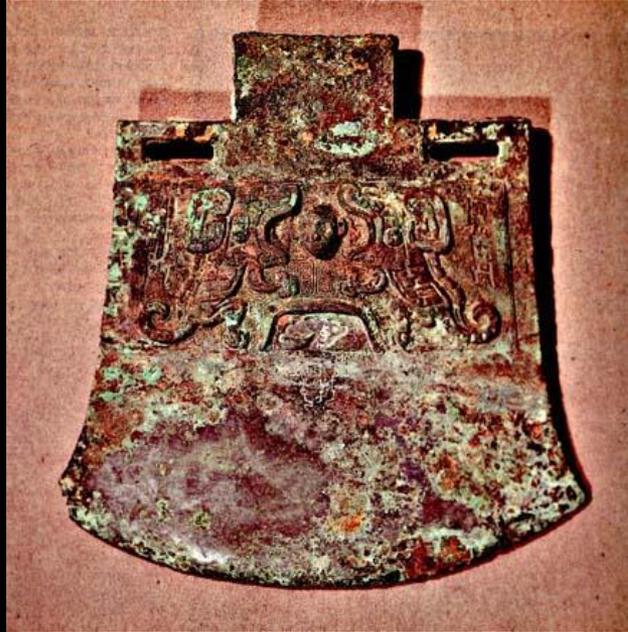


CHINESE BRONZES



The Shang and Zhou Dynasties

Quick Write

- ▣ What are some of the purposes of art?

Bronze age

Somewhere around 2000-1800 BCE the Shang dynasty began to cast bronze. Like most cultures that began to use bronze in an early stage, it was put to weaponry.



But what set the Shang apart in early bronze metallurgy was that they began to devote a great deal of attention to intricate detail and casting things other than common weapons, including ceremonial weapons and vessels.





Ceremonial axes

The Legend of the Founding of the First Dynasty –

Mythical King Yu brought the primordial floods under control, divided his land into nine provinces, and had nine food cauldrons cast to represent them.



When the Xia fell, the nine bronzes, also called “The Auspicious Bronzes of the State,” passed to the Shang, and in turn, to the Zhou when they conquered the Shang. Possession of bronze vessels became a symbol for power and prestige.



Shang and Zhou rulers used cauldrons, cups, pitchers, and other vessels to present offerings to deities and ancestors



Thus rulers reaffirmed their hereditary rights to power and attempted to persuade the gods and their ancestors to influence events favorably.





Spouted ritual wine vessel (*Guang*),
Shang dynasty, 13th century BCE



Detail of ritual wine vessel

The designs on the vessels depicted real and imaginary animal forms, as well as geometric patterns.

Many of the designs are formed into animal masks (*taotie*). The background is a series of spiral patterns, often one animal form flows into another animal form.



Many of the vessels themselves were cast in the shape of animals, both real and imaginary.



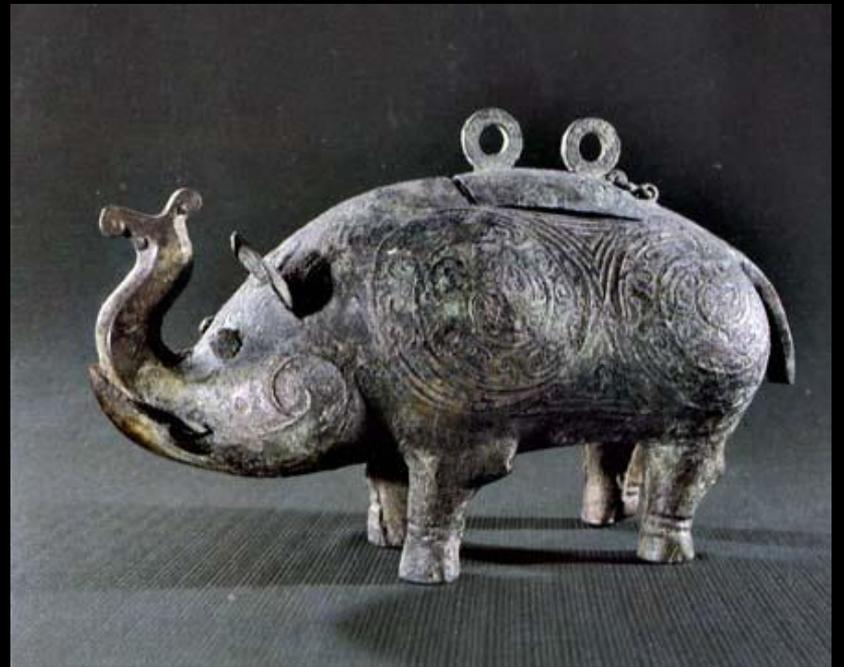
rhinoceros

dragon





owl



During the Western Zhou, zoomorphic forms became more abstract.



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The Eastern Zhou added vessels with purely geometric patterns.



Casting Method

First a clay model was made and then encased with outer layer of damp clay; when firm, the outer layer was cut off in sections and fired to form a mold.

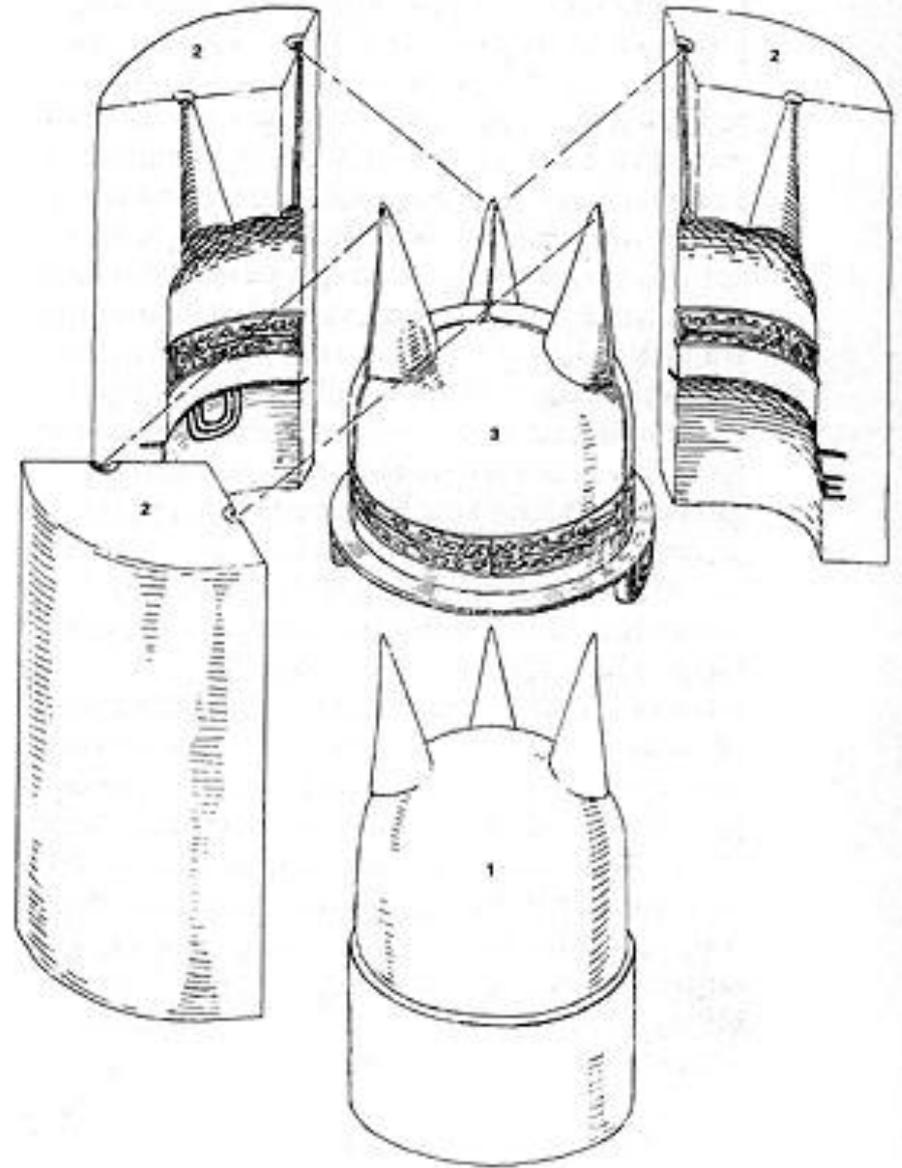
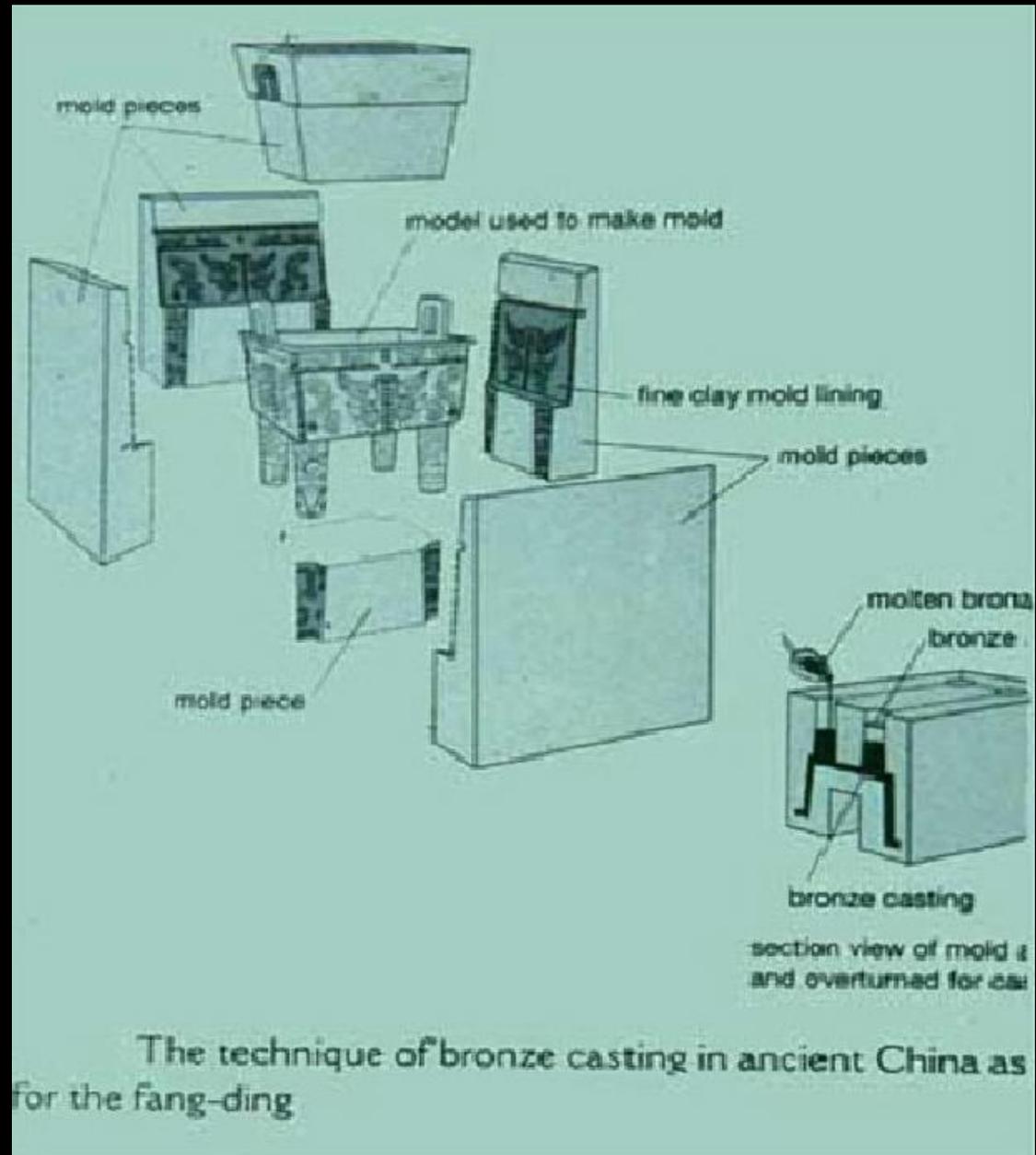


Diagram showing how early Chinese bronzes were formed: the model or core (1), the sections of the mold (2), and the completed vessel (3—the cauldron no. 4)

Next, the model was shaved down to become the core.

Sections of mold were reassembled around the core and molten bronze was poured into the gap between the two.



Once cooled, the mold and core were removed
and the vessel polished.



Ceremonial bell,
Eastern Zhou,
early 5th century.
Height 15 in.





Detail of bell



Twenty-six bronze zhong bells (c. 550 BCE).

Xichuan, height 23.6-120.4 cm.

“With these elaborately cast vessels, bronze itself became an art form. It moved from the utilitarian to something...very meaningful and deeply religious not only to the rulers but to the Chinese civilization...in general”.

