

ANCIENT CHINA: Design Your Own Bronze Vessel

At the Asian Art Museum, most objects from the Shang Dynasty (1600–1050 BCE) come from tombs. These objects and the tombs themselves are among the only surviving physical records from early China and are the main source of what we know about the people of that time.

Many bronze vessels from this period are inscribed with text that commemorates important achievements or events. The inscription inside the museum's bronze rhinoceros describes how a king rewarded a member of his court, while the inscription inside a square food vessel celebrates victory in battle. In this way, the bronzes are like trophies we might make today.

If you were to design a bronze vessel for a friend who has done something important for you, what shape would you make it? How would you decorate it? Would you use designs like the ones on the bronze vessels in the museum? What would you inscribe on it?

DURATION

15–20 minutes

VOCABULARY

Bronze: (noun) a yellowish-brown metal consisting of a mix of lead, copper, and tin.

Inscription: (noun) a historical, religious, or other record cut, impressed, painted, or written on stone, brick, metal, or other hard surface.

Ritual: (noun) a religious or solemn ceremony consisting of a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order.

Tomb: (noun) a large vault, typically an underground one, for burying the dead.



Ritual vessel in the shape of a rhinoceros, probably 1100–1050 BCE. China; unearthed in Liangshan, Shandong province, Shang dynasty (approx. 1600–1050 BCE). Bronze. Asian Art Museum, The Avery Brundage Collection, B60B1+. Photograph © Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

Ritual food vessel (*fangding*), approx. 1042–1021 BCE. China, Western Zhou period (approx. 1050–771 BCE). Bronze. Asian Art Museum, The Avery Brundage Collection, B60B2+. Photograph © Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

Design your own bronze vessel.



What would you inscribe on your vessel?

Extension: After designing your bronze vessel, use nearby materials to create a 3D model.