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Circles of Reflection: The Carter Collection of Chinese Bronze Mirrors

Circles of Reflection opens at the Elvehjem on December 20, 2003 and remains on view through February 29, 2004, in Mayer Gallery. Bronze mirrors were buried along with other funerary wares to accompany the deceased into the afterlife. These objects reflect aspects of early Chinese culture and offer a glimpse into daily life in ancient times.

Many bronze mirrors from the Han dynasty (206 BC-220 AD) were decorated with the so-called TLV pattern, a motif that embodied concepts of early Chinese astronomy and cosmology. Such mirrors were, in effect, miniature universes that could be held in the palm of one's hand. Topics explored in the exhibition include mirror decoration, production and patronage, portability, and value as a commodity.

The 103 mirrors in *Circles of Reflection* span more than two millennia. They range from 1 1/2 to almost 14 inches across, each with one side polished and one decorative. Most are circular; most have perforated knobs in the centers of their decorated sides, through which ribbons were strung to hold the mirrors. One outstanding mirror is the Eastern Han dynasty mirror of the late second century AD. In addition to Chinese inscriptions are mythical figures, winged dragons, a chariot, a tiger with rider, elegant paired birds, a giant tortoise, and other creatures that circle the mirror in an endless chase. The inscription says: "May you see the light of the sun and live in endless joy."

The earliest work in the exhibition is from the fifth or fourth century BC, the Warring States period (481–221 BC), is decorated with a motif known to Western connoisseurs as the "four Ts." It has an intricate background of curving lines, grids, and mazelike designs. The latest work commemorated a wedding in the late 18th or early 19th century (Qing dynasty, 1644–1911). It has a central inscription of "double happiness" and a border decoration of bats symbolizing good fortune. It has a handle, like a western-style mirror, rather than the traditional perforated knob.

Innumerable real and imaginary animals and insects, sculpted in infinitely varying poses, appear on many examples. In a well preserved mirror from the mid-seventh century (Tang dynasty), the animals crouching among vines and grapes seem to look out at the viewer.

Adorning others are cosmic diagrams in which the knob serves as the earth's central mountain, surrounded by a square symbolizing earth, which is enclosed in a circle indicating the heavens. Others include signs of the zodiac, stories of the constellations, scenes of traditional heroes, symbols for the seasons, and simple Confucian inscriptions.

Madisonian Martha Limbach Carter and her husband Thomas Carter donated the mirrors to the Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA) in 1995 and added another six in 1999 in honor of Asian art expert and former CMA director Sherman E. Lee. Martha Carter knew Dr. Lee while she studied art history at Case Western Reserve University; she later served on the Cleveland Museum of Art's education staff. Dr. Carter has published articles and books on Indian and Buddhist art: *The Mystery of the Udayana Buddha* (Napoli: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1990). *A Treasury of Indian coins*, ed. Martha L. Carter (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1994).

RECEPTION

Friday, January 23 from 6:00 to 7:30 p.m. is a free public reception in the Elvehjem Paige Court

Preceding the reception from 5:00 to 6:00 p.m. will be a slide lecture and gallery talk by scholar and collector Martha Limbach Carter

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

Thursday, January 20, 4 pm

Gallery lecture by Ju-hsi Chou, curator of Chinese art at the Cleveland Museum of Art, on *Circles of Reflection: The Carter Collection of Chinese Bronze Mirrors*, Mayer Gallery

Monday, February 9, 4 pm

Suzanne E. Cahill, Adjunct Associate Professor, History Department, University of California, San Diego, "The Moon Stopped in the Void: Daoist Elements on Bronze Mirrors of the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE)," Elvehjem Room L150

CATALOGUE OF EXHIBITION

The catalogue of the exhibition can be ordered from the Elvehjem Museum shop by phone at 608 263-2240.

The catalogue has 164 pages, 8 color plates, 92 black-and-white plates and narrative on the techniques of production. \$40.00.

The exhibition was organized and circulated by the Cleveland Museum of Art. The exhibition curator is Cleveland curator of Chinese art, Ju-hsi Chou.

Generous local support for this project has been

provided by Tom and Martha Carter, Anonymous Fund, Wisconsin Humanities Council with funds from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Wisconsin Arts Board with funds from the State of Wisconsin.

Educational programming for *Circles of Reflection: the Carter Collection of Chinese Bronze Mirrors* has been coorganized by the Elvehjem Museum and Department of Art History and funded in part by the Anonymous Fund, Center for East Asian Studies, International Institute, and Religious Studies Program.

The Elvehjem Museum of Art is open Tuesdays-Fridays 9-5 pm; Saturdays and Sundays 11-5 pm; closed Mondays and major holidays. Admission to galleries and educational events is free. The museum is located at 800 University Avenue on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is accessible to wheelchairs from the Murray Street (north) entrance. Parking is available at the city of Madison's Lake Street and Frances Street ramps, university lot 46 on Lake Street between Johnson and University Avenue, university lot 47 on Johnson Street between Park and Lake streets. Evening and weekend parking is also available under Grainger Hall with entrance on Brooks Street between University Avenue and Johnson streets. The Elvehjem Museum of Art will provide sign language interpreters for associated programs by three-week advance request to Anne Lambert, Curator of Education, weekdays, 608 263-4421 (voice).

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