

ANCIENT VIETNAM

MYSTERIOUS SYMBOLS CAST IN ANCIENT BRONZE

Tool Kit III



MIM's Ancient Vietnam display

Objective

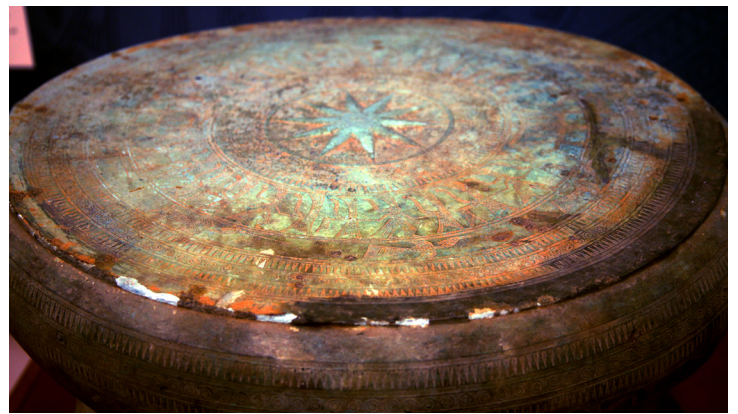
For researchers, artifacts from ancient cultures often generate just as many questions as they do answers. By examining the **symbols** on bronze drums from Ancient Vietnam, students will begin to think like archaeologists: *Why were these symbols put on musical instruments? What can we learn about the Dong Son culture from these musical instruments? What questions remain?*

Background Information for Educators

MIM's Ancient Vietnam display features ancient bronze instruments from prehistoric civilizations of Vietnam. The Dong Son culture (1000 BCE–300 CE) some 1,700 to 3,000 years ago was centered on the Red River Delta of northern Vietnam, not far from the modern capital, Hanoi. Although this ancient culture completely disappeared, **artifacts** were left behind from which researchers can learn. Archaeological excavations of Dong Son sites suggest that it was a warlike culture and that its people developed complex agricultural methods and were highly skilled in ceramics and bronze-casting. Dong Son people were spread out across the region in a network of “chiefdoms” connected by rivers and canals. When the Han Chinese colonized the region in the early first millennium, they counted approximately one million members of this culture! The most important and distinctive artifacts of the Dong Son are the drums that they cast from bronze, called **bronze drums**. We know that the Dong Son people highly valued these drums and that they played them during important rituals and ceremonies.

All of the examples on display at MIM are on loan from Chan and Quynh Kieu, who possess the largest private collection of Dong Son artifacts. The surfaces of the drums are elaborately ornamented with repeating **symbols** that give us tantalizing clues about the culture. In order to examine the symbols more easily, one of MIM's curators and MIM's exhibit designer made graphic renderings of certain sections of the drums. These **line drawings** made it easier to see shapes and distinguish decorations, since the drums' surfaces are heavily corroded from having been buried for almost two thousand years.

We can only make educated guesses at the meaning of the symbols. The “sun” or “star” pattern at the center of the tympanum (top) is probably only negative space, between “seed” icons. Birds (possibly cranes) are also visible. There is imagery depicting a ritual procession. It includes crested warriors and a house or religious structure. The figure that looks like it is being pulled behind the warriors may represent a prisoner.



Closer view of tympanum (top) on bronze drum in MIM's Ancient Vietnam display

That same bronze drum features what appear to be three individuals (possibly ritual leaders) on a boat with a water buffalo. We believe that the buffalo was meant for a sacrifice, similar to ritual offerings still performed by tribal groups in Southeast Asia and southern China today.

Bronze drums may include lots of ancient symbols, but the drums themselves have become symbols, too; they've become symbols of Vietnamese culture! In fact, a **postage stamp** was released that pictured the drums. The Vietnamese are very proud of the Dong Son culture, and the drums and other artifacts they made, because these represent a highly sophisticated civilization that existed in Vietnam a very long time ago, before the advent and influence of outside cultures.

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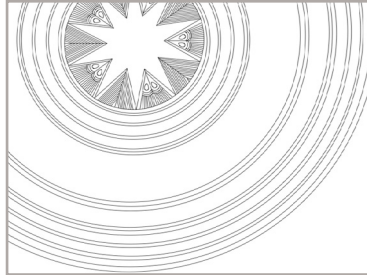
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Images, Videos (Click [here](#) for all images and videos)



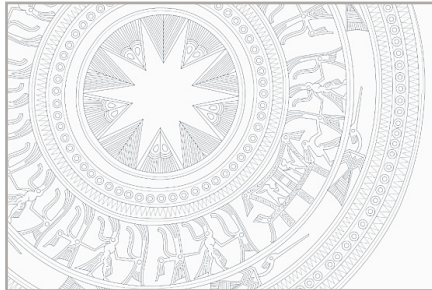
Line drawing of boat scene on bronze drum in MIM's Ancient Vietnam display



Blank line drawing of tympanum of a bronze drum



Vietnamese postal stamp depicting a bronze drum



Line drawing of tympanum (top) on bronze drum in MIM's Ancient Vietnam display



Closer view of tympanum (top) on bronze drum in MIM's Ancient Vietnam display



Bronze drum from MIM's Ancient Vietnam display



Line drawing from a bronze drum tympanum (top) in the National Museum in Hanoi



Closer view of boat scene on bronze drum in MIM's Ancient Vietnam display

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Discussion Questions, Writing Prompts

Standards Addressed	Prompt
<p>English Language Arts, 3rd–5th Grade Writing Standards <i>Text Types and Purposes</i></p>	<p>Use the line drawing of the boat scene and create a short story. If the scene were a “freeze frame” of a moment in time, what do you think happened right before it was “frozen”? Who are each of the characters? What are they thinking and doing?</p>
<p>English Language Arts, Middle School Reading Standards for Informational Text <i>Integration of Knowledge and Ideas</i></p> <p>Visual Arts, K–High School Creating <i>Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work</i></p> <p>Visual Arts, Middle School Responding <i>Cultural associations suggested by visual imagery</i></p>	<p>Make a list of the symbols you can see on MIM’s bronze drum. There are symbols on the tympanum (top) and symbols on the side—a boat scene. What categories can those symbols be separated into? (<i>Animals, man-made, alive, nonliving, etc.</i>)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make a similar list for the line drawing from a bronze drum tympanum (top) in the National Museum in Hanoi that shows people playing the drums as part of a celebration or ceremony.
<p>Visual Arts, K–High School Creating <i>Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work</i></p>	<p>Make a list of symbols you see in your everyday life. (<i>Traffic signs, brand logos, even emojis!</i>) What categories can those symbols be separated into? (<i>For example, animals, man-made, alive, nonliving, etc.</i>)</p>
<p>English Language Arts, 3rd–5th Grade Writing Standards <i>Text Types and Purposes</i></p> <p>Visual Arts, K–High School Creating <i>Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work</i></p> <p>Visual Arts, 3rd–6th Grade Connecting <i>Responses to art change depending on time and place in which it was made</i></p>	<p>Use the blank line drawing of the bronze drum to fill in your own symbols. Create a key to explain all of your symbols. Explain (either in writing or verbally) why those particular symbols were chosen. <i>For a challenge, see if other students can guess what the symbols on their peers’ drawings mean or if they can match up the bronze drum drawings to the correct students.</i></p>

Additional Resources

click on the thumbnail to see each resource



Bronze Drums | Oxford Music Online. “Bronze drum.”

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