models, limited in number, guided their work in a certain direction. One may suppose that the lacquer workshops were located close to the bronze

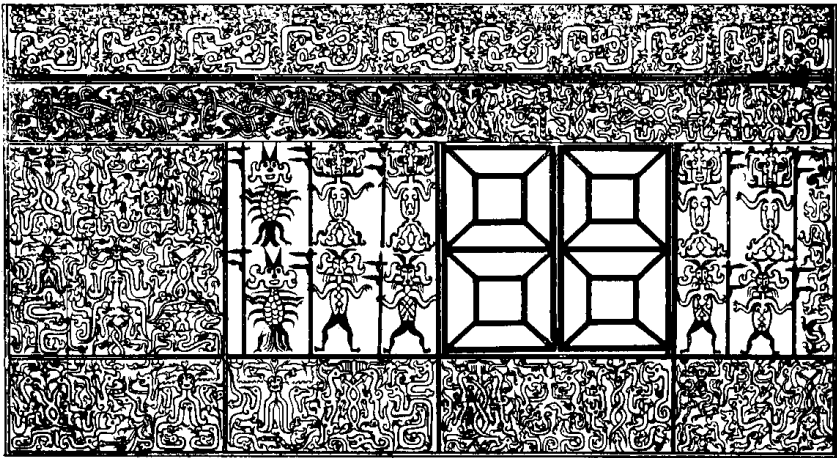


Figure 13. Lacquer decoration on one side of the coffin containing the remains of the marquis Yi of Zeng, from Tomb 1 at Suixian Leigudun (Hubei), mid fifth century BC (date of burial c.433 BC). Height 132 cm, Length 250 cm. After *Zeng Hou Yi mu* (1989), fig. 22, p. 39.

²¹ Thote (1991).

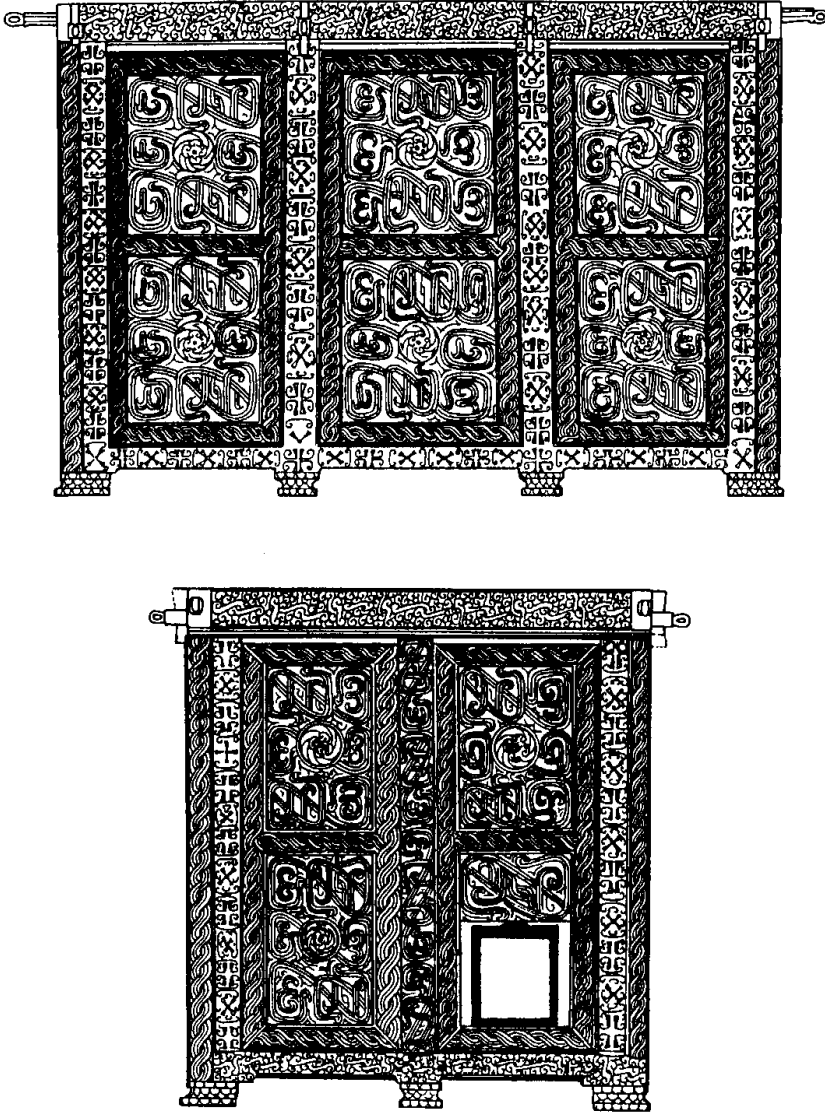


Figure 14. Lacquer decoration on the large coffin of the marquis Yi of Zeng, from Tomb 1 at Suixian Leigudun (Hubei), mid fifth century BC (date of burial *c.*433 BC). Height 2.19 m, Length 320 cm. After *Zeng Hou Yi mu* (1989), fig. 15, p. 25.

workshops and that both were placed under the authority of the royal administration. Consequently, their production was intimately linked. This implies also that their organisation may have been very similar, with a strong hierarchy of specialised craftsmen and artists.²²

However, in ancient China it is difficult to make a clear distinction between the respective functions of ‘artists’ and ‘craftsmen’.²³ Even the finest bronzes come in pairs, such as the *fanghu* vessel from the sixth century BC in Figure 15. These two *fanghu* are almost identical to a number of vessels, also grouped in pairs, found in different tombs.²⁴ Although found in distant sites, they probably were all cast in the royal manufactories of Chu, following very close models.²⁵ Most of the bronzes were made in series and, despite their excellent craftsmanship and distinctive beauty, they had numerous duplicates. Therefore, the concept of uniqueness does not fit well with regard to the bronzes of the early part of the Eastern Zhou period, and under these conditions, it is difficult to distinguish clearly between artist and craftsman roles. The producers worked together in large workshops, in which each person was responsible for a precise task.²⁶ It is unlikely that anyone had the status of an individual artist, not even the designers who imagined the most outstanding pieces. Their creative work depended strongly on execution that involved numerous skilled craftsmen.

Compared with bronze workshops, lacquer workshops were smaller and could be run on a family scale, although they probably were not independent. One cannot conceive of the existence in these early times of a market. The basic organisation of the workshop was probably similar to that of bronze workshops. Whether in bronze or in lacquer, this art remained anonymous. We do not know a single artist’s or artisan’s name

²² Like the organisation described by Bagley (1993, 1995).

²³ Apparently, in ancient Greece and later in the West there was no verbal distinction between craft and art. However, sculpture and painting in ancient Greece can qualify as art. See Robertson (1991), pp. 2–3.

²⁴ Compare the pair of *fanghu* found in Tomb 1 at Xichuan Xiasi, in western Henan (*Xichuan Xiasi Chunqiu Chu mu* (1991), figs. 63–4, pp. 73–4), with a pair of *fanghu* from Xinzheng Lijialou, in central Henan (*Zhongguo qingtongqi quanji. Dong Zhou 1* (1998), no. 23), mid sixth century BC, and with the slightly later pair from the tomb of the Marquis Shen of Cai in Shouxian, Anhui province (*Shouxian Cai Hou mu chutu yiwu* (1956), pls. 7 and 8), late sixth century BC.

²⁵ So (1983).

²⁶ On labour division in bronze workshops, see Bagley (1993).

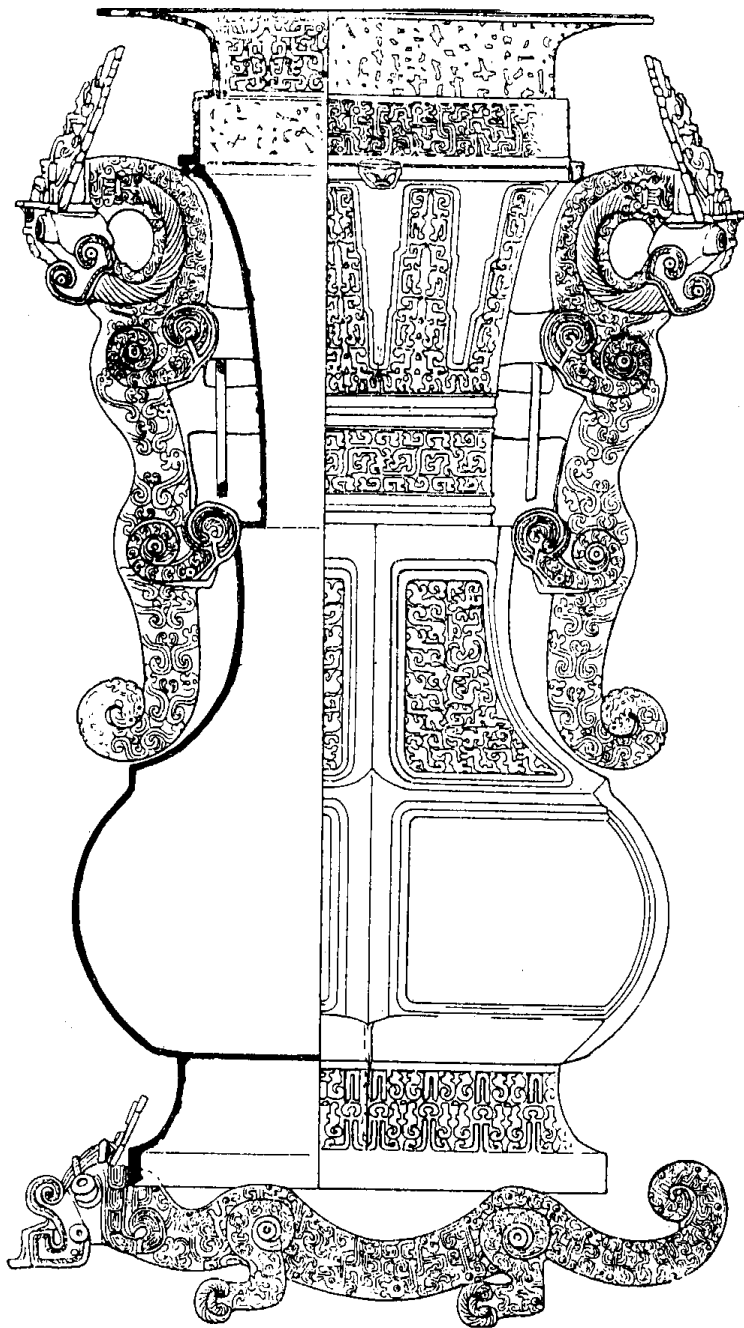


Figure 15. *Fanghu* vessel from a pair, from Tomb 1 at Xichuan Xiasi (Henan). Bronze, c. mid sixth century BC. Height 79 cm. After *Xichuan Xiasi Chunqiu Chu mu* (1991), figs. 63–4, pp. 73–4.

before the fourth century BC.²⁷ None of the objects I have shown has a signature. No textual sources from the Eastern Zhou period have supplied a name.

The only names that we find in inscriptions on bronzes are those of the patrons for whom the bronzes were cast (Fig. 5). In the case of Marquis Yi of Zeng, more than two hundred bronze inscriptions give his name (for example, on the bronzes reproduced in Figures 8, 10, 12, 18).²⁸ Most of them were cast with the objects, though some were engraved with a needle.²⁹ We know the name of the marquis; we have, however, absolutely no idea of the names of any of the individuals who produced these extraordinary works of art. Who indeed were the men who created these masterpieces? Chinese antiquity in no way can be compared with Greece and its numerous artists, such as Phidias or Euphronios, whose names are known from their signatures or from specific mentions in textual sources. The masterpieces of famous sculptors were copied again and again in such a way that it is still possible to reconstitute the individual style of an artist such as Praxiteles.³⁰ Although we refer to these men as artists, Greek potters and painters were both considered artisans. They were placed in a hierarchical position, the owner of the workshop being

²⁷ For an investigation into the bronze craftsmanship of Qin centered on the officers in charge of the workshops, see Sumiya Sadatoshi (1982). In fact, it is only in the first century BC that the name of the caster who organized the casting of a bronze appeared inscribed on a vessel for the first time. The name 'Chengdu' appears in several inscriptions found on excavated lacquers of the Warring States period (Shen Zhongchang and Huangjiaxiang 1987), and of the Han period (Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens 1990).

²⁸ An exact count is still difficult to establish in spite of the numbers provided in the report. However, the total number of inscriptions mentioning the name of the tomb's owner is very high. According to the archaeologists, eighty-seven ritual bronzes (eighty-nine by my count) of a total of one hundred and seventeen have inscriptions. To these bronzes, including vessels and accessories of all kinds, weapons (38 dagger-axes *ge*, 2 halberds *ji*), bells (45), and various other items such as the drum-stand in Fig. 12 must be added. In many cases, a vessel has two inscriptions, one on its wall and one on its lid. See *Zeng Hou Yi mu* (1989), pp. 186–250 *passim* (vessels, accessories, sculpture), pp. 261–3, 284–6 (weapons), pp. 533–48 (bells).

²⁹ With the exception of a *zun* and a basin, all the bronze vessels were cast for the marquis. In fact, when the *zun* and the basin became the property of the marquis, an earlier inscription was partly erased to change the name of the owner. There is a high probability that these two bronzes were cast in the late sixth century or early fifth century BC. See *Zeng Hou Yi mu* (1989), pp. 228–32, 234. The style of their decoration, probably cast using the lost wax technique, is close to the style of a bronze altar found in Tomb 2 at Xichuan Xiasi, dating to about the mid sixth century BC (*Xichuan Xiasi Chunqiu Chu mu* (1991), pp. 126, 128). Many weapons belonging to two other marquises of Zeng were deposited in the tomb of Zeng Hou Yi.

³⁰ Robin Osborne (1998), pp. 225–35, claims that with Praxiteles the artist's life and his work became conjoined, following a development that led to the 'invention of the artist' in mid fourth-century BC Greece.

considered as above the painters.³¹ Rather often, it happened that both wrote or inscribed their names on their works. These signatures allowed the customers to identify them, a requirement in a context of sharp competition between workshops and also between potters and between painters.³²

In ancient China, there was no room for individuals involved in the production process to be acknowledged as artists. Only the artefacts supply information on the producers of the early period. Even then, it is still impossible to identify the personality of any of them through their creations.³³ Today, in the best cases, we can only determine regional or local characteristics of bronze, lacquer or jade production. The human figure was central in the art of ancient Greece: historical figures, heroes and social images of people, as well as representations of gods who looked like men and women (Fig. 16). In the case of China, there is nothing comparable. Images of humans were not highlighted until the fifth century BC, and the images provided by the first pictorial bronzes do not show any individual to whom we could put a name (Fig. 17). No names were attached to the hieratic guardians in ceremonial robes carrying a sword shown in Figure 2. In fact, these remain anonymous figures created by men who remain anonymous to us. Probably, the names of some producers were known in a rather limited circle. However, the conditions in which artworks were produced did not allow them to work independently and be recognised as individuals. Lacquer, jade and bronze workshops were attached to the palaces of the main elite families. They needed numerous skilled and specialised workers organised in a strict hierarchy, and they required very costly raw materials that only well-organised networks could supply. In addition to these specific conditions of artistic production, the fundamentally religious nature of this production suggests that the mention of artists' names had to be avoided.

³¹ As revealed by several features, in particular their signatures, although the potters' names were presumably written by the painters. Some potters were simultaneously painters. Also, in place of the potters, the workshop's owners may have had their names written on the products created under their direction. See Hemelrijk (1991). It seems that painters' personal pride waned by the early fifth century BC (Williams (1991), p. 117).

³² Hemelrijk (1991), p. 256 mentions that the confusing associations between painters and potters were the rule rather than the exception in the late sixth-century BC Attic workshops.

³³ By contrast, in Greek vases, even though numerous pottery painters are nameless, their styles and themes tell us something of their artistic personality. It is possible to distinguish the work of individual painters, to identify the workshops, and to trace the connections between vase painters. Simultaneously, the images they created introduce us into the distinctive culture, society and ideas of the places where the pots were produced.



Figure 16. Attic red-figure cup. Theseus, Athena and Amphitrit, signed by Euphronios, potter, and attributed to Onesimos, painter. Earthenware, c. 500–490 BC, Diam. 39,9 cm. After *Chefs-d'oeuvre de la céramique grecque dans les collections du Louvre* (1994), no. 50, p. 111.



Figure 17. Decor of a pictorial bronze with a hunting scene on a chariot, rubbing. Fifth century BC. After Chen Fangmei (1989), fig. 77.

Around 450 BC, a century after the casting of the tripods from Xiasi, the Marquis Yi of Zeng had a series of nine *ding* vessels of the same kind cast for himself. Though smaller—they are about 45 centimeters in diameter—they still express the power of a wealthy vassal of the Chu king (Fig. 18).³⁴ The inscription found on each is much shorter, saying that the vessels were cast for Zeng Hou Yi for his eternal use. The decoration is less creative than on the earlier *shengding*. And this general tendency is to be felt not only in the ritual bronzes of the Chu kingdom, but also in all the principalities that composed China in the last two centuries of the Eastern Zhou period. Tianxingguan tomb 2 near Jiangling, dated to around 350–330 BC, contained *shengding* of much lower quality, and without any inscriptions (Fig. 19).³⁵ In fact, after a flourishing development of the bronze workshops in the sixth and fifth centuries BC, the production of the ritual vessels that had been so essential for the ancestral cult decreased substantially. In particular, the sets made for the tombs were either cast without any care or were replaced by earthenware models of vessels.³⁶

The potters were trained to imitate the shape and decoration of the bronzes. Even wealthy tomb owners would accept such substitutes instead

³⁴ Zeng Hou Yi mu (1989), vol. 1, pp. 192–6; vol. 2, colour plate 7.2; plate 51.

³⁵ Jingzhou Tianxingguan er hao Chu mu (2003), pp. 42–51; colour plates 10, 11; and plates 6–11. Although the examples used in my argument (Figs. 4, 18, 19) all come from the Chu kingdom and its periphery, examples taken from central or northern China would lead to the same conclusions. Compare the ritual vessels from Houma cast when the quality of the workshops was at its best with the ritual vessels of king Cuo of Zhongshan (*Taiyuan Jinguo Zhao qin mu* (1996); *Cuo mu—Zhanguo Zhongshan guo guowang zhi mu* (1996)).

³⁶ On the development of *mingqi* vessels of ceramics or metal, by definition of low quality, see Falkenhausen (2006), pp. 302–6.

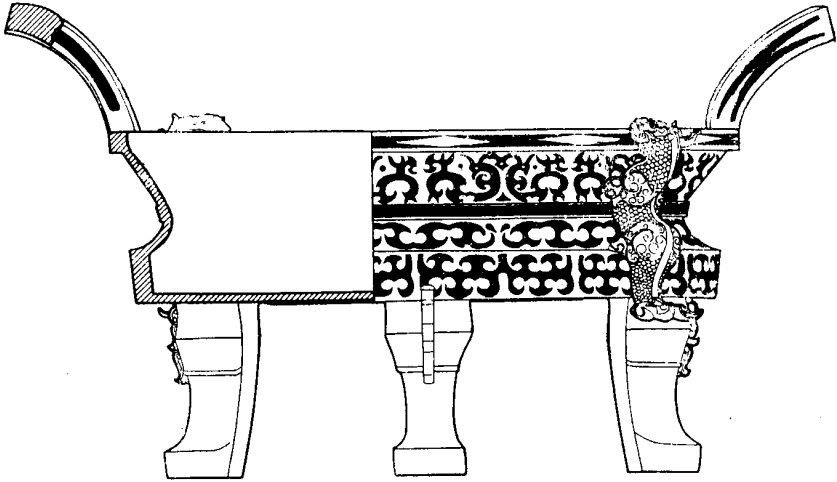


Figure 18. *Shengding* tripod, from Tomb 1 at Suixian Leigudun (Hubei). Bronze, mid fifth century BC (date of burial c.433 BC). Height 35.2 cm. After *Zeng Hou Yi mu* (1989), fig. 96, p. 194.

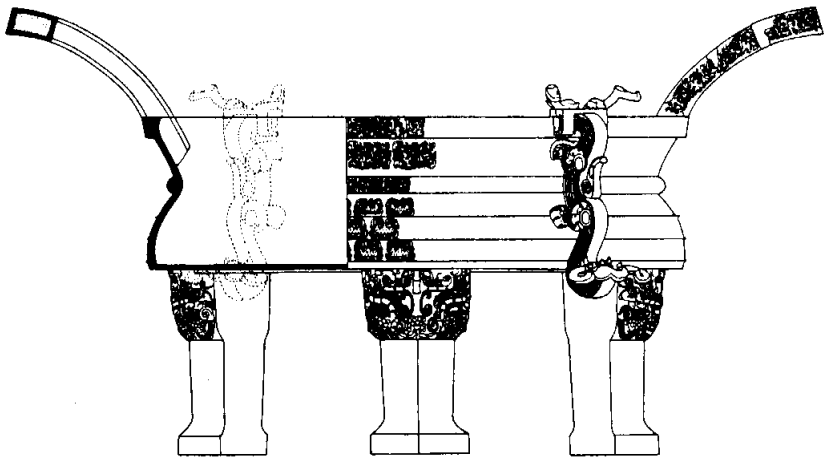


Figure 19. *Shengding* tripod, from Tomb 2 at Jingzhou Tianxingguan (Hubei). Bronze, c.330 BC. Height 42 cm. After *Jingzhou Tianxingguan er hao Chu mu* (2003), fig. 26, p. 44.

of real bronze vessels. Also, defective bronzes with holes in their sides were put into tombs. In several cases, their surface was not smoothed, nor had the earth remaining from the mould section been wiped away. This major shift in the quality of burial ritual vessels may have provoked a substantial change in the scale and organisation of bronze production.

Indeed, at the same moment, some bronze workshops specialised in the production of luxurious objects for daily life, such as tables, belt hooks, lamps, food containers, and dishes (Fig. 20).

What happened between the fifth and the fourth centuries? In less than a century, the nature of artistic production changed all at once. After having been mainly limited to religious expression, art turned to categories in which new forms of sensibility could be expressed. These dramatic changes make the fourth century BC a key period in the development of the arts of ancient China. In fact, in terms of creativity, from that period on lacquers tended to play an influential role comparable to the role bronzes had played in earlier times, when they were the main source of inspiration for artists.³⁷

Earlier craftsmen had not been unaware of the potential qualities of lacquer. However, once they understood these properties more fully, then the relationship between bronze art and lacquer craftsmanship tended to reverse, and this change can be taken as a sign of a major break in the artistic evolution of pre-imperial China. The lacquer box in Figure 21 comes from a tomb that can be dated to 316 BC.³⁸ In several regards, this object is a landmark in the development of the arts. On the side of the cover, a register is painted with scenes representing an embassy sent from one state to another (total length of the register: 87.4 cm, height 5.2 cm). It comprises five scenes (Fig. 22):

- (1) the chariot of the ambassador being driven in the countryside;
- (2) servants announcing his arrival and a man kneeling on the soil to greet the ambassador;
- (3) the host coming to greet the ambassador;
- (4) the encounter of the ambassador and the host while a chariot is waiting; and

³⁷ Although I assume that lacquer shapes and decoration tended to influence the production of bronze vessels in the fourth and third centuries BC, and more broadly played a significant role in the development of the arts, I agree that other sources such as textile designs and embroidery became influential around the same time, as Roderick Whitfield reminded me (on the influence of textile designs, see Mackenzie (1999)). However, these other sources were by far of secondary importance in the process. What is fundamental in this evolution is that bronze vocabulary and designs were no more the dominant expression in the arts once secular concerns replaced the earlier preoccupation with ritual functions (Lawton (1982), pp. 20–3, 181–90). Conversely, the renewal of bronze designs that occurred in the fourth century BC came from several sources, among which lacquer was the most important.

³⁸ *Baoshan Chu mu* (1991). On Chu lacquer, see Hou Dejun (1995), pp. 194–250.

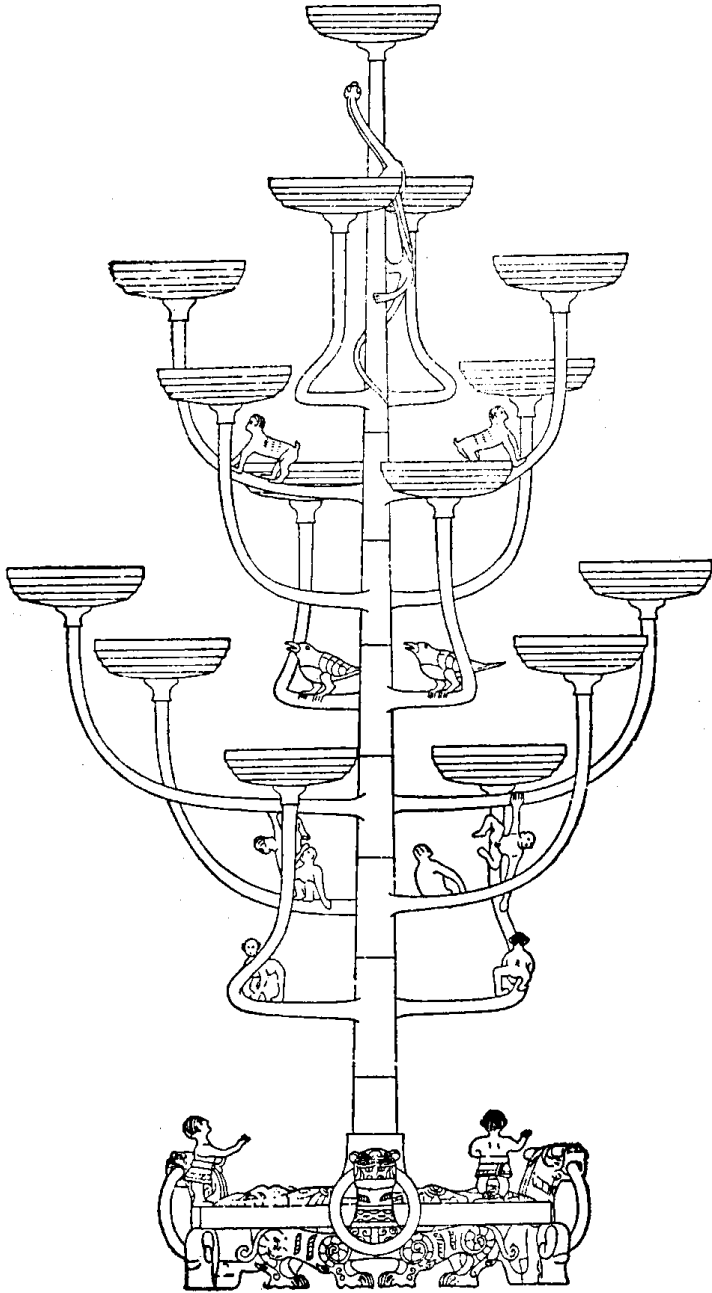


Figure 20. Lamp, from the tomb of King Cuo of Zhongshan at Pingshan (Hebei). Bronze, late fourth century BC. After *Cuo mu—Zhanguo Zhongshan guo guowang zhi mu* (1996), fig. 48A, p. 134.



Figure 21. Box *lian*, from Jingmen Baoshan Tomb No. 2 (Hubei). Dry lacquer technique, c. late fourth century BC (date of burial: 316 BC). After *Wenwu* (1988), 5: colour plate 1.2.

(5) the countryside symbolised by wild boars running between two willows (this scene framed by trees marks the beginning and the end of the series).

The event must have been important since all the stages are illustrated, from departure to arrival. It probably had a historical value, or at least was inspired by a story, now lost. The artist has introduced two dimensions in his painting: the immaterial notion of time and the physical sense of space.³⁹ On the one hand, the painting comprises four successive moments that are each framed by trees, like the scroll paintings of later centuries. On the other hand, the artist has tried to use three-dimensional space and a natural setting. An allusion to nature is given by the willows that are among the first trees to be represented in ancient China. Flying birds—presumably wild geese flying in couples—suggest the sky while the wind seems to blow through the branches and leaves. Space is also suggested in the representation of the chariots, with the three superimposed horses, and the three men in the box of the chariot, one in front, one behind, and the third seen from the back. Along the road there are

³⁹ Wu Hung (1999), pp 705–6; Thote (1999), pp. 206–10.

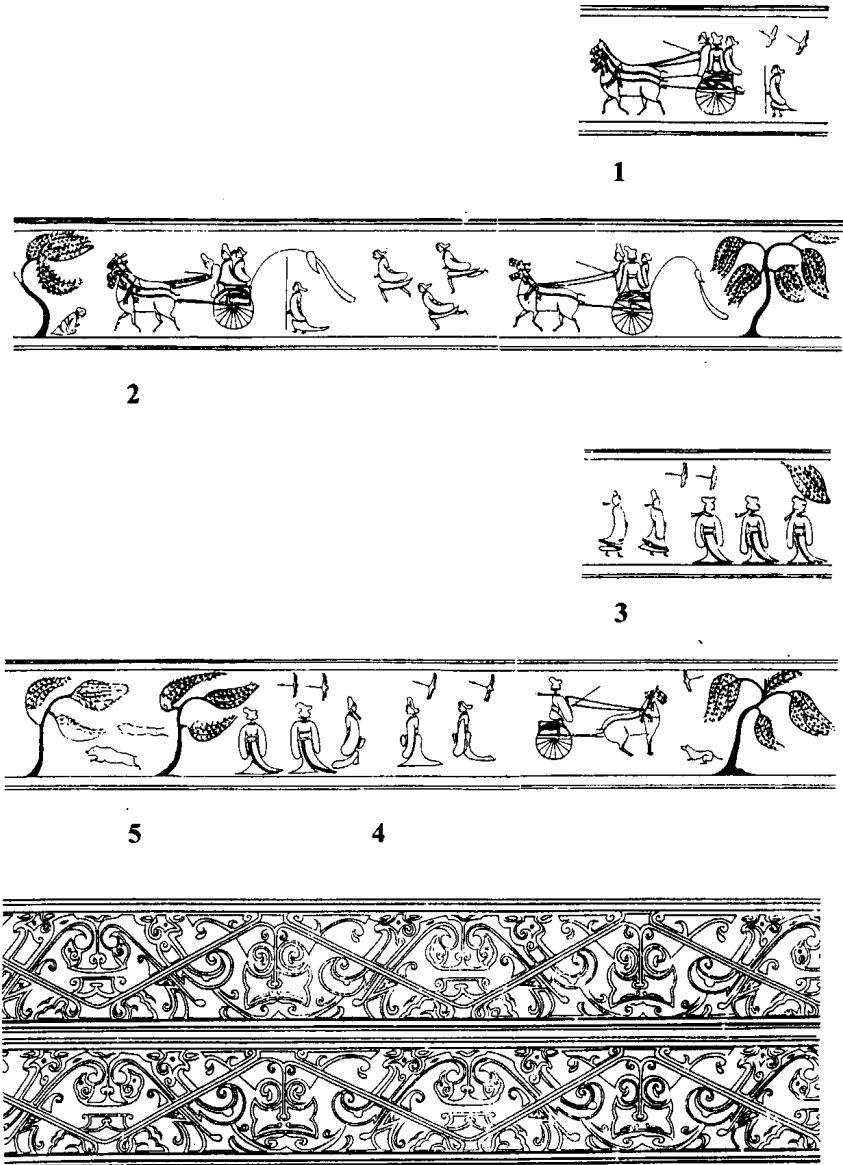


Figure 22. Detail of the designs on the lacquer box from Jingmen Baoshan Tomb No. 2 (Hubei). After *Baoshan Chu mu* (1991), p. 144–5, figs. 89 (B).

several people who also are seen from the back. Compared with earlier pictorial bronzes (Fig. 17), many innovations can be seen here. The box belongs to the luxury items of its time, and the most advanced techniques contributed to the manufacture of this object. The core of dry lacquer is one among very few examples found in Chu tombs. To achieve the painting, it was necessary to produce different colours with natural pigments mixed with oil, or in a few cases with raw lacquer. At least seven colours were used, which is nearly the widest range found on any lacquerware from that time. The background is in black, and most of the painting was done without using line drawing.

By the mid-fourth century BC, at the same time as painting was invented, wood carving began to reveal a sensibility previously unknown. On the small screen in Figure 23 a large number of different animals, more than fifty, has been represented together: snakes, frogs, deer and birds. This is an allegory of life and death seen through the dangers of life. Several creatures, either prey or predators, are assembled on the screen, and all the combinations show different moments of the fights in which the animals are engaged. Some of the snakes are ready to swallow up frogs or bite deer, while others have already been seized by birds. On the base, interwoven snakes make a compact composition. A closer look shows that these snakes are covering the body of supine birds that they have probably just killed. By fixing all these dramatic moments where life and death are in balance, the artist wanted to create emotion in the viewers. Animals in combat had appeared in Chinese art earlier. However, on such a screen the psychological relationship between artist and viewers is much stronger than before.

It seems that the artists had realised for the first time that they possessed the power to create all kinds of emotion through their works, such as fear and joy. For example, the lamp in Figure 20 shows monkeys playing in a tree while a child is throwing something up to them.⁴⁰

At the same time, the lacquer designers explored new avenues in the decors they created. In particular, they invented geometric compositions based on contrasting effects of colours in such a way that it is sometimes difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish basic motifs from the

⁴⁰ Bagley (2006) has shown that the imaginary animals of the fifth century BC and later, testify to a fundamental change of character from their predecessors. He argues that an influence from the steppes and the Near East provoked this change, in which the animals take on a more familiar appearance.

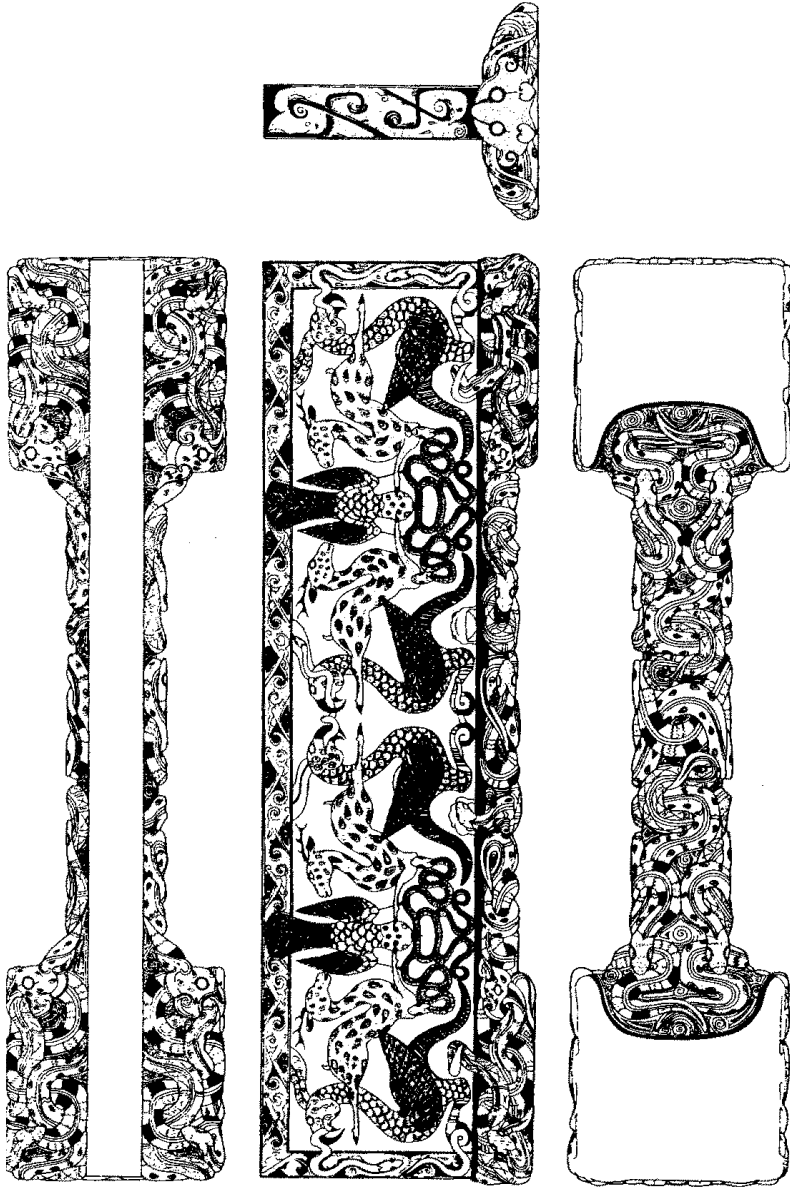


Figure 23. Screen, from Jiangling Wangshan Tomb 1 (Hubei). Painted lacquer on wood, c. 330–320 BC. Height 15 cm, Length 51.8 cm. After *Jiangling Wangshan Shazhong Chu mu* (1996), fig. 66.

background.⁴¹ The lacquer decoration became extremely inventive, and it seems that this inventiveness can be seen as the very beginning of a trend toward pure ornamentation.

Several categories of objects exhibit evidence of the development of a taste for decorative arts. These new lacquer décors prompted the bronze artists to invent techniques that would render the fluidity of the brush on the surface decoration of the bronzes, as well as the contrasts of colours of the lacquer decoration (Fig. 24).⁴² From then on, lacquer art would provide the visual cues for the bronze decoration, and also in some cases for shapes. In fact, in the fourth century BC the lacquer craftsmen not only found new methods to produce several different colours, but they also adopted techniques that allowed wood to be bent into cylindrical forms made with thin walls, and invented dry lacquer, using cloth to replace wood for the core of the containers.⁴³ The numerous properties of lacquers, and specifically the fluidity of designs made with the brush, prompted bronze artisans to imitate the new styles with the help of novel inlay techniques that could introduce contrasts of colours and likewise give the illusion of brushstrokes. To imitate lacquer painting, bronze craftsmen had to solve several technical problems: how to adapt the designs to a round surface; how to create contrasting colours; how to give a natural fluidity to the shapes of the inlays; and, finally, how to produce a smooth surface. Therefore, they invented specific inlay techniques based on copper, silver or gold wires, to which semi-precious stones could be added. Strikingly, even if one can define the style of the lacquers and the bronzes, no two pieces are exactly alike. The inventiveness shown by these designs is in startling contrast to the standardised bronze production for the ritual vessels of the same period. Indeed the taste for ornament that developed during the fourth and third centuries BC initiated a flourishing development of styles and techniques.

It seems, too, that lacquer and bronze workshops from the late Warring States period on did not function in the same way as in earlier times. All the connections between bronzes and lacquer wares point to a complete renewal of the sources of inspiration for bronze decoration.

⁴¹ Some of these designs can be labelled as 'optical games' or 'optical effects' (Thote (1996), pp. 159 and 161). On the relationship between figure and ground, see Lawton (1982), p. 20, Thote (2006), pp. 353–6.

⁴² On inlay decoration of the late Eastern Zhou period, see So (1980, 1995).

⁴³ Garner (1979), pp. 34–8, Hou Dejun (1995), pp. 219–26. In fact, at least two different traditions of lacquer craftsmanship in the Warring States period can be identified, located in Qin and Chu respectively (Thote 2006).



Figure 24. *Zun* vessel, from Jiangling Wangshan Tomb 2 (Hubei). Bronze with inlaid patterns inspired by lacquer decoration, c.330–320 BC. Height 17.1 cm, Diam. 24.7 cm. After Jiangling Wangshan Shazhong Chu mu (1996), fig. 91, p. 135.

Once the bronze workshops were no longer mainly confined by the casting of ritual vessels and related objects, artists became free to look for new sources of inspiration. They emulated several different artistic traditions that probably expressed a greater freedom since they were associated with the secular arts. At the very least, the extremely great variety of the arts during the fourth and third centuries BC seems to indicate that artists benefited from an environment that was very different from standardised workshops of earlier periods such as those at Houma, opening new avenues for exploration. One sign of a significant departure from the tradition can be found in the appearance of artisans' names on objects in the late fourth or early third century BC.⁴⁴ These names were not added in order to vaunt the work of the craftsmen, as in the case of a signature. On the contrary, they were meant to make the artisans responsible for their work, sometimes at the cost of their lives. This was a mechanism imposed by their superiors to control the quality of craftsmanship. In the same spirit, bamboo slips from a tomb which is dated to 217 BC reproduce the texts of laws that regulated craftsmen's work in the Qin kingdom.⁴⁵ It seems to me that this system of control by which individual names were provided on manufactured objects may have been created precisely because artists and craftsmen had already begun to enjoy a relative freedom in their work or in the trade of their products.⁴⁶ Moreover, such inscriptions testify to a significant departure from the former conditions of manufactured work. Probably, artists began to be involved in the creation of the designs, while craftsmen had to adapt these designs to a large number of shapes, and to make use of all kinds of techniques. The fourth century BC, then, appears to be the stage in Chinese art history when

⁴⁴ Shen Zhongchang and Huangjiaxiang (1987). The phenomenon increased during the Western Han period and culminated at the end of the first century BC, as indicated by several objects found at Lolang in Korea, and in several other places. One ear cup dated to AD 4, found in Lelang in North Korea and now in the British Museum, bears an inscription recording the date, the location of the workshop, the techniques used, the name of each artisan according to his specialty, and the name of the administrators of the workshop. For lacquer wares with marks of the Han period, see Umehara Sueji (1943), Yu and Li (1975), Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens (1990), pp. 525–7. On the history of the Qin and Han workshops in Shu commandery, see Barbieri-Low (2001).

⁴⁵ Yunmeng Shuihudi Qin mu Bianxiezu (1981); Shuihudi Qin Mu Zhujian Zhengli Xiaozu (2001); Hülseve (1985).

⁴⁶ During the Qin period, in addition to the governmental factories private workshops also existed. The state factories of the Guanghan and Shu commanderies originally were private workshops during the Qin period. They became state owned around 140 BC. They produced lacquers, and bronze elements with gold and silver inlays for lacquers, mirrors, containers. See Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens (1990).

artists began to depart from craftsmen, gaining a status that allowed them to create with a certain degree of freedom.

Note. I wish to express my gratitude to the British Academy, and in particular to Professor Dame Jessica Rawson, for inviting me to give this lecture. Helpful comments have been made by the audience, as well as on two earlier occasions by several scholars at Princeton University and Columbia University where I presented different versions of this lecture. My paper also benefited from discussions with Robert Bagley and Jonathan Hay. To them all, I express my thanks.

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