

Arabic-Inscribed Archaistic Vase

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17th/18th Century, Qing Dynasty, China

Bronze, with silver and gold inlay

H: 30.3 cm, W: 17.2 cm

An elegantly cast bronze vessel from Qing Dynasty China. The pear-shaped body sits atop a splayed foot, and rises to a waisted neck and flared rim. A broad band of gold and silver inlaid decoration circles the neck of the vessel, in an archaistic design of masks of the mythical creature, taotie, on a ground of leiwen – a series of small incised parallel lines following the contours of the main design. Each mask is framed by projecting vertical flanges. The body is adorned with two Arabic inscriptions inlaid in silver, one of which may be a later addition. The inscription reads ‘al-sirat haqq’, which can be translated as ‘The Path is truth’. The foot is encircled by two raised bands.

The form of the vessel is modelled after the bronze zhi ritual vessels used as drinking cups during the late Shang dynasty and early Western Zhou period. These vessels were placed in tombs, and laid out in the form of communal banquets for ancestors to share with their living descendants. The forms and patterns of ancient bronzes were used as inspiration for many vessels in multiple materials during the Qing dynasty. This was particularly important for ritual functions – the Qianlong emperor (r. 1796-1799) reinstituted the use of archaic forms for all ritual vessels in 1748 – and spread to other kinds of vessels too. Illustrated catalogues of collections of ancient vessels in jade and bronze were published and studied, for instance the vast imperial collection of bronzes was published between 1749 and 1755 under the title Xiqing gujian. Artists based archaising bronzes on the wood print illustrations in these catalogues. The mythical taotie, as seen on this vessel, was often depicted in two halves on either side

of the casting ribs on archaic bronzes, was a particularly popular archaising design during the Qing period.