

50.

Large Painted Earthenware Covered *Hu*

大加彩雲紋蓋陶壺

Height: 56.5 cm. (22 1/4 in.)

Diameter: 33.2 cm. (13 1/8 in.)

Western Han dynasty

2nd-1st century B.C.

西漢

Provenance: A Japanese Collection

所藏：日本

The large, robust vessel is supported on a high, splayed base with a straight, sharp-edged foot, the body ballooning to a full, rounded mid-section, the shoulders swaying inward, the neck constricting and flaring slightly to a sharply articulated banded mouth rim that mirrors the shape of the foot band. The mid-body zone is decorated with swirling cloud motifs between two large intricately molded bronze-style *taotie* masks applied on opposite sides of the vessel, one of these masks with the original white slip-coating intact, this mid-section zone bordered above by horizontal bands with raised edges, a red band with white lining and dotted with demi-florets above, and below a plain red band with white borders. The painted decoration was executed with a brush after the vessel was fired to earthenware hardness, the colors including red, ochre, lavender and white on a dark grey ground, the designs in imitation of lacquer ware, textiles, and inlaid bronzes. The neck is painted with large triangular blades descending from a solid red horizontal band enclosing large shield-like forms. These are adjacent to ascending triangular panels outlined against a ground of abstract cloud-forms composed of elongated spirals, dots and amorphous shapes, the demi-floret band repeated on the mouth. The lower third of the vessel is left undecorated. The domed cover is painted with four 'C' shapes circling the center with a red band dotted with white demi-florets at the rim. The deeply recessed base and inside of the foot exhibit some cracks and remnants of organic material from burial.

Examples of painted earthenware *hu* have survived in significant number, known through both excavations from Western Han tombs and also their presence in numerous museums throughout the world (figs.1-3). Combining lacquer, textile, and bronze themes in décor and mirroring contemporaneous bronze and lacquer shapes, the ceramic workers of the early Han were able to create products reflecting contemporaneous taste yet in a medium less costly and less time consuming to work with than any other medium then in fashion. A wide swath of the public must have responded to the aesthetic qualities of such vessels, fashioned as funerary trappings, through the power of their forms and the virtue of their sinuous, calligraphic, and suggestive designs.

Swirling ethers corralled in the décor of such vessels suggest celestial realms where the departed souls would journey forth. An insightful study by

Peter Sturman, who addresses the significance of these characteristic Han period abstract designs, notes that "In ancient China, the universe was conceived as an interacting unity of heaven, earth, and man, and rapt attention was paid to the patterns of the sky, since it was believed the omens visible in the celestial sphere would find realization on earth."¹

The very high standards reached by the craftsmen who created these *mingqi* was pointed out by Sturman, and this level of achievement suggests to us the seriousness of the metaphysical beliefs and expectations of the Han Chinese, and the necessity and desire to manifest these effectively in the objects that would serve them in life and, in the present case, accompany them to the afterlife. How then do we reconcile the staggering steps taken in the arts and crafts to provide for mundane necessities in the afterlife? The furnishing and supplies of Han tombs

demonstrate the keenest focus on the here and now and how it would be transmitted to the other side. These early Chinese must have been a fascinating

tribe, dichotomous to be sure but at the same time remarkably well-balanced.

1. P.C. Sturman, "Celestial Journeys-Meditations on (and in) Han Dynasty Painted Pots at the Metropolitan Museum of Art," *Oriental Art*, May 1988, p. 57.



Fig. 1: Large painted earthenware covered *hu*, Western Han dynasty, 2nd-1st century B.C., excavated in Luoyang, Henan province, Henan Provincial Museum, after *Chugoku no Hakubutsukan*, vol. 7 (Henan Provincial Museum), Tokyo and Beijing, 1982, pl. 69.

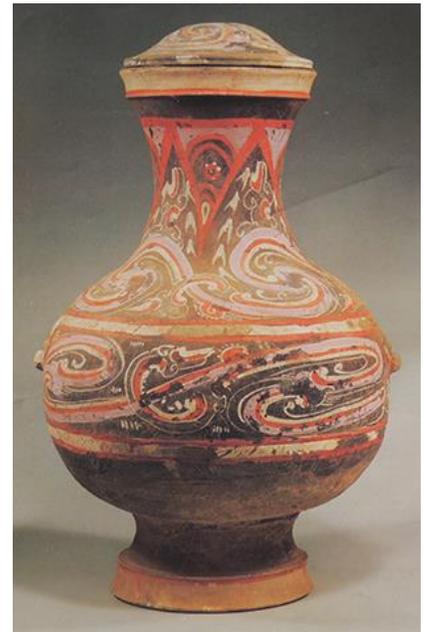


Fig. 2: Large painted earthenware covered *hu*, Western Han dynasty, 2nd-1st century B.C., Metropolitan Museum of Art, after P.C. Sturman, "Celestial Journeys-Meditations on (and in) Han Dynasty Painted Pots at the Metropolitan Museum of Art," *Oriental Art*, May 1988, fig. 6, p. 62.

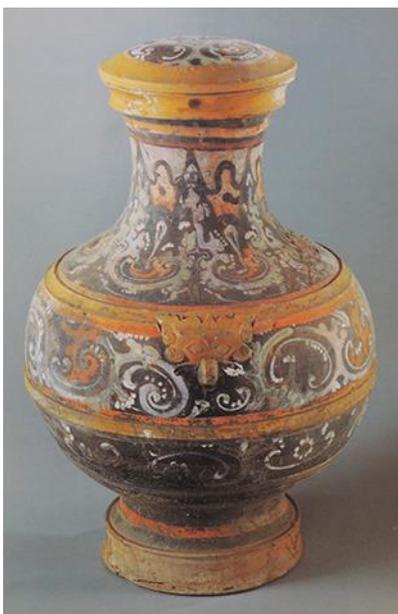


Fig. 3: Large painted earthenware covered *hu*, Western Han dynasty, 2nd-1st century B.C., after Julia M. White and Ronald Y. Otsuka, *Pathways to the Afterlife: Early Chinese Art from the Sze Hong Collection*, Denver Art Museum with University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1993, pl. 29, p. 71.