

OBJECT IN FOCUS

## Elephant-shaped wine server



China, Middle Yangzi Valley  
Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–1050 BCE),  
ca. 1200–1100 BCE

Bronze

6 3/4 x 4 3/16 x 8 7/16 in

Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment. Freer Gallery of Art, F1936.6a-b

### Describe

This lidded bronze container is shaped as a baby elephant standing on a larger elephant's back. Made as a serving vessel for wine, it reveals ancient people's creativity and innovation. Wine was stored in the larger elephant's belly and poured from the trunk. The baby elephant serves as a knob for the vessel's lid. In contrast to the realism of the overall shape, the fragmented patterns that cover the body are derived from mythical creatures often found on Shang vessels, including dragons and *taotie* masks. A *taotie* is a frontal animal-like face with a pair of staring eyes, a nose, and jaw. This elephant-shaped bronze is an impressive example of an early Chinese sculpture with both artistic and practical value. It looks vivid and lively, reflecting the skill of the craftsmen.

### Analyze

Animal-shaped bronze vessels were relatively rare during the Shang dynasty. Favored by the people who lived in the Yangzi River valley, they reveal the southern craftsmen's knowledge and appreciation of the animals portrayed. Depicted with incredible realism, this bronze vessel must have been cast by a master who had seen an elephant with his own eyes.



## Interpret

Bronze played an important role in ceremonies for Shang rulers and high officials. Ceremonial rituals to honor gods and ancestors often included offerings of wine and food presented in decorated bronze vessels. The number and variety of wine vessels from the Shang dynasty suggests that wine played an important role in Shang religious rituals. These practices also influenced people living outside the Shang realm.

## Inquire

- What is bronze? What special qualities does it have that would have made it important in ancient China?
- How do you think this object was made? Describe the steps you think it might have involved. Then, research the piece-mold process of bronze casting common during the Shang dynasty to see if you are correct.
- Why do you think the craftsman chose the elephant shape for this vessel?
- Why do you think the craftsman covered the vessel with creatures and abstract faces?
- How do we show respect for our deceased family members today?

## Resources

View this object online at <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1936.6a-b/>

Learn more at <https://asia.si.edu/teachingchina>

