

CHINESE BRONZE MIRRORS



1st-2nd Century, Six Dynasties
Artist Unknown
Chinese
G 215
Acc: 52.11.6



Han Dynasty
Artist Unknown
Chinese
G215
Acc: 96.97.10

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

Mirror One: Bronze mirror, round (8 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches) with relief pictorial decoration (Yeuh type)

Mirror Two: Bronze mirror, round (6 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches) decorated with Chinese characters

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

1. What might be some of the uses of mirrors by the Chinese?
2. How would you describe the decoration on the back of these mirrors?
3. Who might have owned these mirrors?

KEY IDEAS

1. While the history of bronze mirrors is much less ancient than many of the ritual vessels from the Shang Dynasty (one example has been found in a tomb dating to the Zia Dynasty), mirrors have been used in China from at least the 8th century BCE. Mirrors are not as complex as the bronze bells developed at this time but were much more widespread.
2. Chinese bronze mirrors were highly burnished on the reflective side and sometimes polished with mercury. Most mirrors found today have the reflective surface pitted and corroded and have lost their original finish. The other side—cast from clay molds-

-is decorated with intricate patterns and design that reveal astonishing levels of artistry and craftsmanship. Some are compact and portable enough to be held in one hand, others are large and heavy enough to require stands.

3. The majority of mirrors are round. The decorated side of the mirror was filled with symbolism in the early mirrors. The Chinese believed that by using symbols representing the universe, it would be possible to acquire some of the universe's power to gain strength and protection from evil. For example, round shapes represented Heaven, the Earth was square and small domes represented stars and constellations.
4. As round symbols of the universe, the mirror also became a symbol of perfect bliss. Mirrors—representing perfection, reunion, fortune and satisfactory love and marriage—were used as a pledge of love or part of a dowry. Marriage mirrors were made for a bride to carry on her lap during the wedding procession and were later hung over the marriage bed to repel evil forces and ensure continuing good fortune for the couple. These mirrors have auspicious symbols chosen to express the idea of marital unity and often feature pairs of animals. Ancient tradition held that the Phoenix was monogamous and had deep affection for its mate making it a perfect symbol to use on a marriage mirror. In tombs of couples, archeologists have discovered two halves of a mirror, one in each couple's tomb.
5. Cast from clay molds, the decorated side of the mirror reveals intricate patterns and designs. Birds, dragons and serpents were common motifs in early mirrors, but later more sophisticated and intricate designs evolved that featured mythological figures, deities, animals of the Chinese zodiac, abstract patterns and inlays of jade, turquoise and mother-of-pearl. This evolution in design helps researchers discern changes in taste, the spread of religious and cosmological ideas about the world, the consequences of expanding commerce, and the influence of Western art spread by the trade routes of the Silk Road.
6. Mirrors could be held in the hand or grasped by a cord or tassel passed through a pierced knob on the back. The knobs are usually simple domes, but can be decorative and some even take on the shape of an animal. Sometimes mirrors were made with handles but handles were a Western influence that never was extensively adopted by the Chinese. As mirrors grew larger, stands were developed to hold them, but most stands were wooden and most of disappeared by today.
7. Mirror production flourished from the Warring States period (475-206 BCE) until the Tang Dynasty (618-906 CE). Mirrors became practical but expensive luxury goods that only people from the privileged classes could afford. By the Tang period private workshops arose and spread due to the rising merchant class and prosperous farmers being able to afford mirrors. By the middle of the Qing Dynasty (18th century) bronze mirrors were gradually replaced by glass.
8. Mirrors were not only practical objects, but were held to have magical powers as well. Since the ancient Chinese did not understand the theory of reflection, they generally believed that mirrors were able to dispel evil spirits by making spirits visible. It is reputed that Taoist scholars wore mirrors hanging down their back so



they could pursue their studies without fear of being harmed by invisible spirits all around them. In burial, mirrors were often placed face up on the breast of the deceased to protect them from evil spirits. As a result, mirrors became indispensable in Taoist and Buddhist rituals.

SOURCES

- 1. Susan D. Costello, "An Investigation of Early Chinese Bronze Mirrors at the Harvard University Art Museum", Harvard University**
- 2. Lothar von Falkenhausen, "The Introduction and Transformation of Mirrors in China", UCLA Today**
- 3. MIA, "Sixteen Chinese Bronze Mirrors Acquired for Permanent Collection"**