Ancient Chinese Bronze Mirrors from the Lloyd Cotsen Collection

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Virginia Steele Scott Galleries of American Art
Susan and Stephen Chandler Wing

The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens
**The Collection**

What is the genesis of a great collection? For Lloyd E. Cotsen, it started with a fascination for Chinese art that took root during his undergraduate years at Princeton University. As a student of archeology and architecture, he was intrigued by the strong contrast between Chinese and Western art. Cotsen purchased his first Chinese bronze mirrors in Hong Kong in the early 1950s while serving in the Navy during the Korean War. A fascination with textiles, which shared many of the same influences, naturally followed. In building his collection and researching these artifacts of material culture, Cotsen was following the tradition of antiquarians—from the Far East and the West, Henry E. Huntington among them—who collected art, amassed libraries, and built gardens.

Today, the Lloyd Cotsen Collection comprises thousands of pieces, including textiles, basketry, and folk art. Among them are 95 ancient Chinese bronze mirrors, a selection of which are exhibited publicly here for the first time.

**Scholarship and Connoisseurship**

The study of Chinese bronze mirrors provides a wealth of information about the society that created them: its history, beliefs, and people; its artistic and technological developments. Each object tells a story. A decorative motif or inscription, for instance, provides insight into the hopes and values of the people who made them. A wooden fragment embedded in a corroded mirror may indicate that it had been in a wooden coffin or stored in a box that had disintegrated in time.

Aside from mirrors authentic to their periods, the collection also includes a few reproductions. Some were replicas made in ancient times out of admiration for the originals, while others were made in the 20th century with the intent to deceive buyers. The collection also provides opportunities for researchers to use multiple tools—scientific analysis, art historical study, and the experienced eye—to discern the “real” from the “fake.”
Techniques

The earliest bronzes from the Shang period (ca. 1600–1046 B.C.E.) were cast in clay molds. By the Warring States period (475–221 B.C.E.), the lost-wax method was used together with clay molds, allowing for greater detail and ornamentation.

Trade with the West along the fabled “Silk Road” flourished during the Tang dynasty (618–907), bringing with it the influence of Sassanian Persian craftsmen. As a result, new techniques for working metal were introduced, such as hammering, repoussé, gilding, granulation, chasing, and inlay with precious stones or glass.

LOOKING CLOSER

Find this eight-lobed mirror and see if you can distinguish what was hammered and what was chased.

Hammering: A soft metal is placed over a carved form and tapped into shape with a hammer. The metal is then applied to the cast bronze for a raised effect.

Chasing: A hard stylus is tapped with a hammer to make fine marks in metal, creating detail and texture.

Production

As early as 2000 B.C.E., bronze technology was highly developed in China, and objects such as ritual vessels made from this alloy of copper, tin, and lead were considered luxury items. By the end of the 5th century B.C.E., the expansive southern state of Chu, near modern-day Changsha, was a major center of production. The metropolitan capitals Chang’an and Luoyang of the Han (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.) and Tang (618–907) periods were also important centers, with the regional cities of Suzhou and Yangzhou becoming famous for their bronzes.

Because of court patronage, the production of mirrors was held to certain high standards. During the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), the Shangfang (尚方) office oversaw the production of crafts, including textiles and lacquer, as well as metal work. The workshops for these crafts were often situated close to each other, making it conceivable that patterns and designs could be shared.
Function

One of a mirror’s primary functions is to reflect, and from the earliest periods of China’s history, bronze mirrors have reflected, both literally and symbolically, the face of the Chinese people. With a highly polished surface on one side, these exquisite and coveted objects would have had a place of importance on aristocratic dressing tables among such personal items as face powder and hair combs.

Yet a bronze mirror’s reverse side, with its intricately wrought designs and inscriptions, is where centuries of Chinese beliefs, values, and aspirations are revealed. Here the scholar can find reflected a wealth of information about Chinese craftsmanship, aesthetic taste, dynastic change, philosophy, and consumer culture.

Meaning

The decoration on mirrors is never neutral but is intended to convey specific meaning. That meaning might be a wish for good fortune or prosperity, or for cosmic or familial harmony. Some motifs, such as monster masks referred to as taotie, were used to ward off evil.

Daoist concepts of the universe can be seen in cosmic diagrams alluding to space and time. Space is represented on a square mirror (signifying the earth) ornamented with the Five Sacred Mountains. Animals of the zodiac are depicted on a circular mirror (representing the heavens) to symbolize the cycles of time.

LOOKING CLOSER

Dragons were believed to bring rain to nurture crops. Like other symbolic images, their appearance changed over time. Find two mirrors with dragons in the exhibition and compare how different artisans depicted them across the span of centuries.
Inscriptions

On mirrors as well as textiles, written characters were incorporated directly into the design. These inscriptions were often auspicious phrases, bearing good wishes for the owners.

The earliest inscribed mirror in the Cotsen collection is from the Western Han dynasty (西漢 206 B.C.E.–8 C.E.). Within a design that embodies the cosmic principles of space, time, heaven, and earth, the inscription reads:

May you enjoy noble status and blessings for a long time;
May you have pleasure without incident;
May you have delight every day;
May you have plentiful wine and food;
And may you regularly obtain lordly delights.

子孫昌樂未央

Some inscriptions evoke legendary figures or serve as shorthand references to well known stories, such as the tale of Confucius meeting Rong Qiqi, a hermit who tells him the “three joys” of living to an old age.

An inscribed textile fragment from the same period features mythical animals, winged immortals, and cloud arabesques (representing the Daoist qi, the life’s breath or energy). The inscription conveys the wish:

May your sons and grandsons prosper;
May you have pleasure without end.

長貴福/樂無事/日有熹/宜酒食/常得君喜
Design Motifs

The geometric and figurative designs on Chinese mirrors were most likely adapted from textiles, and woven fragments provide a fascinating opportunity to trace these artistic parallels.

Artisans may also have used textiles to make decorative impressions directly on the clay molds, creating a textured background on which figures stand out.

Comparing Design Motifs

Examining the similar designs found in the mirror’s background design above and the textile shown at right, see how many other different kinds of design parallels you can find between mirrors and textiles in the exhibition.

Patina

Patina is the result of corrosion on the surface of and within bronze. This occurs naturally, but a surface can also be altered intentionally with the application of specific chemicals. Patina is one of the main criteria collectors look for in a mirror. Depending on the stages of corrosion and the environmental conditions, a large color range is possible, from red to green or blue.

Patinas that are in an active state of corrosion appear bright green or green-blue. Typically, this type of corrosion is not desirable and is treated to keep the decomposition from progressing.

Conversely, some patinas are very desirable. By the Song dynasty (宋 960–1279), connoisseurs made distinctions between four types of patinas that were highly sought after: black lacquer antique 黑漆古, green lacquer antique 绿漆古, quicksilver white 水銀漆, and lead-gray 鉛白.

Looking Closer

Examine these three examples of fine patinas. Can you tell the difference between them? Can you find other examples in this exhibit that share the same type of patina?
Related Book

Related Lectures
Susan Cahill, “Charts of the Cosmos: Chinese Bronze Mirrors and Textiles of the Warring States through the Tang Periods” Nov. 15 (Tuesday), 7:30 p.m. Free; Friends’ Hall
Lothar von Falkenhausen, “The Introduction and Transformation of Mirrors in China” Feb. 7, 2012 (Tuesday), 7:30 p.m. Free; Friends’ Hall

Curator Tour

Photographs by Bruce M. White, 2009 (bronzes and terracotta), and Kaz Tsuruta (textiles).