

Resound: Bells of Ancient China

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Musical innovations in the Bronze Age meld with today's digital technology in this interactive exploration of ancient Chinese bells. Thousands of years ago, Chinese musicians worked with foundry technicians to cast matched sets of bronze bells of different sizes to produce a range of tones. They developed oval-shaped bells that, depending on where they were struck, produced two distinct pitches with an intentional interval between them. "Resound" investigates this advancement with displays of early instruments, including a graduated set of matched bells discovered together in a Chinese tomb, videos of ancient bells being played and chances for visitors to compose their own music on virtual bronze bells.

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Dramatic bells like these, made in south China, are decorated with birds, tigers, and other creatures.

(From left to right)

Bell (*bo*) with birds

China, Yangzi River valley, ca. 1000–800 BCE
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
Arthur M. Sackler Gallery S1999.120.18

Bell (*bo*) with birds and tigers

China, Yangzi River valley, ca. 1050–900 BCE
Gift of Arthur M. Sackler, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery S1987.36

Bell (*bo*) with birds

China, Yangzi River valley, ca. 1300–1100 BCE
Gift of Arthur M. Sackler, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery S1987.10



Played with mallets, the earliest Chinese musical bells were held with the mouth positioned up.

(From left to right)

Bell (*nao*) with taotie masks

China, Yangzi River valley, ca. 1200–1100 BCE
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
Arthur M. Sackler Gallery S1999.120.1

Bell (*nao*) with taotie masks

China, probably Henan province, Anyang, late Shang dynasty, Anyang period, ca. 1300–1050 BCE
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Arthur M. Sackler Gallery S1999.120.17

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Bell (*bo*) with birds and tigers
 China, Yangzi River valley, ca. 1050–900 BCE
 Gift of Arthur M. Sackler
 Arthur M. Sackler Gallery S1987.36



Bell (*bo*) with birds and dragons, from a set of four
 China, Shanxi province, State of Jin, Houma foundry, Eastern Zhou dynasty,
 late Spring and Autumn period, ca. 500–450 BCE
 Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment
 Freer Gallery of Art F1941.9



Bell (*yong*) with *taotie* masks and birds
 China, Shanxi province, State of Jin, Houma foundry, Eastern Zhou
 dynasty, late Spring and Autumn period, ca. 500–450 BCE
 Gift of Arthur M. Sackler
 Arthur M. Sackler Gallery S1987.285



These six bells represent a matched set intended for use with other instruments in musical ensembles

Bells (*yong*) with dragons from a matched set (*bianzhong*)
 South or southeast China, Eastern Zhou dynasty, late Spring and Autumn
 period, ca. 550–450 BCE
 Gift of Arthur M. Sackler
 Arthur M. Sackler Gallery S1987.4



In the later Bronze Age, bells like these were made in sets with members of different sizes yielding different notes.

(Largest to smallest)

Bell (*bo*) with birds and dragons, from a set of four

China, Shanxi province, State of Jin, Houma foundry, Eastern Zhou dynasty, late Spring and Autumn period, ca. 500–450 BCE
Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment
Freer Gallery of Art F1941.9

Two bells (*bo*) with felines and dragons, possibly from a set of four

North China, Eastern Zhou dynasty, late Spring and Autumn period, ca. 550–500 BCE
Gift of Arthur M. Sackler
Arthur M. Sackler Gallery S1987.274, 307

Bell (*bo*) with felines and dragons

China, Shanxi province, State of Jin, Houma foundry, Eastern Zhou dynasty, late Spring and Autumn period, ca. 550–500 BCE
Gift of Arthur M. Sackler
Arthur M. Sackler Gallery S1987.282



Bell (*nao*) with *taotie* masks

China, Yangzi River valley, ca. 1200–1100 BCE
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