

SOME REMARKABLE OLD CHINESE BRONZES.

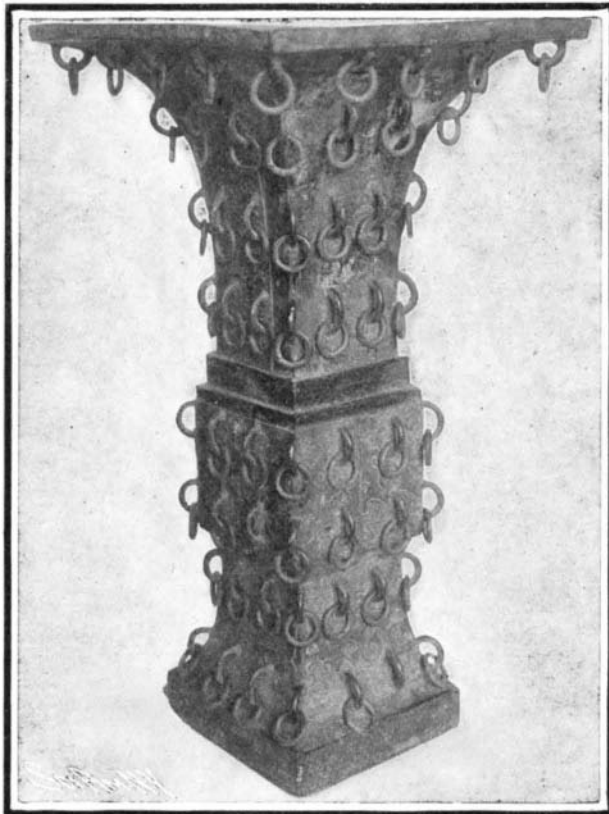
BY WALTER L. BEASLEY.

The American Museum of Natural History has installed the largest and most comprehensive Chinese collection that has yet been brought from the Celestial empire. This exhibition is due to the generosity of Jacob S. Schiff, Esq. Dr. Berthold Laufer, the well-known Oriental traveler, for the past two years has been carrying on systematic and painstaking researches in the various Chinese provinces to collect the material. Thoroughly familiar with the Chinese language, literature, and art, as he was, this trained explorer has been able to bring together an authentic and representative array of objects designed to show the past and present state of Chinese culture, and also the influence which Chinese civilization has had over the whole of Eastern Asia. The wonderful artistic development of the people is especially brought out in their unexcelled color work in porcelain, *cloisonné*, as well as their great skill in fashioning objects in metal, clay, and wood. One of the most valuable and interesting features of the collection is a remarkable series of bronze vessels, some dating before the Christian era. These form in themselves a noteworthy contribution to our knowledge of ancient Chinese art. Their shape, decoration, and technique are of no common order, and they unquestionably rank as the most characteristic products of the early bronze founders of China which have yet reached this country. The bronze vessels were used almost entirely in the elaborate ceremonial worship of Buddhism in the various temples and monasteries. A few were used as decorative features for temple and palace approaches. Incense vessels were largely employed; in most cases the incense issued from perforations in the cover or through the nostrils of the figure adorning the top. The Chinese bronze founder's chief aim was to make power attractive by combining it with the terrible. Ferocious mythological beasts, with glaring eyes and gaping mouths, surmount the top in many instances. In the ritual

of this early period, each kind of vessel was devoted to a particular use. Those in the form of monsters and birds were incense burners proper. Prof. Frederick Hirth, occupying the chair of Chinese at Columbia University, in a recent interview has favored the writer with notes and opinions on some of the specimens, which lend additional interest to the accompanying narrative. The coming of the new religion of Buddhism from Hindostan in the first century

A. D. marked an exceedingly important epoch in Oriental history and art. The early Buddhist missionaries not only proclaimed new doctrines and a new code of ethics, but were also the possessors of a new art and a new culture. The bronze vessels vary in height from less than one foot to two and a half, and differ accordingly in circumference. They show a love of round and square patterns, combined with a grotesque ferocity. The pair of joined horses are probably the oldest specimens in the collection, so ancient that there is no authentic record assigned to them, and none could be obtained by the explorer. Their origin is therefore shrouded in obscurity. From the fact that they are not so well executed, they are thought to have not been the work of a Chinese artist proper. Bronze models of horses were cast nearly two thousand years ago by workmen having carefully measured the build of the animal.

The bronze horses here figured were probably made in a remote locality where there was little artistic taste, or may have drifted from some savage or barbarous tribe outside the Chinese dominion, say the Tartars in the North or Siberia. Next to the horses in age is the bronze libation cup. It is authentically assigned to the Shang dynasty, 1766 to 1122 B. C. The tripod was a libation vessel used in the temples, known as *Tsio*, originally meaning a small bird, but written with a character of the same sound, denotes the ranks of nobility of the Chinese. The vessel has thus become, by way of a *jeu de mot*, a synonym of high rank, and is depicted with other good things and symbolic drawings of a congratulatory character. The bronze rattle or hand-bell, having a loose ball inside, which dates from the Han dynasty, 221-206 B. C., was commonly stuck on a bamboo stick, and used during the performance of the ancient pantomime to create a musical noise to enliven the dance. It was a popular instrument during the Han dynasty. The one here shown is about two thousand years old. It is a strange and notable



Vase of the Sung Dynasty Over 1,000 Years Old.



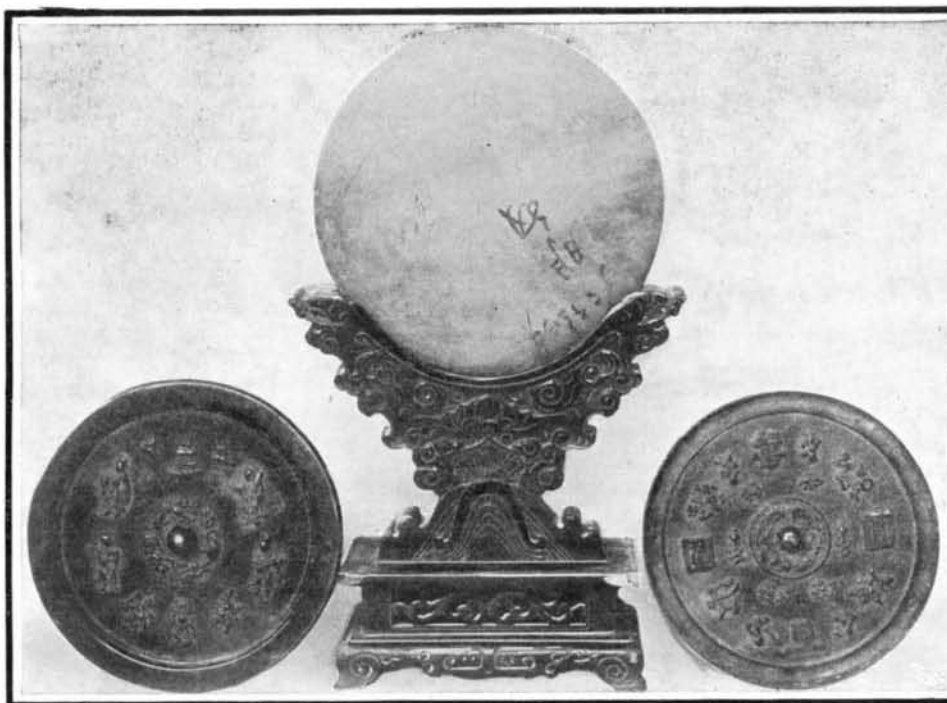
A Censer of the Ming Dynasty.



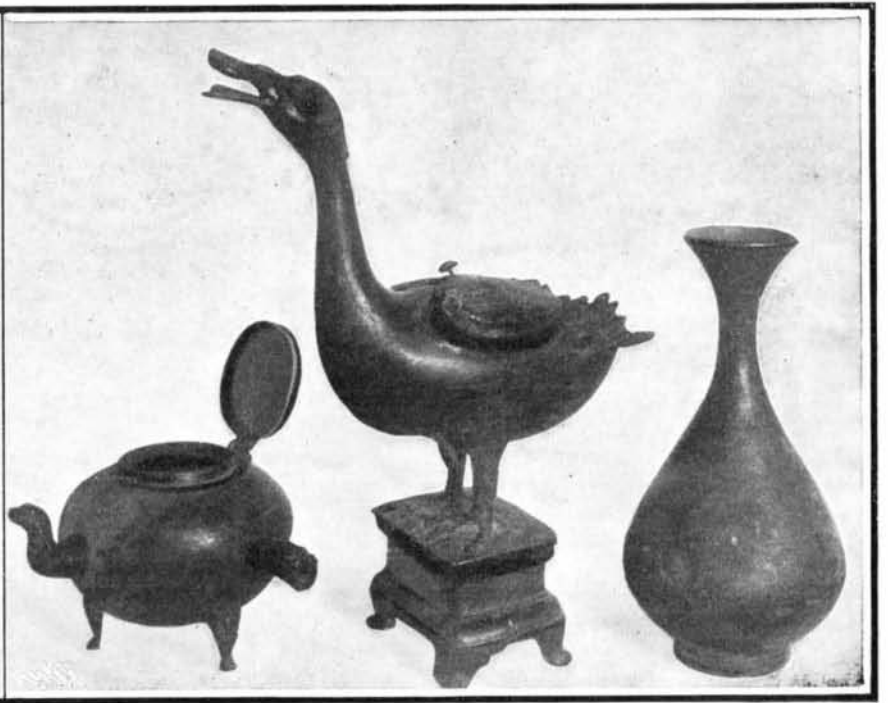
Temple Censer of the Ming Dynasty.



Temple Bell Inlaid with Gold and Silver.



Metallic Mirrors 1,500 Years Old.

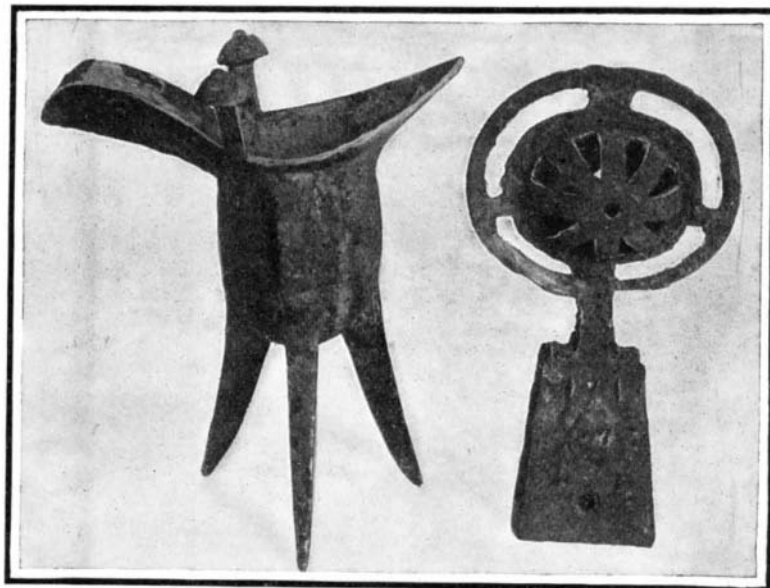


Libation Vessels and Duck Incense Burner.

fact that implements of a similar kind have been found among the old Scythian antiquities. The age of the bronze bottle of the Han dynasty may also be about two thousand years. The shape is met with in a number of porcelain vessels of all descriptions, and has formed the model which has been imitated in various materials by potters and workers in glass. It was well known under the Chou dynasty, and is described as Su-p'ing, that is, the plain bottle, in the catalogue of ancient bronze works. A rare type of a square bronze censer of the Ming dynasty, 1358-1644 A. D., with S-shaped handles on each side, has a cover representing a flattened pyramid crowned with a fierce mythological dog, the heavenly dog of Buddha, with a bushy tail and almost human expression of face. The thunder pattern of ancient times has been largely drawn upon for the filling out of spaces. The top fields of the cover show the mystic diagram known as Pa-kua, said to have been invented by the mythical Emperor Fu-hi. The characters for longevity and good luck are seen on the main side of the vessel. The bronze duck, standing on a footstool of the same material, is of the Ming dynasty. It is hollow, and its wings can be removed when incense sticks are placed inside, the pleasant and sacred fumes being emitted from the beak. Similar works were made under the Chou dynasty, 1122-255 B. C.; they were not, however, used for incense vessels, but for wine libations in the sacrificial service. In devoting vessels to purposes of incense, ancient forms, which can outdate the introduction of Buddhism, were often retained. The vessel looking like a teapot may be said to belong to this category, made in imitation of an ancient wine-holder for sacrificial purposes. The vase with rings attached is described as one of the strange creations of the Sung dynasty. Its whole surface is ornamented with 128 rings, and would remind one of the libation vessels known as Tsun of the Chou dynasty, which has furnished the prototype of a number of the later porcelain shapes. It was used as a sacrificial vessel in the temples. A censer of the Ming dynasty has a unique cover, on which a number of rats are amusing themselves among clusters of grapes and leaves. The feet of the vessel are formed of solid vine trunks. The ornamental scheme is quite ingenious, and has a touch of Japanese humor.

Equaling, if not surpassing, the ceremonial vessels in interest and historic significance, are the splendid series of metallic mirrors, forming the largest collection in the world. The main decorative feature of the mirrors is upon the back. Here, together with ornamental designs, are inscribed the prayers and mottoes of the owner and symbolic representations of that

has been discovered and worked out by Prof. Hirth, whose researches prove that the ornamental parts of certain classes of these mirrors, notably those from the Han dynasty, were greatly influenced by Greek patterns. Other works may have been influenced in a similar way, but there are none in which the Hellenic art is brought out in such a striking way. The new collection contains large numbers of the variety called grape mirrors, the chief ornaments being formed of grapes, vines, and leaves. These grape mirrors were among the most valued relics of ancient art of the im-



Libation Vessel and Hand Bell 2,000 Years Old.

perial museums of the middle ages, and are placed by Chinese archeologists in the time of the Han dynasty (206 B. C. to 291 A. D.). None are provided with an inscription which might throw light upon their exact date of manufacture. Certain analogies with objects of the same alloy, similar in size and general arrangement, though differently ornamented, but bearing distinct dates, seem to confirm the opinion of old Chinese writers that they were the work of the imperial bronze factory known as Shang-fang of the Emperor Wu-Ti, who died 86 B. C. Some of the other kinds of mirrors are dated and throw clear light upon the period of their production, but even if they had been manufactured centuries after the reign of Wu-Ti, the time which has elapsed since the introduction of the grape into China—about the end of the second century B. C.—would have been much too short for Chinese artists to develop an ornament of such high finish, showing the coils, leaves, and fruit of the vine in its most elegant conventionalism, a pattern which it took the artists of Greece many centuries to bring into full

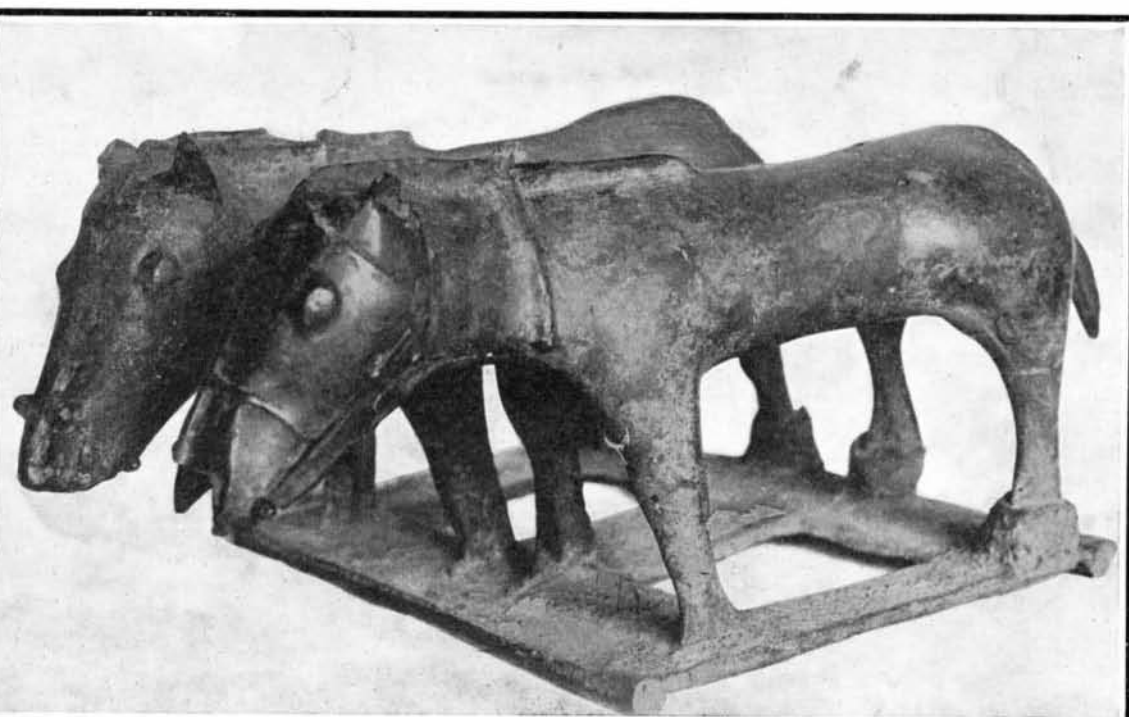
some of his generals founded dynasties in his former possessions of Asia. The easternmost of these Greek kingdoms was that of Bactria, the last Greek king of which died about 50 B. C., after which Bactria was swallowed up by Indo-Scythian conquerors.

The star and unrivaled specimen of the collection, however, is a magnificent temple bell, of extraordinary interest, both from its age, odd shape, and rich decorations, gold and silver being lavished on parts of its surface. The principal ornament is a conventionalized dragon, with eyes inlaid with gold and the lines forming the body of silver wire. The characters forming the inscription on both sides are also of silver wire. A vast amount of historic and sacred lore clusters around this bell. Bells of this pattern are the oldest of all the inventions of the Chinese. They were known long before historical recollection. The Emperor Huang-Ti in the twenty-second century B. C. and others still earlier are said to have cast bells. This means that bells were among the very earliest elements of Chinese culture, and are probably as old as the early sacrificial vessels among the ancient bronze works. The art of casting bells was in full sway in China during the first millennium B. C. One of the main differences of the Chinese from those of European manufacture is the absence of a clapper. Large bells are not swung, but securely sustained by ropes and chains fastened to the handle in frames constructed of strong beams. The bell was struck by a wooden log suspended from above by two ropes and allowing the log to swing against a certain part, the striking of which would bring out the sound to the best advantage. One of its

odd and peculiar ornaments is a number of thumblike projections, from the size of a button to that of a finger, arranged in three rows of three or four sizes, in all twenty-six projections. All the ancient bells of this kind show these buttons, which are thought to have been used for the purpose of adjusting the sound of the bell, since the bell was one of the chief musical instruments used in tuning the temple orchestra. The original pattern of this old bell is found in the Chou dynasty, 1122-255 B. C. The inscription is in silver wire, and as interpreted by Dr. Hirth reads: "Sung-kung Sü chí hōng-chung," the translation of which is: "Hōng, bell of Sü, Duke of Sung." The bell was called Hōng as being classed with a musical instrument, so called, the invention of which was ascribed to one of the fabulous emperors of the third millennium B. C. According to the inscription, Sü was the personal name of the Duke of Sung, who caused the bell to be cast. Bells bearing this inscription were cast under the auspices of a Duke of Sung in the present province of Hunan, whose reign ex-



Incense Vessel of the Ming Dynasty.



A Pair of Bronze Horses of Unknown Antiquity.

SOME REMARKABLE OLD CHINESE BRONZES.

particular dynasty or period in which they were used. Magical powers were attributed to these mirrors. In size they ranged from that of a big coin to a large dish. It should be understood that the smooth side of these in most cases is now covered by rust, and no longer capable of reflecting the human face, but at the time they were made they were actually used for this purpose. The ancient method of grinding was lost during the middle ages. Small ones show convex surfaces, while those of larger size show concave. A noteworthy revelation in the history of Chinese art

development. The fact is that the grape, together with a number of other elements of culture, was unknown in China prior to the expedition of the Chinese General Chang K'ien, whom the Emperor Wu-Ti sent on a political mission to the Indo-Scythians, who had established their capital somewhere on the Oxus River. The current court language, to judge from the Greek inscriptions on their coins, was probably Greek, and that tongue was spoken by the ruling castes in the neighboring kingdom of Bactria. It will be remembered that after the death of Alexander the Great,

tended from 574 to 530 B. C. Dr. Hirth, however, is somewhat conservative in his opinion in regard to this specimen, on account of the ornamental shape of the Chinese character for shōu, "longevity," appearing right below the inscription, which he says he has never seen in works of the Chou dynasty, and the mixing up of which with Chou ornaments is looked upon by him as an anachronism in style.

The writer acknowledges his indebtedness to Prof. Frederich Hirth for certain notes embodied in the above narrative.