

## OBJECT IN FOCUS

### Ladle



China

Western Han dynasty, Dated 61 BCE

Bronze with gold inlay

13 9/16 x 4 1/2 x 8 11/16 in

The Dr. Paul Singer Collection of Chinese Art of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; a joint gift of the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation, Paul Singer, the AMS Foundation for the Arts, Sciences, and Humanities, and the Children of Arthur M. Sackler. Paul Singer collection, RLS1997.48.827

### Describe

This hemispherical ladle has a long handle, which curves upward and ends in a dragon head. Four raised horizontal bands appear at the base of the handle. Between the dragon head and the bands is a twenty-three-character inscription inlaid with gold. The inscription is rendered in two columns. At the beginning of each column is a stylized bird also inlaid with gold wire. Translated, the inscription reads: "As commanded by the magistrate of Chang'an this bronze measuring vessel was made; it holds a weight of three *jin* and two *liang* (about 1.75 lbs); it was made in the first year of the Shenjue era by the workshop of Gongji; this is number nine."\* The handle has been cleaned to expose the inscription, while the rest of the ladle surface is covered with a rough, green patina (typical long-term burial corrosion).

### Analyze

Though short-lived, the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE) set standards for many systems that would last for centuries, including weights and measures. The inscription on this Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) ladle refers to a government standard of measure. It also indicates that the ladle belonged to a series of similar objects made by the capital workshops. They were most likely to be used at various government departments where such a system of measuring was required.

### Interpret

The inscribed characters on the ladle were written in *lishu*—clerical or official script. This style of writing was used mainly for official government purposes when it first emerged. During the Han dynasty, almost all official documents were written in *lishu*. *Lishu* is notable for its emphasis on horizontal strokes and somewhat angular form, as seen in the inscription here. The character lines are very curvy, suggesting they were not engraved but cast into the ladle. The gold wires were then hammered in after the ladle was cast.

\* Translation from Max Loehr, *Relics of Ancient China, from the Collection of Dr. Paul Singer* (New York: Asia Society, 1965), no. 123.



## Inquire

- What can we infer about cultural values during the Han dynasty by analyzing this artifact?
- Why do you think the artisan inscribed the date and manufacturer on the artifact?
- Research the origins of measuring standards we use today: foot, meter, yard, grams, teaspoon, etc. Were any of these measurements dictated from a standard initiated by a government?

## Resources

View this object online at <https://asia.si.edu/object/RLS1997.48.827/>

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

