

OBJECT IN FOCUS

Bell (*bo*) with birds and dragons



China, Shanxi province, State of Jin, Houma foundry

Late Spring and Autumn period,

Eastern Zhou dynasty, ca. 500–450 BCE

Bronze

26 1/8 x 18 1/2 in; 136.7 lb

Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment. Freer Gallery of Art, F1941.9

Describe

This type of Chinese bronze bell is called a *bo*. Different from western bells, it's not meant to be swung back and forth to make a sound. Instead, you hit it on the outside with a wooden mallet. Almond-shaped if you looked at it from below, it produces two tones depending on whether you strike it near the center or the edge. The *bo* would have been hung from the loop on top. The loop is formed by a decoration that looks like a pair of birds. Their bodies face each other while their heads turn back to swallow their cat-like tails. On either side of the bell are eighteen round knobs or bumps. We don't know if these knobs are purely decorative or had a musical or acoustic function. If you look closely, you will see a small head in the middle of each bump. They are coiled snakes. Low relief dragons cover the bottom of the bell and horizontally divide the three bands of bumps.

Analyze

Although made in different sizes, *bo* are usually quite large in order to generate deep bass notes. Weighing almost 140 pounds, this bell is the largest of a set of four. Together the set could produce eight different notes. Sets of bells were an important aspect of Zhou bronze production. During the Eastern Zhou period (ca. 770–256 BCE), central Zhou authority became increasingly weakened. Meanwhile, regional courts began fighting each other not only for land and political control but also for cultural supremacy. Music was a key part in this display of superiority. In fact, casting a perfectly tuned set of bells was thought to signal good government and a proper relationship with heaven.

Interpret

Making a large bronze bell like this one was a costly commission in terms of both material and labor. Its elaborate decoration further emphasizes the high status of bronze bells as a luxury restricted to rulers and the elite. Besides its political implications, owning a set of bells was also thought to bring great happiness to a family. Cherishing their bell sets, many owners chose to be buried with them. The greenish coating (patina) on this bell is the result of having been buried; the owner wanted to hear its beautiful sound in the afterlife.

Inquire

- What did ancient Chinese bells sound like? Explore the exhibition [Resound: Bells of Ancient China](#) at the Freer and Sackler or online to find out.
- Study the designs on the bell. Can you find when a pattern begins and repeats itself?
- What role does music have in your life? How does music give you a sense of power like the rulers of the Zhou dynasty?
- What objects in your life are so important to you that you would want to be buried with them?



Image: Musicians playing a Chinese bell set. This graphic is based on a decoration from a wine vessel dating to the fifth century BCE and excavated at Baihuatan, Chengdu, Sichuan Province. Drawing after Li Xiating.

Resources

View this object online at <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1941.9/>

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

