

# COLLECTION

## The ritual bronzes of the **Meiyintang collection**

The subject might seem austere. But far from it. The exhibition devoted to Chinese bronzes from the Meiyintang collection by the Musée Guimet in Paris is truly fascinating for the richness and variety of its treasures. Staged like genuine jewels, these ritual objects made for Shang and Zhou sovereigns bear witness to the mastery of Chinese bronze-makers from the 16th century BC onwards, and the considerable refinement of this ancient civilisation. The exhibition's two curators, Marie-Catherine Rey and Hwei-Chung Tsao, talk about its high points.

### **Gazette Drouot: How did an exhibition like this come about?**

**M.-C. Rey and H.-Chung Tsao:** Through the special relations between the private collector and the president of the Musée Guimet, Olivier de Bernon. The Meiyintang collection of ritual bronzes had never been shown to the public before this Paris exhibition. Another collection bearing the name Meiyintang, dedicated to imperial porcelain, has already been exhibited.

### **The exhibition and catalogue make little mention of the collector, or how the collection came about...**

The exhibition's approach is both aesthetic and scientific. We wanted to focus on the characteristics of the collection, while finding an appealing way to present it to the general public – a staging that wouldn't intimidate visitors not very versed in Chinese archaeology. This is a singular collection because it contains almost all the forms in the history of Chinese bronze work, and makes it possible to show the different uses of these vessels, which have a huge typology. That's why the

collection is so interesting. The Musée Guimet inherited a large number of pieces in the past, and has also made acquisitions, but it cannot claim this exhaustiveness. The chronology of the collection is extremely broad, ranging from the Erlitou culture, represented by a jue libation cup (16th century BC), to chess players of the Western Han period (206 BC to 9 AD). It's a really encyclopaedic collection of ritual bronzes.

### **Did you choose particular pieces from the collection?**

We selected 120 of the 207 bronzes available. Some do not have great marketable value, and are unspectacular, like the small figurines in the "Towards humanism" section, but we chose them because they link up with the museum's archaeological collections, notably the funerary statues. They also make it possible to appreciate one man's particular taste, and a keen eye adept at spotting more picturesque pieces, or ones produced in the provinces, as well as extravagant works from the royal workshops. We have tried to show the place and importance of bronze in China by illustrating the various forms inherited from ceramics and ennobled by the material. Bronze is a theme that runs all through Chinese civilisation. In addition, we were keen

## NOTE

The name Meiyintang "conceals" the collections brought together over fifty years by the brothers Gilbert and Stephen Zuellig, whose family own the Zuellig group, active in Asia in health services and processed food. Since January 2013, the Rietberg Museum in Zurich has exhibited 600 ceramics from the famous collection, on permanent loan. Part of this collection has also come up in several Sotheby's auctions in Hong Kong: the fifth session on 8 April this year posted a result of HKD77,677,500 (€7.7M).