China of bronze and gold: The Dong Bo Zhai collection

The remarkable Dong Bo Zhai Collection, brought together by a Chinese businessman from Hong Kong, contains three emblematic fields of the Chinese cultural heritage. Discussed here are the important archaic bronzes reflecting the evolution of these remarkable sumptuary vessels, from the Shang (circa 1550-1050 BC) to the Han dynasty (206 BC-221 AD), and an ensemble of worked gold presenting a panorama of imperial wares and gold jewellery from the 13th to the 18th century. The collection also includes a white marble statue of the Buddha, which still bears traces of coloured paint, exemplifying the heights achieved in Buddhist sculpture in the 6th century.

The Dong Bo Zhai Collection

Loan exhibition at the Baur Foundation, Geneva
Until 1 April 2012

THREE OF THE TEMPORARY EXHIBITION ROOMS are devoted to the ritual bronzes. Thanks to an abundance of raw materials, a highly original form of bronze casting developed in ancient China, and was to dominate the arts for over a millennium. The worship of the royal ancestors was an important component of the religious and political activities of state, and bronze vessels, as well as jade, were the symbols and attributes of power. Limited to the aristocratic elite, bronze vessels were used to present offerings of food and water as well as libations of alcoholic drinks. The formation of an early state in China and the discovery of its bronzes belong to the same tomb and bear inscriptions of the same tomb and bear inscriptions of the royal ancestors, and was also much appreciated by the European courts.

From the middle of the 5th century BC, seven major political centres emerged in China. This marked the beginning of a new era, called the Warring States Period (481-221 BC). The country's political expansion and the opening of the Sino-Roan roads also stimulated a taste for the exotic, and encouraged the development of a sophisticated and luxurious court art. The great originality of the Dong Bo Zhai Collection is that it includes exceptional examples of luxury ware and gold adornments, dating from the Southern Song (1127-1279) to the Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, presented in the last exhibition room. In ancient China, gold was mainly used for ornaments before becoming a sign of wealth from 6th century BC onwards. The first gold vessels did not appear until the Warring States period (481-221 BC). The country's political expansion and the opening of the Silk Roads also stimulated a taste for the exotic, and encouraged the development of a sophisticated and luxurious court art (fig. 3). The great originality of the Dong Bo Zhai Collection is that it includes exceptional examples of luxury ware and gold adornments, dating from the Southern Song (1127-1279) to the Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, presented in the last exhibition room. In ancient China, gold was mainly used for ornaments before becoming a sign of wealth from 6th century BC onwards. The first gold vessels did not appear until the Warring States period (481-221 BC), reaching a highpoint in the Tang dynasty (618-907). From the Song dynasty (960-1279) on, the use of gold and silver ware spread both geographically and socially. Gold wares remained the prerogative of the imperial family and high dignitaries. Dishes and bowls took on lobed, floral shapes, and the calligraphic fluidity of the incised or repoussé decoration reflects the sophisticated taste of the scholar. Under the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1279-1368), large quantities of gold and silver ware in a variety of shapes and designs inspired by Song styles were used at court, but these pieces, probably recycled later, have only rarely survived to this day. During the Chinese Ming dynasty (1368-1644), gold became one of the most prestigious materials alongside jade and silk, as well as an important symbol of rank and wealth. Gold was the favourite metal used for the jewellery of the aristocracy (fig. 4). The use of gold vessels was reserved for the emperor and his family (fig. 5). A new taste for rich and colourful decora tion encouraged the widespread use of inlaid stones, such as diamonds, rubies, sapphires, emeralds, amethysts, and opals, as well as pearls and jade. Several of the pieces of the Dong Bo Zhai collection belonged to the same tomb and bear inscriptions dating to the year 1601, to the reign of Emperor Wanli (1573-1620). Many of these were made in gold filigree (fig. 6), a technique originally intended for the aristocracy but which was also much appreciated by the European courts.

The Baur Foundation, Museum of Far Eastern Art, is a private museum housed in an elegant late 19th century town house in Geneva. The collection comprises some 9000 Chinese and Japanese art objects. Acquired by the Swiss collector Alfred Baur (1885-1951) over a period of some 45 years, these works of art include Chinese jades, snuff bottles and imperial ceramic ware from the Ming (1368-1644) and the Qing dynasties (1644-1911), as well as Japanese prints, lacquer, ceramics, netsuke and sword fittings. Since 1995, several donations have further enriched the museum's holdings. (http://www.fondation-baur.ch)