TWO CHINESE BRONZE VESSELS

THE Museum has recently acquired through the generosity of a patron two antique bronze vessels of such rarity and importance that it seems appropriate in describing them to give readers of the Journal a brief account of the ancient art that they so admirably exemplify.

One of the most fascinating of the results which are beginning to accrue from the scientific study of China's ancient past has been the disclosure of a Bronze Age civilization in many ways strikingly similar to those which once flourished in Europe and western Asia. Most of our knowledge has perforce been gained from a perusal of the ancient Chinese written records, a few of them contemporaneous with the life they describe, but most of them dating from a time long afterward, when continuity of historical contact or even of tradition had long died out. It is this fact which renders so precious the few relics of that old-world civilization that we possess.

Pre-eminent among these objects are the vessels of bronze which were employed in the religious observances of the time. Of surpassing interest for their own intrinsic strength and dignity and grace of form and decorative design, they are perhaps of even greater importance from the archaeological point of view. It is upon a first hand study of objects of this class as well as of the written records afore-mentioned, and of the various monuments of a remote antiquity remaining in China itself, that this necessarily incomplete study is based.

There is now little doubt that at a period something like five or six thousand years ago, when more favorable climatic conditions
prevailed than is now the case, a continuous area of settled agricultural communities extended right across Central Asia, from southern Russia to China. In this way there was brought about during prehistoric times a diffusion over an enormous area of some of the most fundamental elements of civilization, until peoples so widely sundered as the Chinese on the one hand and the tribes of the extreme west of Europe on the other had come to utilize the same food plants, the same domestic animals, and the same weapons, tools and utensils, including such important factors in progress as the cart and the plow. In this way is also to be explained the fact that so many of the religious beliefs and observances in both East and West are closely parallel, and often indeed actually identical.

This continuity of culture, however, whereby ideas and inventions were enabled to spread far and wide over the Eurasian continent, was broken up in time, largely through that decrease in the rainfall which appears to be still going on, and which has resulted in former flourishing communities being transformed into desolate wastes, where only occasional ruins, half buried in the sands, remain to tell of former happier conditions. Another factor which appears to have played an important part in interrupting the ancient though no doubt indirect and tribe-to-tribe communication between East and West was the acquiring by the wild herdsmen of the steppes of the art of riding. The horse, never used among primitive peoples for the arts of peace, is pre-eminently adapted for the purposes of the marauding raider and plunderer. The quickness with which our own Plains Indians adopted the horse and utilized him in sudden raids upon the white settlements and upon one another is an example of this. In the same way the possession of horses enabled the savage ancestors of the later Huns and Mongols and Turks to swoop down upon the settlements which were still waging a struggle against increasing aridity, to cut up caravans and drive off captives and flocks and herds, and to prevent during many centuries any possibility of intercourse, even of an indirect sort, between East and West. Hence it was that while abundant evidence exists of contact of some sort in prehistoric times, we find that throughout the earlier part of the historic period, down nearly to the Christian Era, China was isolated and shut off from all intercourse with the civilized regions of the West, the very existence of which was not even suspected. It is for this reason that the Bronze Age in China
Emperor Yu the Great Controlling the Floods.

Large Painting in the University Museum.

FIG. 29.
enjoyed in many ways a longer and more continuous and more independent development than would otherwise have been likely, and the result has been the production of objects which are acknowledged today to rank among the most noteworthy achievements in metal that have ever been wrought.

When, or from what source, the ancient Chinese acquired the art of founding bronze, is not yet possible to say. We know only that already in the earliest period to which we can penetrate with anything approaching probability we find the Chinese using that alloy as the material for their knives, their swords, their spears, their axes; for the metal fittings of their chariots and carts and plows; and, above all, for the sacred bells and the ceremonial vessels of various types, consecrated to the worship of ancestors and of various amorphic deities and spirits, for the most part personifications of natural phenomena and of geographical features, such as mountains, rivers and lakes.

In this primitive ritual, bronze vessels were used to hold the food and drink offered to the spirits of the earth and the air and to the manes of departed ancestors. Employed for different purposes, they naturally took on different shapes. Some, fashioned like capacious urns or amphorae, or of graceful beaker or vase form, were intended to contain the rice and millet beer (usually miscalled "wine") which played so large a part in the life of the people, and which was a primitive brew as different as possible from the tremendously potent distilled liquors in use among the Chinese of the present time. Others were shaped after the likeness, highly conventionalized, of various animals, mythological and real; among the latter was the ox, which has always played an important part in Chinese ritual, just as it has in the ceremonial observances of the early peoples of Europe and western Asia. Inasmuch as grains of various sorts, vegetables, and flesh cooked in divers ways played a part in the sacrifices, special forms of bronze vessels were evolved for the purpose of containing these. Colanders with perforated bottoms for steaming and draining vegetables; large globular vessels, their shape no doubt inspired by the earthenware pots and rush baskets used for storing grain in ordinary life; and portly tripod cauldrons for broths and stews and meats of various sorts, all had their part in the ceremonies which they graced and to fulfill whose requirements they were wrought.

Strict sumptuary laws regulated the number of bronze vessels
Detail from large Painting showing the Emperor Yü the Great receiving the Reports of his Officials regarding the progress of the work of Flood Control.

Fig. 30.
to be used by various ranks of society, and they themselves came in time to be looked upon as partaking of the sacred nature of the ceremonies with which they were associated. It is perhaps largely owing to this sacrosanct character with which they became invested, and which they retained for many centuries, that so many bronze vessels owe their preservation where the ordinary utensils of peace and war were melted down and thus lost. Another reason is that they came to be largely used to contain the food and drink buried with the illustrious dead, and have thus been preserved inviolate in tombs through the ages, there acquiring the wonderful patinas of green and blue and red which form one of their many charms in the eyes of the connoisseur. Needless to say, this patina was not a characteristic of theirs in the days when they played an active part in the religious life of the people. On the contrary, passages in the "Classics" show that it was customary to clean and burnish them before a ceremony, and doubtless the least suggestion of verdegris on their surfaces would have brought punishment upon the slave responsible for their condition.

In general these bronze vessels were of no great size; but that some of them were very large there is reason to believe. One, recently unearthed in a field in the province of Shen-si, in the extreme northwest of China, and now on exhibition in the newly established museum in the provincial capital, Si-an Fu, is the largest that I have ever seen, and is a truly magnificent example of the ancient bronze founder's art.

Constant traditions state that the great Yü, that half mythical ruler of the third millenium before our era who is reputed to have quelled the floods and to have founded the earliest dynasty, that of the Hia (B. C. 2205–1766), took metal brought as tribute from the nine regions into which his realm was divided, and wrought therefrom nine tripod cauldrons, which in time became the holy palladia of the empire, the possession of them being thought requisite to the validity of a ruler's title to the Dragon Throne. Whatever their origin, whether they were cast by Yü the Great or by another, it is certain that when we begin to find ourselves on fairly solid historical ground, a millennium or so after the alleged date of that monarch, we do find a set of nine tripods of such putative origin actually in the possession of the reigning house of Shang. They passed to the founder of the Chou dynasty as part of the booty obtained after the overthrow of the ancient line (B. C. 1122), but for some reason,
possibly through fear of popular discontent, they were not removed to the distant Chou capital, on the northwestern borders of the empire. Instead they were permitted to remain in the heart of the Chinese domain, being housed in a secondary capital, the modern Ho-nan Pu, which the Chou ruler established closer to the heart of his newly acquired dominions than was his own ancestral city. Eventually after the decay and final fall of the Chou dynasty, these tripods disappear from history; it is not known what became of them or what they were really like.

No properly authenticated bronzes of the Hia dynasty, that semi-mythical and wholly legendary house which is said to have ruled over the Chinese people two thousand years before our era, have come down to us; but it is inherently probable that such vessels were already in use. The Chinese tradition is that they were characterized by being inlaid with gold in fine hairlike lines. The Shang vessels are said to have been plain and unadorned, while those of the Chou are described as being richly engraved in fine lines. The earlier specimens, when inscribed at all, bear merely exceedingly brief and terse dedications or attributions; it is only late in the first millennium before our era that we begin to come upon inscriptions of as many as two or three hundred characters.

The designs with which the surfaces of these ancient bronze vessels are decorated afford a number of most interesting problems. In them some have seen the continuation of certain designs found on the walls of caves in western Europe and assigned to that period in the later Old Stone Age known as the Magdalenian. Others have thought that they detected points of contact with the art of various American peoples, such as the Chilkat Indians of the Northwest Coast and the ancient Mayas of Central America. Others, without going so far afield, have suggested that the decorative designs of the Ainu, the aborigines of northern Japan and the adjacent islands, are connected in some way with those appearing upon the ancient Chinese bronzes. None of these theories has yet been proven, and for most of them it is unlikely that proof exists. Certain it is, at all events, that without proper archaeological excavations we can look for little light upon the subject. Consequently we shall have to content ourselves for the present with what we can read in the designs themselves and with what the native Chinese writings have to tell us.

The earliest designs known to us are almost wholly devoid of
any attempt at realism, and consist very largely of extremely con-
ventionalized representations of various animals. It is unfortunate
that that section of the Chou-li or "Ritual of the Chou Dynasty"
which has reference to the founding of bronze objects should have
been lost. However, the work by which it has been replaced is
itself of respectable antiquity, dating back at least some centuries
before our era, and there is indeed a slight chance that it may after
all be the original section which somehow or other got itself dis-
placed for awhile. Be that as it may, this work contains a long
list of animals, birds, reptiles, and even batrachians and insects,
used as decorative designs on the different types of bronze vessels.
They were not, however, as a rule reproduced in anything like
a naturalistic way. That style of art came into vogue only long
afterward, largely as a result of contact with the art of the West,
through Buddhism. Symbolism and sympathetic magic were the
actuating influences in the choice of designs in the primitive period.
For example, a certain type of decoration resembling a spiral or
fret symbolized thunder and lightning. On the surface it appears
to be nothing more than an expression of the craftsman's feeling for
beauty; but in reality it had for the people of that day a much deeper
meaning than that. In northern China, and particularly in those
regions where the extremely porous loess soil renders irrigation dif-
cult or impossible, a regular and copious rainfall has always been
of the very highest importance, and much of the magic and ritual
of primitive China was most intimately concerned with this question.
Holding important places at the courts of the rulers were rainmakers
whose incantations and frenzied dances, to judge by the references
contained in the ancient records, must have been precisely like
those indulged in by witch-doctors and medicine-men and shamans
the world over. The Shu-king or "Book of History," for example,
refers to drunken singing and dancing as acting "in sorcerer's fash-
on." No natural phenomena were of more consequence to the
ancient Chinese than the thunder and lightning which accompany
the breaking up of the long dry season, and the symbols which
denoted them were consequently of the first importance as deco-
orative motives on the vessels devoted to the worship of the spirits.

Among the animals named in the "Chou Ritual" as being appro-
priate subjects for decorative designs are tigers, leopards, turtles,
birds, serpents, and lizards, besides numerous others of less impor-
tance. The dragon is not mentioned by name in this connection,
although in later times this creature came to hold the first place in the list of Chinese mythological animals. Possibly the concept had not yet got itself fully detached from that of the Chinese alligator (the only true alligator to be found anywhere in the world outside of North America). In that event it would probably be included in the categories of serpents or of lizards, much as Marco Polo, for example, two thousand years later, speaks of crocodiles as “serpents.” A reference in one of the “Classics” to keeping captive dragons would seem to confirm this view; for these “dragons” can scarcely have been anything else than alligators, doubtless kept for religious reasons, as sacred animals have often been kept in all parts of the world. The accounts given of the kiao, or kiao-lung, in various old Chinese writings certainly apply with greater force to the alligator than to any other creature known. It is described as being hatched from eggs, as having the body of a fish, four feet, and the tail of a snake, as having a voice “like the bellowing of a cow,” as lying hidden and sleeping in pools, as “lying hidden in rivulets and pools and under rock caves,” and, finally, as “troubling” people who walked by the waterside, tumbling them into the water and feeding upon them. There can surely be little doubt that the now almost extinct alligator of China was one of the sources, at least, for the dragon concept which was destined to play so great a part in the development of Chinese art, ritual, and religious belief.

At all events nothing is more certain than that a creature which is regarded by critics and connoisseurs as a dragon plays a very prominent part in the decorative designs of a great proportion of ancient bronzes, and goes through a vast range of interesting and doubtless highly significant metamorphoses.

It is well known that from a very early period among the peoples of southern and eastern Asia different monsters which we lump together under the generic term of dragons have been associated in some way with the water. Sometimes the reference is to the sea, under which the Dragon King is supposed to have his fairy palace, where occasionally favored mortals are admitted. Again, the monster may be the genius of a river, appearing miraculously before some virtuous ruler, to whom the idea of writing is suggested by the curious marks upon the creature’s back; this form of the myth may have applied originally, perhaps, to the turtle, whose shell was much used for divination. Finally, the dragon may be the spirit and symbol of rain, of clouds and lightning and thunder, bringing quicken-
ing showers to parched fields and drooping crops. In any event, in marked contrast to the dragon of the Occidental world, he is in the Far East usually (though not invariably) an auspicious creature, bearing blessings to mankind and heralding by his appearance the advent of a virtuous ruler destined through his wisdom and beneficence to bring back to the earth the Age of Gold. The vitality of this last form of the myth was well illustrated in the autumn of 1915, when a stalactitic formation shaped curiously like a dragon being found in a cavern along the upper Yangtse, the late Yuan Shikai, then engaged in his attempt to make himself emperor, declared this a portent from Heaven betokening his appointment to rule over the people of the Middle Kingdom.

In general it may be said that the portion of the surface of the ancient bronze vessels reserved to form the background was covered with an irregular diapering of those scrolls, spirals, and frets already mentioned, sometimes of exceedingly fine execution. Upon this was the design proper, often arranged in horizontal bands, or in evenly spaced panels divided by vertical ribbing, or again in flaring lanceolate segments with perfectly plain intervals. This design, often in very high though usually flat relief, as a rule exhibits a strong tendency to assume a spiral or scroll-like form, and can usually be shown to take the shape of some extremely conventionalized and not infrequently distorted or embellished beast, bird, or monster. Not infrequently it is the eye which gives the first clue to the identification, affording as it does a central point from which to work out the remainder of the details; this organ is almost invariably represented as a hemispherical boss with a slight pit in the center to indicate the pupil.

It is as a rule in what might pass for handles of a vestigial sort that the nearest approach to realism takes place. For very often, projecting from the shoulder, neck, or sides of a vessel at the points where handles would naturally occur, are animal heads, usually projecting in very high relief. These may take the shape of heads of rams, of tigers, of wild bulls, and of what are apparently intended for elephants or tapirs. I know no instance of any unmistakable representation of the rhinoceros and its nasal horn or horns, although this animal is known to have existed in southern China, along with the elephant, in early times. It frequently happens that in the case of kettles the ends of the bails, at the points where they engage the rim of the vessel, are wrought in the form of naturalistic animal
A Section of a Large Chinese Rug. K'ang Hsi Period.
Gift of James B. Ford, Esq.

Size 24 ft. x 24 ft.
heads. Sometimes, too, the handle on the lid of the vessel is wrought in the form of an animal head, or even of the complete animal form; two cases especially recall themselves, in one of which the handle on the lid assumes the form of a somewhat stiff and clumsily executed deer, while in the other a tiger or leopard is shown in an exceedingly skillfull and realistic way; the latter, however, is relatively late.

As is well known, the forces of conservatism are nowhere so strong as they are in matters connected with religion. This is well illustrated in the case of these ancient Chinese bronzes. Exactly when this particular style of art arose we do not know; but we do know that once fully developed, it retained its integrity and perpetuated its peculiarities with comparatively slight variations for many centuries after the archaic period and the Bronze Age properly so called had drawn to a close. It was only during the Sung dynasty (A.D. 960–1280) that these relics of China's early ages ceased to be looked upon with superstitious awe and began to be valued for their antiquarian and esthetic qualities primarily. Largely through the great advances in philosophy made during this epoch, the modes of thought of the Chinese underwent a noteworthy change, comparable in many ways to that experienced in Europe at the Renaissance and the Reformation. Men adopted different views of the relation of man to nature and to the unseen world; materialistic and agnostic ideas came into prominence; and an interest never felt before began to display itself in the sciences, among them that of archaeology of a sort occupying an especially prominent place. In older days the finding of an ancient bronze vessel had been regarded as an event of the most auspicious character, portending good fortune to the Empire and particularly to the locality where the discovery was made. So strong was this belief that names of cities and of the year-periods by which the Chinese have been accustomed to reckon time during the past two millennia have been changed by way of commemorating so happy a circumstance. In later times, however, this feeling has disappeared, much as has been the case with the superstitious craze for "relics" which characterized the Middle Ages in Europe. Among the Chinese as with us, the religious interest has been replaced by the secular, and during the past few centuries it has been the antiquarian rather than the priest who has concerned himself with the preservation of these products of a remote past.

The process by which the ancient Chinese craftsman produced these masterpieces of bronze founding was that known to us as the
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cire perdue, in which the object is first modeled in wax with great exactness and attention to detail. This model is then carefully coated with the material of which the mould is composed, and after the latter has set the molten bronze is poured into it, expelling the wax before it and assuming its form with wonderful exactness. When the metal has cooled the mould is broken away and the final finish is given with burin and rasp and polisher. It is obvious that by this process any given model could be used but once, and it is doubtless this fact that gives these old bronzes their characteristic and striking individuality and strength of character; for they were not mechanical reproductions of any set forms, but each was the individual and distinct production of the artist's own personal skill and taste and comprehension. It must never be forgotten, too, that like all the world's greatest art this art of casting ceremonial bronze vessels found its inspiration in religion. No doubt the shape and decorative quality of these vessels satisfied the best esthetic standards of their day just as they do those of the present. Yet it is to be borne in mind that first of all and above all they were objects having a religious significance of the profoundest sort. Every line and marking and feature had its significant symbolic reference to some act by which the worshiper was brought into communion with the souls of the beloved dead or with the spirits of mountain and torrent and waste whose favor he besought. It was not to supply the needs of everyday life, or to satisfy the merely esthetic sense, keen though that must have been, that brought the casting of these vessels to so high a pitch. It was the operation of that universal human sentiment, that for the gods, only the best is worthy.

Of recent years it has been the privilege of some American museums to secure specimens of these ancient sacrificial vessels. Two especially fine examples, undoubtedly among the best specimens of this class of object, have lately been acquired by the University Museum, one of them belonging in all probability to a period well back in the first millennium before our era, while the other presents certain indications which would seem to place it still earlier, either toward the close of the Shang dynasty, or, perhaps, at the very beginning of the succeeding period of the Chou, in other words during the twelfth or eleventh century B.C.

Let us begin by studying the vessel which seems to be the earlier of the two. It is of the so-called beaker type, with a plain broad
Sacrificial Libation Cup of Bronze.

Gift of Lammot du Pont, Esq.

Fig. 31.
foot and wide neck and a gracefully flaring mouth. The proportions and the curves could hardly be bettered. The entire surface is covered with a wonderful patina of a very dark olive green, the effect, apparently, of atmospheric action alone, for the patinas produced through long immersion in water or burial in actual contact with the earth are of a very different sort. What happened in the case of this vessel was, in all probability, that it was placed upon a pedestal in some sepulchral vault, doubtless to contain drink for the use of the departed, and remained there undisturbed, perhaps for centuries. Here and there are slight traces of a fine malachite green patination and also of a modification of the surface due to some other agency. Doubtless this vase has undergone numerous vicissitudes in the three thousand years or so of its existence, and has been affected by a variety of conditions.

As already noted, the foot is quite plain, and bare of all ornamentation aside from its own graceful shape. The decoration itself may be divided into two parts, that upon the body and that upon the neck, the latter again being subdivided into a narrow band or collar and, above, four lanceolate segments upon the widely flaring upper portion.

The background in the decorated portions consists of an extremely fine and clearcut series of spirals and frets and meanders, in places forming a sort of irregular diapering, while in others it is modified to fit certain definite spaces in the ornamentation. A true diaper background consists of course of a definite often geometric motive repeated regularly without any modification due to the design superposed upon it. The background here however, and the same may be said of most objects of the sort, sustains a very definite relation to the general design, and is obviously merely another manifestation of the tendency displayed in the latter, a tendency, that is, to reduce everything to a spiral or volute form.

The decoration upon the body is separated from that of the neck by a narrow plain band encircling the shoulder. As is usually, though not universally, the case, strict symmetry is observed. Upon the body occur two pairs of extremely conventionalized bird-like creatures which may perhaps symbolize some primitive form of the Fèng or, as we term it for want of a better name, the Phoenix, although needless to say the Fèng and the Phoenix concepts have no connection that has hitherto been traced. In spite of the high degree of conventionalization which is manifest here it is still possible
to recognize the various features with a considerable degree of certainty. The large almost hemispherical eye, with its central pit-like pupil; the curve of the wing, which is held folded tightly against the body; the long and richly feathered tail, which appears to have become resolved into a number of independent details as a result of over-conventionalization; the two feet, still recognizable though far from realistic—these may all be made out. With the head, however, apart from the eye, the case is different. It is here, of course, that the process of modification would naturally go farthest. Consequently it is difficult to determine whether it was the intention of the artist to represent the creature with its beak open and a line, doubtless of symbolic significance, issuing from its mouth; or whether the intention was to show the head turned backward over the shoulder; in which event the remaining appendages might be taken to indicate a flowing crest or something of that sort. It is of course impossible to reconstruct, without historical data of some sort, the symbolism of ninety generations ago; and the statements of Chinese antiquarians writing of an object wrought perhaps two thousand years before their own time are too often pure speculation; honest enough, no doubt, but of very little scientific value. It will be only after proper archaeological research has been undertaken in China and enough data have been collected to give us some adequate basis for our studies that we can hope to find ourselves in a position to interpret the highly complex and apparently arbitrary symbolism of early Chinese art.

Just above the decoration on the body, and separated from it by a narrow plain strip with slightly raised edges is a band of ornamentation slightly less than an inch in width. The salient features of this area are two animal heads, moulded in the round, and projecting from opposite sides of the vessel, just above the points where the pairs of bird-like creatures in the body ornamentation face each other. These heads are apparently those of composite creatures, although it is possible that real animals are intended. Upon the whole it seems most probable that the wild bull was the basis for the concept. That features characteristic of other animals should have crept in need not excite surprise; for the notion of composite mythical animals is one that is exceedingly widespread and that goes very far back into the past of our race. Each of these animal heads is flanked on either side by two serpent-like forms, very much disintegrated by the process of conventionalization which
Sacrificial Libation Cup of Bronze,
Gift of Lammot du Pont, Esq.
Fig. 32.
they have undergone, but of which the heads are still quite clearly discernible.

Above this band of ornamentation the neck of the vessel begins to flare outward and terminates in a very wide bell-shaped mouth. Exteriorly, this portion is decorated with four equal lanceolate segments or gores with perfectly plain and undecorated intervals. The ornamentation of these segments is difficult to describe, and harder still to interpret; but essentially it seems to consist in each case of two dragons with their bodies and tails pointing upward while they themselves stand upon their forelegs and confront each other with open mouths and protruding tongues. It is possible that each creature is provided with six pair of legs, and a crest and beard seem also to be indicated.

Taken as a whole, the decoration is wonderfully effective, impressing one more deeply the more carefully it is studied. In spite of its bizarre quality it is harmonious, tasteful, and arranged in the most effective way in order to conform to the exigencies of the space to be covered. Evidently the artist was not obsessed with that horror vacui, that dislike for vacant spaces, which seems to afflict exponents of certain schools of decorative art; for such spaces are most effectively employed. The interior, for example, is entirely plain, with one exception which will be noted in a moment; while on the exterior, the plain foot and the equally plain intervals between the highly decorative segments around the flaring neck serve most admirably to set off and emphasize the superlative balance and restraint of the ornamentation as a whole.

The sole exception to the plainness of the surface of the interior is a brief inscription of four exceedingly archaic characters which appears on the bottom, apparently cast with the vessel rather than engraved later. While the inscription itself yields us no data as to the age of the vessel aside from the style of the characters and the fact that its nature is such as we should expect to find in vessels of the period to which we have reason on other grounds to assign this vessel, it at least confirms the accuracy of the traditional account of the purpose for which this type of vessel was employed; for the four characters read: Tso pao tsen-yi, which may be translated, “Wrought as a precious libation-cup.”

The other of the two ancient bronze vessels recently acquired
Ancient Sacrificial Wine Vessel of Bronze.

Gift of Lammot du Pont, Esq.

Fig. 33.
by the University Museum is not only of a different period, but of a wholly different shape, designed for a different purpose; for instead of being employed for the pouring out of libations, it was meant to hold the liquor used at sacrificial feasts. It may not be out of place to mention here that of the three classes of spirits recognized and worshiped by the primitive Chinese, the celestial, the terrestrial, and the ancestral, it was only the latter before whom libations were actually offered. It is to be borne in mind that in China of the archaic and protohistoric periods, just as so often among other peoples, the fundamental concept of an act of worship was that of a communion with the spirits invoked, a feast in which both worshiper and god took part. Particularly was this so in the worship of departed ancestors, where the ceremony assumed the character of a family reunion in which the presence of the dead was regarded as none the less real than was that of the living. In this connection a curious device was resorted to. Certain individuals were chosen, according to the Shu-king, or "Book of History," to be "personators of the dead;" these occupied the places at the sacrificial banquet which would have been given to the dead had they been actually present in the flesh, and libations were poured out before them. Of the actual feast, however, they were not allowed to partake, although we are told that later, doubtless as a sort of solatium for their enforced abstinence, they were given a special feast of their own.

Just as the libation-cup described above was notable for its grace of form and the charm of its design, so the vessel now under discussion is remarkable for its strength and dignity and a certain almost savage ruggedness of form and decoration which afford convincing proof that the art of which it is a product was still a vital factor in the life of the people, and not merely an avenue for the expression of esthetic emotions and impulses.

In general it may be said that this vessel is divided from top to bottom into three equal segments by lines of notched ribbing which extend from the knob on top of the cover clear down to the bottom of the foot. Each of these segments again is divided vertically by a similar rib or flange broken at the shoulder by a highly conventionalized animal head moulded in the round. What this creature may be intended to represent is not clear, although the horns with which it is equipped are decidedly those of a ram. Accordingly to the interpretation of the Chinese antiquaries however it is meant for a hsi-niu or wild bull, and this is no doubt correct.
Over the surface of the vessel appears the usual finely incised scheme of spirals and frets, betokening thunder, lightning and rain, and thus by implication suggesting a bountiful crop, upon which the prosperity of the country then as now was so dependent; for the Chinese have always retained that keen sense of the fundamental importance of agriculture which we of Occidental lands had so largely lost until the sharp lessons of the present war developed it anew for us. Over this symbolic background are displayed various patterns in somewhat high relief in which the forms of various mythological creatures may be traced. Each of the three subdivisions of the foot, to begin with, contains a pair of dragon forms placed vis-à-vis, but so extremely conventionalized that they might be easily be mistaken for geometric forms. Only the fact that the eye still survives shows us that we have here a derivative from what was evidently once intended for a naturalistic representation. Similar figures occur on the dome-shaped cover and also upon the shoulder, in the zone in which occur the three animal heads already described. On the body, however, the scheme is different, although the style is the same. Here we have represented a mask intended it is said to represent the hsi-niu or wild bull, as in the case of the three heads in high relief on the shoulder. It seems quite probable that this interpretation is correct. We know, in the first place, that wild bulls, apparently of the same species (Bos namadicus) as those so vigorously portrayed on the Assyrian monuments, did formerly occur in China. We also know that the ancient Chinese, exactly like our own ancestors, made extensive use of bulls' horns as drinking vessels. Further, the bull has been the symbol of fertility among many nations. Consequently it seems inherently likely, quite apart from anything told us by the Chinese antiquarians and art critics, that the bull’s head should have occupied a prominent place in the symbolism of religious art as exemplified by these ancient vessels. Flanking each of these masks are small dragon figures represented head downward.

The vessel is covered with a somewhat lighter patina than that displayed by the libation-cup but of the same general character, while it has a much greater amount of the malachite green patination. There is unfortunately no inscription to guide us, either by its subject matter or by the form of its characters, in fixing the age of the vase. I ascribe it however without hesitation to the Chou period (B. C. 1122–255). It belongs probably to the earlier rather than the later part of that era.
A word in regard to the question of the dating of these bronze vessels may not be amiss. That they belong to an art of a very highly developed type goes without saying. Everything about them presupposes a long previous evolution somewhere. Where that evolution took place we still have no means of knowing; but upon the whole it seems probable that the primitive Chinese acquired the knowledge of bronze from southern Siberia, and perhaps more specifically from the upper Yenesei valley, exactly as long afterward they obtained their iron culture at least in part from the same general region. It is probable that the bronze culture which they thus borrowed, perhaps at a very rough guess somewhere around three thousand years before the commencement of the Christian Era, was already a fairly advanced one; for in a generalized way the types of weapons, utensils, vessels, and other objects of bronze which we find in China correspond quite closely to similar categories from western Asia and eastern Europe. The bronze cauldrons of Homer and other classical writers are too well known to need more than passing mention. What is more to the point is that people like the Scythians and the Massagetae, living as they did athwart the western end of the old trans-Asiatic trade-routes, should have been still largely in the Bronze Age as late as the time of Herodotus, in the fifth century B. C., and that among them should have existed objects similar in purpose, and generally speaking similar in nature, to those belonging to the Bronze Age in China. The sacrificial cauldrons mentioned by Herodotus as occurring among the Scythians are in this class.

In a certain sense the Bronze Age in China drew to a close somewhere about the middle of the first millennium before our era. That is to say, it was from that time that iron began definitely to supersede bronze in the uses of everyday life, in the arts both of peace and of war. For religious purposes, however, bronze continued to hold its own, and it was not in fact for another millennium, or until the sixth and seventh centuries A. D., that the art of the bronze worker may be said really to have attained its apogee, with the casting of those wonderful statues of gigantic size representing various Buddhist personages, which characterized the religious enthusiasm prevailing in the China of the Northern Wei (A. D. 386–535) and T’ang (A. D. 618–907) dynasties, and of which the sole remaining example in the world today is the great Daibutsu at Nara, the ancient capital of Japan.

Even after the introduction of Buddhism, however, and indeed
down to the present time it has been customary to turn out copies of ancient sacrificial vessels, with their decorative motives, inscriptions and all. In large part this proceeding has been designed to supply the wants of cultured people who admired the ancient bronzes but were unable to obtain examples of them; exactly as our art shops sell frank reproductions of famous paintings or statues. The skill of the Chinese metal worker, however, has been so great that it is frequently difficult to distinguish a vessel turned out under the early Chou dynasty, three thousand years ago, from one produced under the Sungs, two millenniums later.

C. W. B.
A Ming Cloisonné in the Museum Collection
Colossal Head of a Bodhisattva.
Gift of James B. Ford, Esq.
FIG. 34.