

CHINESE BRONZE  
FLOWER VESSELS

## Chinese Bronze Flower Vessels



M I C H A E L  
GOEDHUIS





*Leaving the Bath* (1700s) and on the right, detail of a bronze flower vessel showing the ultimate later flowering of the literati aesthetic in a domestic environment



## *Chinese Bronze Flower Vessels*

Interest in flower vases and other vessels from China's Second Bronze Age (10th - 18th century) is still at a stage which merits Rose Kerr's description of them as the Cinderella of Chinese arts. Yet while indeed the full beam of modern scholarship may still have to lighten our path here, there has been in recent years an upsurge of interest in the field from private collectors and public institutions, both of whom have begun to recognise it as academically and commercially neglected.

It may seem strange that these bronzes, which had enjoyed such a vogue in Europe in the second half of the 19th century, then avidly collected by private individuals and dealers in Paris as well as by Western museums (the Victoria and Albert Museum holding the world's largest collection) were largely forgotten about thereafter.

The explanation for this lies in the fact that, in the first decades of the 20th century, the Western art world was overwhelmed by the sudden emergence of ancient bronzes from excavations in China which were quickly recognised as among the greatest manifestations of man's cultural history. Then, in the excitement, the later bronzes were unceremoniously brushed aside as it was uncritically assumed they were no more than pale versions of their majestic forebears.

It is the purpose of this exhibition to show how, on the contrary, the Second Bronze Age of China in fact represents an emphatic demonstration of the way in which master craftsmen of a later era, while holding firm to their reverence for the classical past, were able to reinterpret it, incorporating subtle references to these ancient masterpieces, to create works of great aesthetic novelty and charm, a quality absent from the earlier ones.

Many of the flower vessels in the exhibition date from the Song and Yuan dynasties (960 - 1368), with more precise dating within that period still to be established by scholars working in the field. Interestingly, bronze vessels actually datable to the Song period are often quite remote from any classical models. The audacious fusion of decorative ingredients, first seen at this time and freely developed in the course of the following centuries, shows a completely different archaism to that found in Song manuals of ancient bronzes.

And it was precisely this divergence from the prototype with its subtle allusions to the antique that was appreciated by the literatus, flattered by the implication he had to be cleverly erudite to understand their import.

The Song dynasty is generally acknowledged, at least by Chinese connoisseurs, to be the high point of Chinese culture, and by the 13th century, when Marco Polo knew it, the country was certainly far richer, more productive, more populous, more advanced technologically and better governed than Europe.



It was also the period when a series of archaeological excavations detonated a fashion for collecting antiquities similar to the later European Renaissance's fascination with Greek and Roman antiquities.

It was in this period that China's unique version of the Renaissance Man in the final form of the Scholar Gentleman was created. He formed part of an elite civil service, empowered not only to run the country, but to embody the highest ideals of Chinese culture. Part of this lofty status, which he had acquired through a ferociously competitive series of state examinations, involved developing an aesthetic ethos associated with classical literature, painting, music, calligraphy, wine and connoisseurship, all of which, particularly in good company, constituted the quintessence of a very sophisticated *douceur de vivre*.

There are many delightful paintings illustrating this civilised life . . . gatherings of scholars in shaded garden pavilions drinking wine, composing poetry, practising calligraphy and painting as well as refining the art of convivial conversation. This elite of gentleman scholars became perhaps the most cultivated society the world has known and it was this class, connoisseurs of life at its most exquisite, who were the patrons of the vases in the exhibition.

But, for some vessels of the period, it is not yet possible to distinguish between those produced during the Song (960 - 1279) and the Yuan (1279 - 1368), as the Mongols, though ostensibly having little regard for the great classical traditions of China, appear not to have initiated any stylistic rupture with the preceding dynasty in the area of bronzes.

The subsequent Ming dynasty (1368 - 1644), however, with its energetic nationalism and renewed self-confidence, epitomised by the reign of the artistically gifted and highly cultured Xuande Emperor (1426 - 1435), gave rise to an era in art and manners in which the sophistication of the Song yielded its hallowed status in favour of a more robust and realistic aesthetic, leading to a new demarcation of stylistic features. Away from the court, this process seems to have taken longer in the area of bronze vases than in ceramics, with vessels continuing to be made in the earlier style, illustrating the tenacity with which the scholar's world held onto the aesthetic ideals of the Song.

Because so much of the Chinese scholar's life was spent seated at a table, practising calligraphy, writing poetry and looking at paintings, the objects on and around his table came to assume great importance. Hence beautiful works of art were made - brushpots for his brushes, rocks to evoke the mysteries of nature, incense burners and flower vases - all to promote an atmosphere of intellectual and spiritual refinement. And these objects were savoured not only for their expressive forms, subdued colours and subtle designs, but also for the train of poetic and intellectual associations they evoked. The educated scholar would sit quietly relishing the exercise of his erudition on the allusions to the antique in items before him.

We have much evidence of the scholar's lifestyle in the numerous treatises written in the 16th and 17th centuries on fashion and taste known as Handbooks of Elegant Living. They were mostly written by scholars living in the Jiangnan of Southern Central China and define what the cultured gentleman should surround himself with in his study.

The most complete of these is Treatise on Superfluous Things by Wen Zhenghang which describes the objects essential to the life of the scholar, offering, in particular, guidance on flower vessels and flower arrangement:

In spring and winter one should use bronze, in autumn and summer, porcelain. In the main hall one should use large vases, and in the library small ones. Bronze and porcelain are to be valued, gold and silver abhorred. Vases with ring handles should be avoided, as should matching pairs of vases. Slender elegant vases are appropriate, over- elaborate ones are not . . .

Another scholar, Zhang Chou, in 1595, in a monograph entitled *Putting Flowers in Vases*, wrote as follows:

As a general rule, and in order to keep flowers fresh, the choice of vase is most important . . . the mouth of the vase should be small, while the base should be thick to ensure stability without impairing its essential elegance.

A constant theme of these works dealing with flowers and their arrangement is an accent on the *type* of vessel to be used. Form and decoration were critical in the way they reflected the sophisticated and restrained aesthetic that had evolved in the Song period.

A noteworthy part of the story is how, from the Song period onwards, admiration for these vases spread to Japan and Korea where they had been imported. Native craftsmen then began their own journeys of reinterpretation with very different stylistic results.

I have enjoyed Chinese flower vases for nearly fifty years. They are the most intimate of works of art, calling to mind the image of a venerable scholar in his studio hundreds of years ago quietly savouring the freshness of the flowers amid subtle hints of China's classical past, millennia older still, evoked by the shape and decoration of the vessel containing them.

And, as we hold these beautiful works which have been worn by time and handling, their colour and patination assuming greater richness and variegation through human contact, we cannot but be moved by the way they recall a culture that achieved such heights but which is now long gone.

MICHAEL GOEDHUIS



*Bronze pear-shaped vase*  
Yuan/early Ming dynasty · H: 25 cm









[LEFT] *Bronze vase with foliate mouth*

Song dynasty · H: 25.5 cm

[CENTRE] *Bronze Gu vase*

Ming dynasty · H: 26.5 cm

[RIGHT] *Bronze gilt inlaid vase with dragon handles*

Ming dynasty · H: 22.5 cm









*Bronze pear-shaped vase*  
Song/Yuan dynasty · H: 21 cm











*Bronze Hu inlaid in silver and gold*  
Ming dynasty · H: 41 cm





*Bronze arrow vase*  
Song/Yuan dynasty · H: 18 cm











*Bronze arrow vase*

Song/Yuan dynasty · H: 18 cm





**Bronze vase**  
Song/Yuan dynasty · H: 17.8 cm











*Parcel gilt bronze vase*

Ming dynasty, Wanli period (1573-1619) · H: 29.5 cm







## *The Collection*





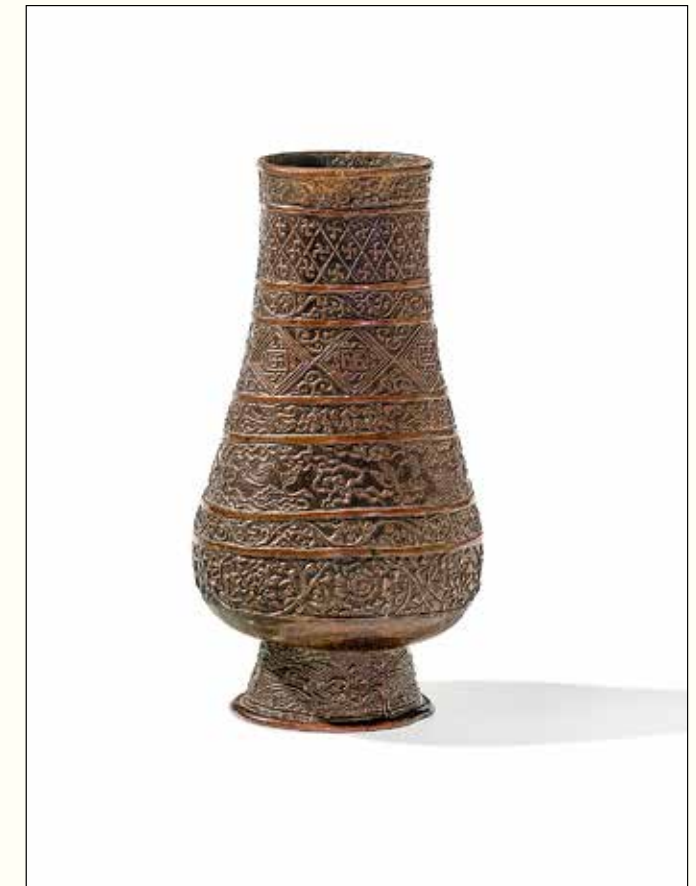
1



*Bronze Hu inlaid in silver and gold*  
Ming dynasty, 17th century or earlier  
H: 41 cm (16 in)



3



*Bronze pear-shaped vase*  
Song/ Yuan dynasty 13th-14th century  
H: 21 cm (8¼ in)

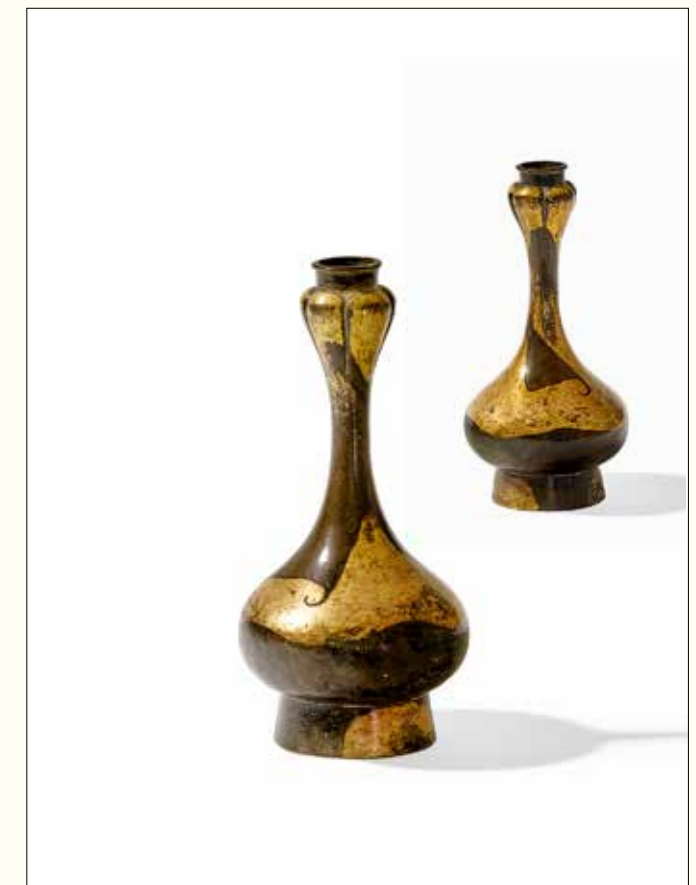
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*Bronze vase with mythical beast handles*  
Ming dynasty, 14th-15th century  
H: 29 cm (11¼ in)



4



*Pair of parcel gilt bronze vases*  
Ming dynasty, c. 1600  
H: 18 cm (7 in)



5

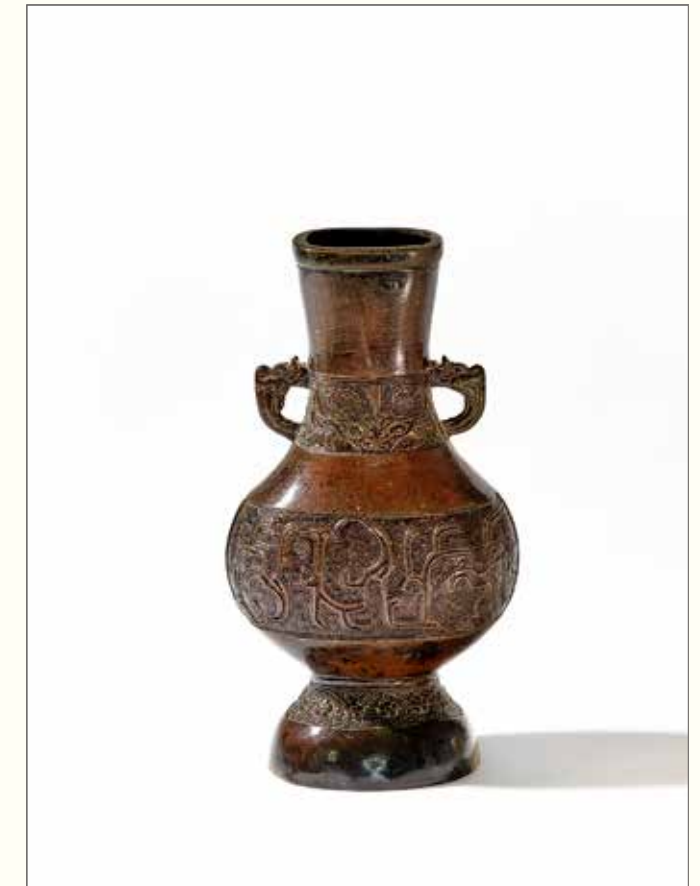


*Bronze pear-shaped vase*

Yuan/early Ming dynasty, 1279–1400  
H: 25 cm (10 in)



7



*Bronze vase with mythical beast handles*

Song/Yuan dynasty, 12th–14th century  
H: 22 cm (8 3/4 in)

6

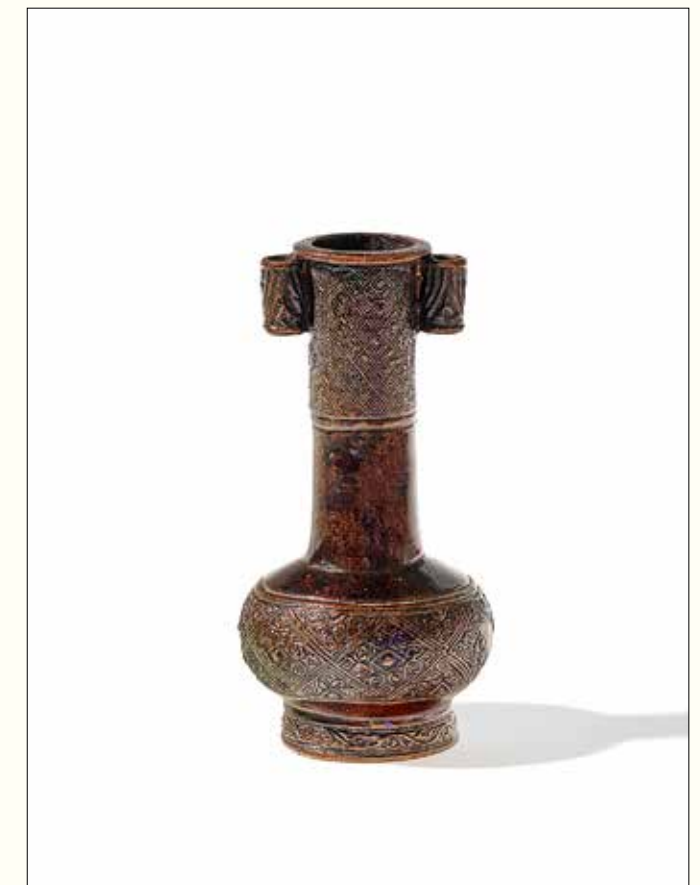


*Bronze vase with mythical beast handles*

Early Ming dynasty, c. 1500  
H: 34 cm (13 1/4 in)



8



*Bronze arrow vase*

Ming dynasty, late 15th century  
H: 15 cm (6 in)



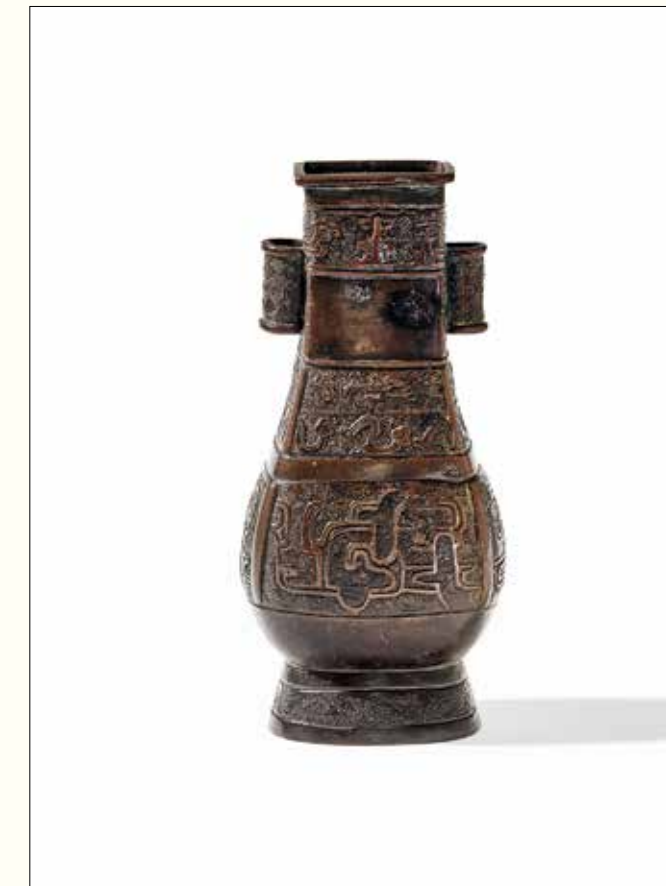
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**Bronze Gu vase**  
Ming dynasty, 17th century  
H: 26.5 cm (10½ in)



11

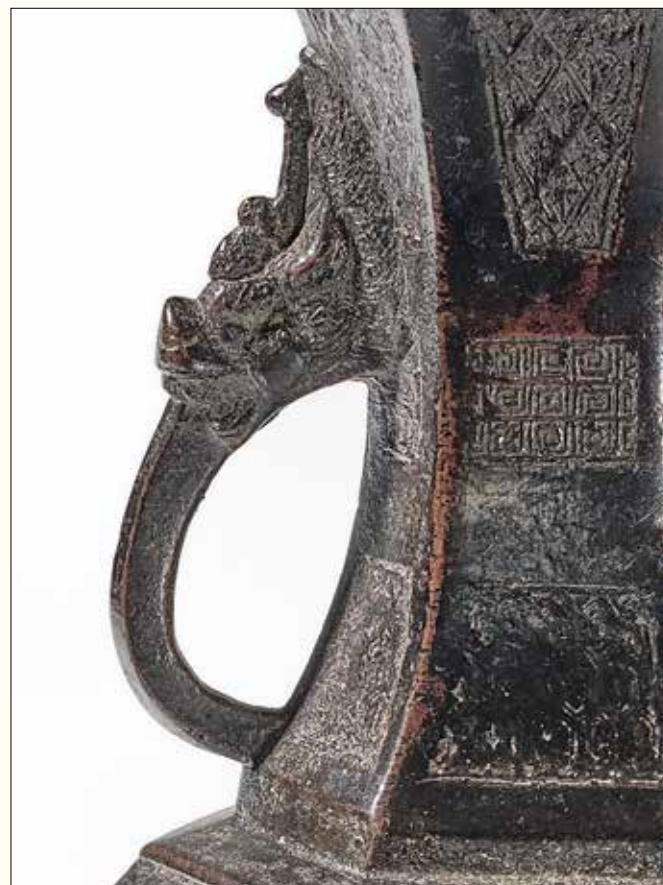


**Bronze arrow vase**  
Song/Yuan dynasty, 12th–14th century  
H: 22 cm (8½ in)

10



**Bronze vase with dragon head handles**  
Song/Yuan dynasty, 12th–14th century  
H: 31 cm (12¼ in)



12



**Bronze vase with dragon head handles**  
Yuan/Ming dynasty, 14th–16th century  
H: 31 cm (12¼ in)

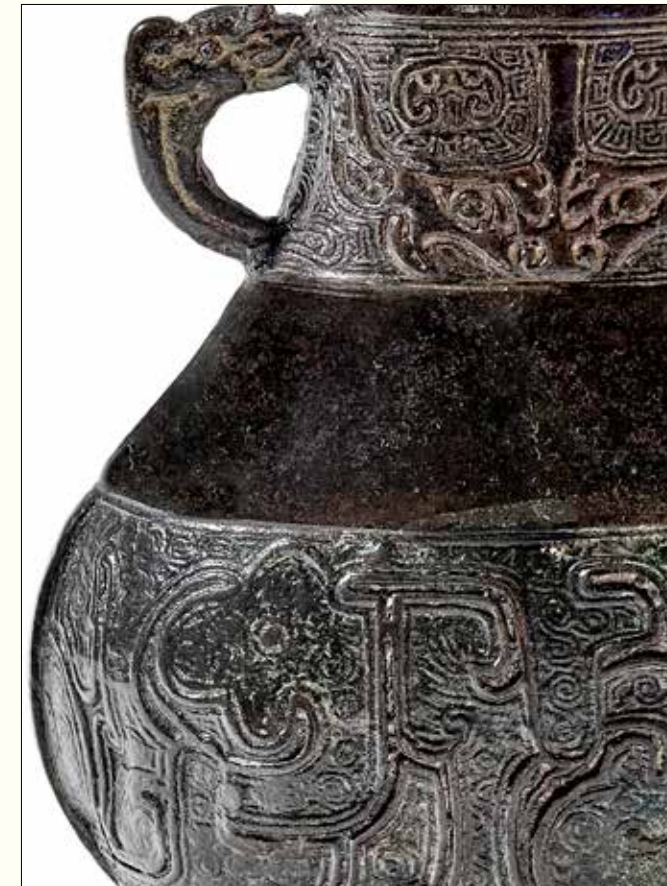


13

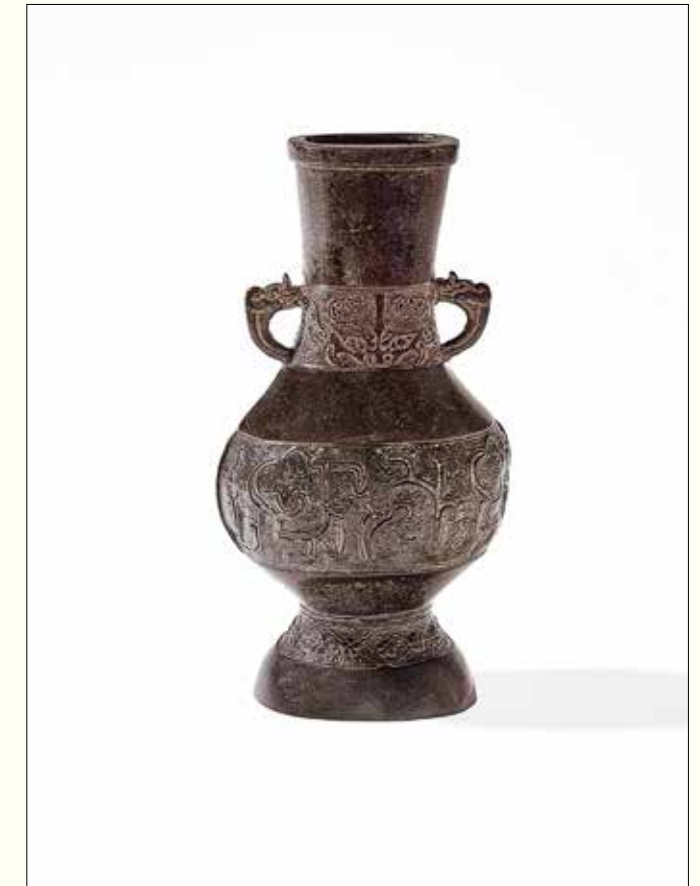


*Bronze vase with ring handles*

Song/Yuan dynasty, 12th-14th century  
H: 23 cm (9 in)



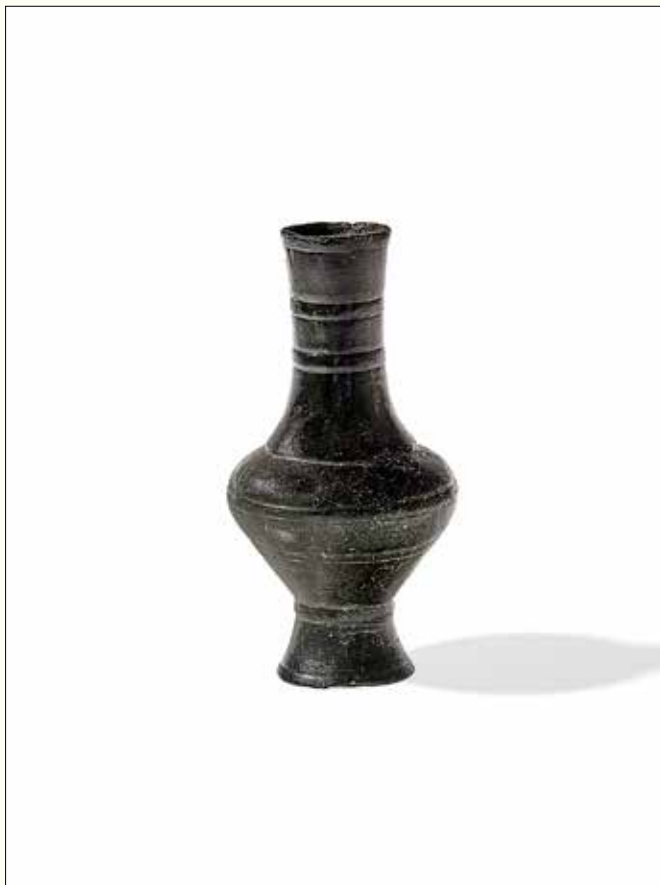
15



*Bronze vase with mythological beast handles*

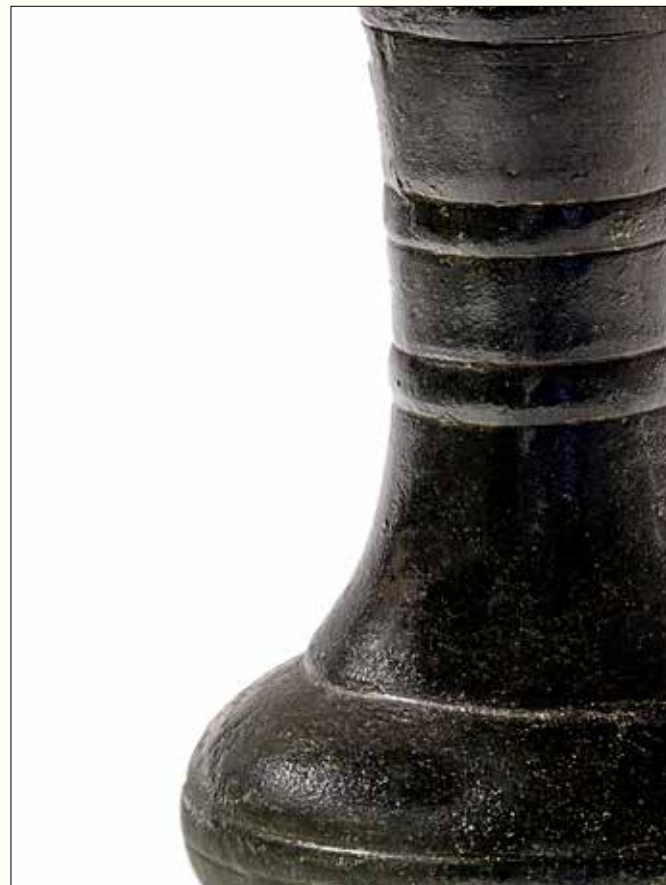
Song/Yuan dynasty, 12th-14th century  
H: 22 cm (8 3/4 in)

14



*Bronze vase*

Song dynasty, 12th century  
H: 23 cm (9 in)



16



*Bronze arrow vase*

Song/Yuan dynasty, 12th-14th century  
H: 22 cm (8 1/2 in)



17



*Bronze vase with foliate mouth*

Song dynasty, 12th century  
H: 25.5 cm (10 in)



19



*Bronze vase*

Song/Yuan dynasty, 12th-14th century  
H: 17.8 cm (7 in)

18

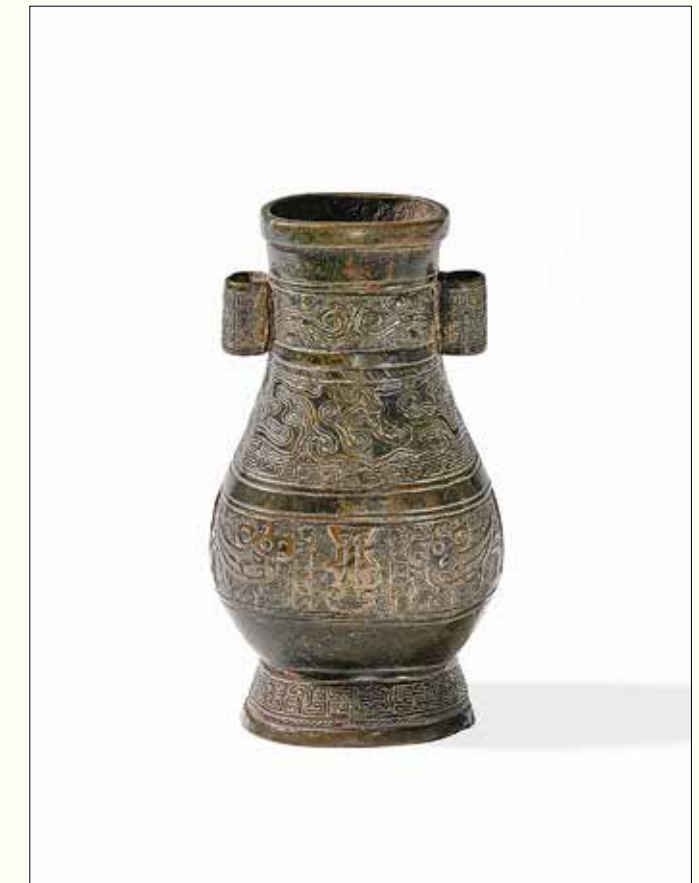


*Bronze gilt inlaid vase with dragon handles*

Ming dynasty, 15th-16th dynasty  
H: 22.5 cm (8 3/4 in)



20

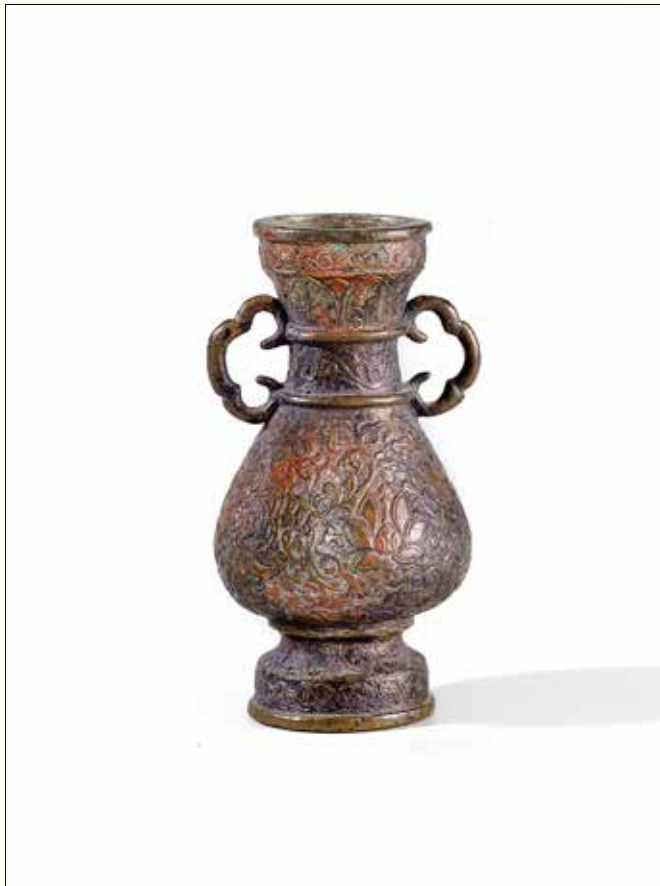


*Bronze arrow vase*

Song/Yuan dynasty, 12th-14th dynasty  
H: 18 cm (7 in)



21



*Bronze vase with foliate handles*

Ming dynasty, 16th century  
H: 13.5 cm (5½ in)



23



*Parcel gilt bronze vase with climbing dragon*

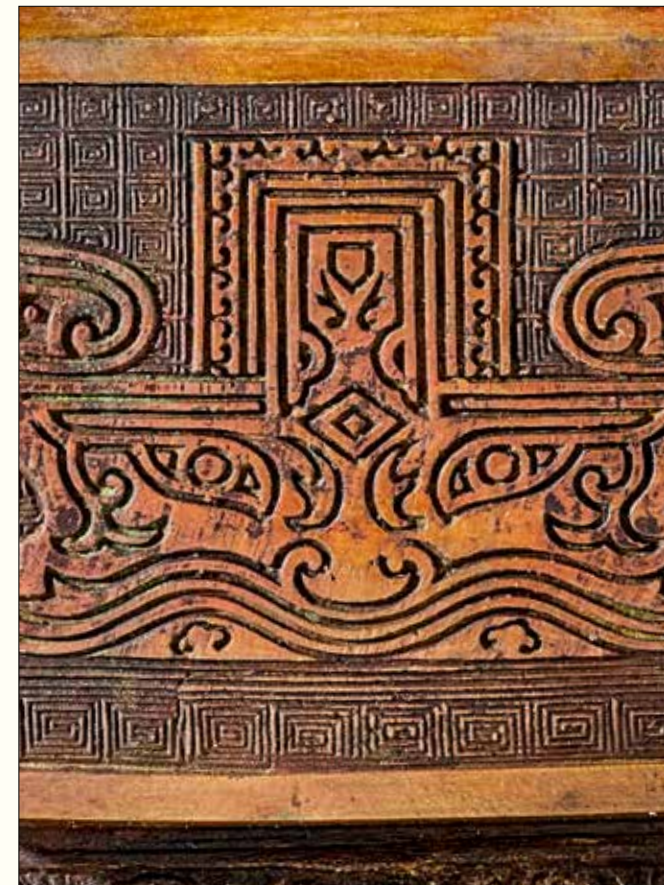
Ming dynasty, 16th century  
H: 15 cm (6 in)

22



*Bronze vase*

Song dynasty, 12th-13th century  
H: 15 cm (6 in)



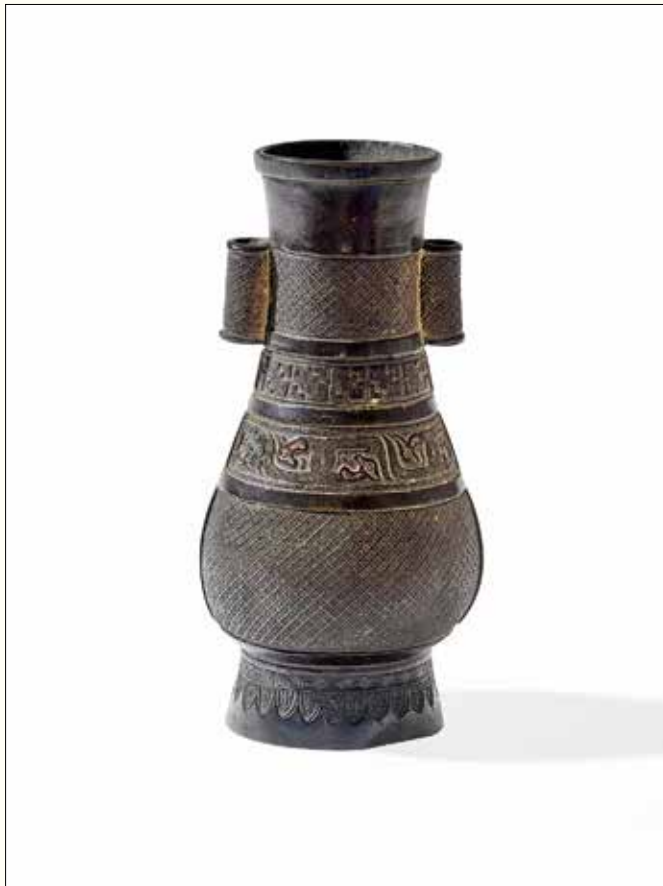
24



*Parcel gilt bronze vase*

Ming dynasty, Wanli mark and period (1573-1619)  
H: 29.5 cm (11½ in)





***Bronze arrow vase***

Song/Yuan dynasty, 12th-14th century  
H: 19.5 cm (7¾ in)



## Scenes from literati life in old China



*Gathering of scholars in a shaded garden  
(with a small flower vessel on table)*



*Official business with early bronzes on full display*



## COLOPHON

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Image on page 4: *Yang Guifei Leaving the Bath* (楊貴妃出浴圖), 1700s  
China, Qing dynasty (1644-1911); Hanging scroll, ink, colours  
and gold on silk. Painting: 96.5 × 44.1 cm (38 × 17<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in.)  
From the Cleveland Museum of Art