

## Compton Verney:

A gem collection of Chinese  
archaic bronzes in the heart of England

I visited Compton Verney again in May last year and for visitors coming for the first time, I would suggest that it is really worth taking the time to walk in the scenic grounds designed by Lancelot 'Capability' Brown in 1769.

The house was originally built by Richard Verney, 11th Baron de Broke, in 1714 and was extensively remodelled by Robert Adam in the 1760s. It stayed in the family until 1921 when Richard Greville Verney, the 19th Baron, sold it to a soap magnate Joseph Watson. Watson died a year later and it was requisitioned by the army during the Second World War and was used as an experimental station for smoke-screen camouflage.

After the war the house was never lived in again and it had become semi-derelict by the 1980s after a local property and nightclub owner, Harry Ellard had acquired it and had let film companies shoot on its grounds.

In 1993 the site was acquired by former Littlewoods chairman Sir Peter Moores, who's vision was to bring art to the people. He created the Compton Verney House Trust which spent £45 million on a restoration project of the Grade I listed house which included a modern wing, designed by architects Stanton Williams, to house exhibition spaces and a visitors centre.



Compton Verney was officially opened in 2004 and comprises five collections of European art including British portraits, Northern European sculpture and works of art, Neapolitan paintings from 1600-1800 and British Folk art.

Sir Peter starting collecting Chinese archaic bronzes in the 1980s after a visit to Harvard University Art Museum. He formed the collection of around 100 bronzes over a twenty year period and the majority of the purchases were made at auction. Careful selection was made of each piece with the advice of his dealer, Roger Keverne, and museum advisor, Jessica Rawson.

Roger Keverne was to become a governor of Compton Verney and played a key role in purchasing the pieces, a number of which had been deaccessioned from the Idemitsu museum in Tokyo. He helped organise a trip for Sir Peter to Shanghai in the later 1990s and they had the rare opportunity to see the basement storage facility pieces at the Shanghai Museum, which had its own underground viewing room.

At the entrance to the Chinese gallery stand a large pair of Ming dynasty early 15th century gilt-bronze guardian figures, which represent two of the Four Heavenly Kings (*si da tian wang*). The figure on the right, holding a sword is identified as the Guardian of the West (*Ma*) and the other on the left, holding a stupa is believed to be the Guardian of the East (*Li*). They were purchased by Sir Peter from Sotheby's London slightly on a whim, as they were unrelated to the rest of the bronzes in the collection. However they were an astute purchase, as early Ming figures of this size are extremely rare and are now considered to be of great significance. These grand, forbidding figures, clad in armour, would have stood at the entrance to a temple to protect it from evil spirits.



2. The pair of large Ming, 15th century gilt-bronze guardian figures stand at the entrance to the Chinese gallery.

In 2015, the Chinese galleries were re-fitted, transforming the exhibition space with state of the art display cases and dramatic lighting, that shows off the displays to their best.

A thematic approach to the galleries was also adopted and five different areas are explored: an introduction which puts the collection in its historical context; food, wine and ritual which explores the use of these vessels in ceremonies and burial; the horse which shows off the large Han dynasty bronze 'Heavenly Horse' and a number of Tang dynasty pottery horses; mirrors and finally animal designs in bronzes .



The bronzes in the collection date from the Shang dynasty (1600 to 1046 BC), the earliest period of sophisticated casting techniques, through to the Han dynasty (206 BC to AD 220).

These bronzes were used for elaborate ritual ceremonies, which were held as offerings to the spirits of ancestors. These ritual events were recorded by inscriptions on these vessels from the Shang dynasty, but this became more common and detailed by the Zhou dynasty (1045 to 256 BC).



Sumptuary laws dictated the amount and the size of vessels that were allowed by each social rank, with numerous large scale sets reserved for the upper social hierarchy. These were included in the tombs of the elite after death, as it was believed that these could be used in the after life.

The use of archaic script to record ritual events originated in early oracle bone writing. This recorded the messages that the spirit world was believed to have communicated when consulted about the outcome of future events relating to the health of the king and consorts, war, hunting, harvests, the weather and the timing of sacrifices to ancestors. This was practiced by cracking the scapulae of cow bones and turtle shells with hot pokers and then interpreting the cracks that resulted. These were then recorded onto the bones themselves. 1





An archaic ritual wine vessel, (*Fangjia*), Late Shang dynasty,

The most significant bronze in the collection is undoubtedly the late Shang dynasty ritual wine vessel and cover, *fangjia*. It was purchased from Sotheby's New York in March 2007. It was the highest lot of the sale at US\$8.1m and it was a record at the time for an archaic bronze piece.

The crispness of the casting is absolutely superb and the various elements of the decoration, including the owl heads to each side, are really clearly defined, which to this degree, is a rare feature in archaic bronzes.

The vessel was deaccessioned from the Albright-Knox Museum in Buffalo, New York, with the funds to benefit a restricted endowment for the purchase of works of art.

It was reputedly found at Anyang just before 1944 and was purchased in Beijing that year by the dealer and collector, Dr Otto Burchard. It was purchased by the museum in 1953 from the antiquities dealer, Mathias Komor in New York, through the Arthur B. Michael fund at a cost of \$10,000

This *fangjia* is unique in that it is the only known example that features the owl motifs to each side of the body. A similar owl head motif can be seen on each side of a Shang dynasty *fangyi* 2 in the Museum of East Asian Art in Cologne. Fig 1 It can also be seen as a more striking, three dimensional motif on the cover of a Shang dynasty *gong* from the collection of Daniel Shapiro Fig 2 published in the catalogue of J.J. Lally Oriental Art, entitled *Chinese Archaic Bronzes, the Collection of Daniel Shapiro*. 3



Fig 1. An archaic bronze vessel, *fangyi*, Shang dynasty, 22.5cm high, Museum of East Asian Art, Cologne.



Fig 2. An archaic bronze vessel, *gong*, Shang dynasty, 29.8cm long, Daniel Shapiro Collection.



This large ritual wine vessel, *hu*, is unusual with its slender pear-shaped body. One of the reasons this piece is highlighted is due to its unusual decoration of four rows of fish scale or feather pattern below a band of long tailed birds at the neck. But its selection is really based on the wonderful multi-coloured patina that this piece displays from deep blues and turquoise, through to bright green and yellow encrustations. It is really rare to see such a natural multi-coloured patina interacting so successfully with the cast surface decoration.

The band of long tailed birds at the neck are overlaid on a spiral *leiwen* ground and act as a link to the two tubular lug-shaped handles.

This piece was purchased from Christie's New York in March 2003



An archaic bronze ritual wine vessel, (*Hu*), Middle Western Zhou dynasty, 41.3cm high.



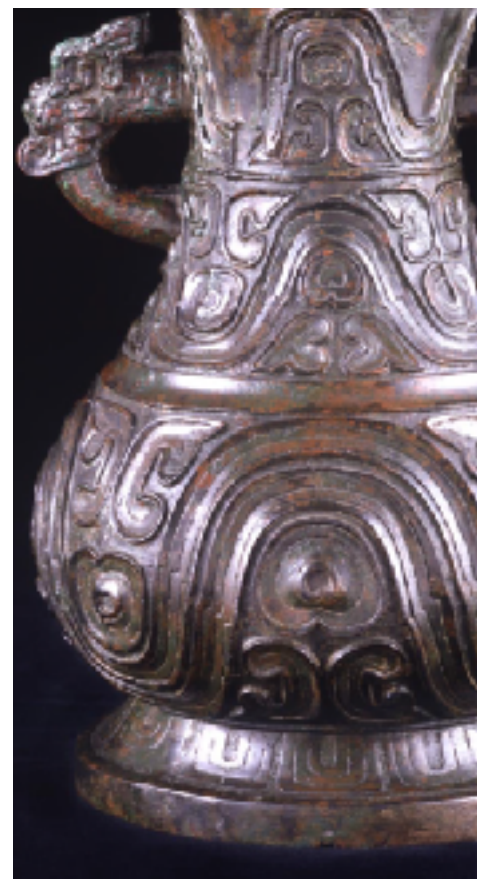
This late Western Zhou dynasty ritual wine vessel, *hu* is an excellent example of its type and projects a real sense of power by its large size, broad pear-shaped body and the dramatic play of light and shadow across its surface decoration.

*Hu* vessels such as this were often made in pairs and would originally have had a cover. The surface decoration differs from the previous example in that the wave pattern design is cast much deeper into the body.

The animal-form handles at the neck are cast quite wide of the neck and successfully act as a counterbalance to the width of the lower body and the spreading foot acts as a strong base for the form.

It is clear that this piece would have been made for an important noble family.

An archaic ritual wine vessel, *hu*, late Western Zhou dynasty,



The heavenly horse, *tianma*, got its name after word reached the Han court of the 'Martial Emperor' Wu (141-87 BC) of horses from the West that were incredibly swift and strong, that sweated blood and were able to gallop great distances in a day.

These horses, known as Ferghana, were named after the Ferghana valley where they originated (in present day Uzbekistan). A supply of horses was obtained and these were indeed far superior to those that the elite had previously owned. 4

This horse was most likely made for the tomb of a nobleman and probably part of a group of four horses that would have pulled a chariot for its owner in the after life. It is cast in nine separate parts, the main part of the body, the four legs, the tail, the head and neck and the two ears. These were then riveted together.

This horse is approximately 125cm high, so the advantage of casting this in parts meant that the individual moulds could be much smaller than if it was cast whole, in one piece.



A bronze 'Heavenly Horse', *tianma*, Han Dynasty, approx 125cm high.



This Tang bronze mirror is cast in eight lobes and depicts a lively scaly three-clawed dragon. The pose of the dragon is quite unusual as it looks slightly ungainly with its head reversed and its front and back legs facing each other and splayed in the air. However, the artist has successfully conveyed the sense of movement, as if the dragon is flying slightly out of control through the air amongst swirling clouds.

The casting is first rate and the scales on the body are really crisply rendered. The claws convey a real sense of power of the animal, which is slightly contradicted by the rather humorous facial express of the animal with its mouth agape and its long curled tongue extended.

This mirror can be compared to a similar mirror, but cast in reverse Fig 3 in the publication *Bronze Mirrors from Sui to Tang Dynasty*, Uragami Sokyudo. 5 This version also captures a sense of movement and realism that is characteristic of the Tang dynasty, but the dragon slightly lacks the detail and power of the Compton Verney example. This can especially be seen in the rendering of the claws and curve of the spine as it terminates to the coiled tail.

For those that have not yet ventured to near Stratford-Upon-Avon along the M40 from London, I would thoroughly recommend Compton Verney as a must see, as it houses one of the finest collections of archaic bronzes in the West after the British Museum and the Guimet.



A bronze eight-lobed 'dragon' mirror, Tang dynasty, approx 18.5cm diameter



Fig 3. A bronze eight-lobed dragon mirror, Tang dynasty, 18.7cm, diameter, Uragami-Sokyu-do, Tokyo.



A large bronze ritual wine vessel, *lei*, Eastern Zhou dynasty.



A large ritual wine vessel, *hu*, Western Zhou dynasty



A bronze ritual food vessel, *gui*, Western Zhou dynasty



A bronze ritual wine vessel, *zhi*, early Western Zhou dynasty.



A large bronze ritual wine vessel, *you*, Eastern Zhou dynasty.



A large bronze ritual wine vessel, *lei*, Western Zhou dynasty.



A large archaic bronze water vessel, *jian*, Eastern Zhou dynasty.

## Bibliography

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