

OBJECT IN FOCUS

**Lidded ritual ewer (*guang*)**



China, probably middle Yangzi River Valley  
Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–1050 BCE),  
ca. 1100–1050 BCE

Bronze

12 3/8 x 12 3/8 x 5 11/16 in

Gift of Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer. Freer Gallery of Art, F1961.33

**Describe**

This interestingly shaped ewer, a vase-shaped pitcher, is called a *guang* (“*gwang*”) in Chinese. It is designed as a pouring vessel. The broad, raised spout aligns with a vertical handle at the back. It ingeniously combines a handful of fantastic beasts into its form. At the front of the vessel is a horned bird with a hooked beak. Its wings, composed of coiled dragons, cover its flanks. The space between these areas is filled with matching pairs of dragons, reptiles, and birds. The handle also takes the shape of a standing bird, its head caught in the jaws of a horned beast. It divides the animal mask—*taotie*—into halves. Find one of its staring eyes. Below it is a snout and open mouth. The creature has the head of a snake man in either side of its mouth. The lid is decorated with two prominent animal masks: a ram head at the front and a buffalo head at the back. See if you can identify the animals that form their horns and fill the area between the two bodiless heads.

**Analyze**

Real and imaginary animals are frequently seen in the surface decoration of ancient Chinese bronzes. Realistic depictions of living animals were typically produced in southern China, while in the north, fantastic creatures were prevalent. One of the most characteristic mythical images decorating Shang vessels is the so-called *taotie*. It is a frontal animal-like mask with a pair of staring eyes, often protruding in high relief. Between the eyes is a nose, with jaws shown directly below. The *taotie* motif here also includes eyebrows, horns, ears, snout, and fangs. The emergence of animal-shaped bronze vessels and the popularity of animal motifs clearly indicate the importance of animals in the repertoire of artisans of this era.



Smithsonian

Freer Gallery of Art  
Arthur M. Sackler Gallery

## Interpret

Chinese bronzes like this *guang* show a mastery in casting, rivaling that of other ancient civilizations. They were used to hold wine, water, grain, or meat in sacrifices to ancestors or in ritual banquets by Shang kings. The shape of each vessel matches its intended purpose. The fabulous animal motifs are unlikely to have been purely decorative. Although their exact meanings are unknown, they must have played a certain role in the rituals or in the popular imagination.

## Inquire

- What animals and creatures can you identify on this ewer?
- Why do you think the craftsman covered the vessel with creatures and animals?
- How do we show respect for our deceased family members today?

## Resources

View this object online at <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1961.33a-b/>

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

