

Excerpts from *Metal at the Brooklyn Museum* by Roberta Smith. NYT. 12/27/02.

Metallurgy is one of the crucial transformations of earth-given materials that made human progress possible. Civilization's Big Bang Basics, as they could be called, developed at different times, in different orders, all over the world, with different results. The pre-Columbian peoples of South America, for example, never abandoned stone tools, reserving metalwork primarily for luxury and ceremonial items.

Since ceramics and metallurgy involved fire and an alchemical transformation that must have struck early humans as miraculous, they figured importantly in creation narratives, with metalsmiths in particular often doubling as shamans and priests. The meshing of religion, economic might, social and political status and daily usefulness is especially potent in metals because of their inherent beauty and durability. In its rawest state metal has always had high market value and quickly became the most common form of currency. The durability that made it so eternally useful helped many metal objects survive where ceramics shattered and fabrics rotted. But value also eradicates objects and therefore history: metal things were, and still are, continuously melted down to make other metal things.

Following metals and metalwork through the Brooklyn Museum teaches one a lot, but hardly everything about the history of the family of malleable, ductile materials, whose best-known members include iron, silver, gold and copper and whose most widely used alloys, especially in early times, are bronze (copper and tin) and brass (copper and zinc). Metals can play starring, supporting, purely decorative or exceedingly minor roles. Yet because of metals' supreme shape-shifting capacities, a few, diverse objects can tell a material tale that encompasses an array of colors, of shapes and textures (not to mention physical strength and weight), of purposes and meanings and of skills and aesthetic priorities. With some huge gaps, the path here crosses nearly three dozen centuries.

1. Egypt

Tucked away in numerous vitrines are all kinds of small bronze figures, numerous pieces of jewelry and decorative objects, and a few relief fragments that attest to the Egyptians' mastery of hollow-casting, gilding and inlay. The gold pieces include an exceedingly small, rare gold scarab depicting a queen with microscopic crispness, and a hefty necklace strand spacer inscribed with hieroglyphs. A small black bronze inlaid with gold of King Osorkon I with an offering bowl in his upraised hand reflects how bronze-casting freed Egyptian sculptors from stone and allowed for more naturalistic gestures. Small bronze figures become more plentiful as you move into the Third Intermediate, Late and Ptolemaic periods, when the figures were often mass produced for private shrines or to be left on tombs. None of Brooklyn's Egyptian bronzes have the masterpiece status of its stone figures, but they are immensely appealing in their liveliness and oddness. Among the displays, keep an eye out for three bronzes in particular: a sinuous sculpture of a sharp-eyed cat, a Late Period king in front of a groundhog-like ichneumon, and an unusual casket for a mummified snake, with a human-headed serpent stretched the length of its narrow, elongated form. Giacometti would have been inspired. One of the museum's best-known Egyptian objects is a large coffin for the royal ibis bird that combines gaudiness and streamlined restraint. Its smooth wood body is brightly gilded in gold, but its sleek neck and head and almost creepily accurate feet are solid silver, and its eternally alert eye is rock crystal edged with gold. The legs are bent, as if this creature were rising from or settling into a nest; its side-by-side feet rest before it like the hands of someone awaiting a juicy bit of gossip, or a game of cards.

2. Islamic World

Middle Eastern gallery, where ceramics reign. Toward the end, the greatness of metalwork in medieval Iran is signaled with two brass vessels whose punch work achieves an almost lacy fineness, and also with a relatively plebeian three-legged incense burner in the shape of bird that suggests a helicopter.

3. India and Southern Asia

Indian and Southeast Asian galleries, where stone alternates with bronze and Buddhas alternate with Hindu gods and saints. The idealized human form reigns throughout - seated in meditation, standing, dancing, making love. First, a chock-a-block vitrine contains small, intricate bronzes from the Himalayan cultures, including an extravagant Nepalese Shiva-Shakti bristling with so much in the way of

headaddresses, arms and attributes that it almost seems to be on fire. In the next gallery, a fabulous dancing Krishna represents the 10th-century Chola dynasty of southern India, a high point in the world history of bronze casting and figural sculpture. Step into the elevator foyer to see one of the museum's greatest and largest pieces of Asian bronze: the head and torso of a Buddha from 14th-century Thailand. With a head of curls like snail shells, a lustrous deep brown patina, handsome features and large downcast eyes, it is an image of life-affirming beneficence.

4. China and Japan

Evidence of one of the world's greatest ages of bronze, which was also the dawn of Chinese dynastic civilization, is provided by some of the oldest and most beautiful pieces of metalwork in the Brooklyn collection. There are more than a dozen Shang and Zhou dynasty ceremonial bronzes from the 15th through the 12th century B.C. Most were used for making symbolic offerings to ancestors. In shades of green ranging from pale celadon to rich turquoise, they start with a perky three-legged Shang dynasty jia (wine vessel), whose smooth surface imitates ceramics. The increasingly ornate surfaces of succeeding bronzes - a three-legged caldronlike ding (food vessel), for example - indicate a rapidly developing grasp of the possibilities of casting bronze in clay molds that were incised with intricate spirals and zoomorphic faces. (This ubiquitous animalistic face is not so far removed from the Haida bear downstairs.) The zoomorphic presence might be said to culminate in the jutting head and clenched teeth of the animal-shaped Zhou guang (wine vessel), one of the museum's finest bronzes. Fast-forward about 3,000 years, and the next imposing piece of metalwork is a Qing shrine, where the patterning, more naturalistic now, is rendered in blue, red and green enamel on copper with dragon-wrapped piers. The object of devotion is not ancestors but a gilt bejeweled bodhisattva. The Japanese gallery provides a mere glimpse of Brooklyn's riches in this area, and metal, while infrequent, takes a variety of forms. An austere second-to-third-century Yayoi bronze bell, nearly three feet tall, shows the influence of Chinese bronzes. Screens and lacquered writing boxes shimmer with sprinkled gold. The museum's great 13th-century Kamakura guardian mask, its every feature aflame, is carved in wood with glaring rock crystal eyes. It seems completed by a bronze crown whose delicate cartwheeling filigree diadem has a flair all its own and is in fact an Edo period addition.

5. Sub-Saharan Africa

The objects date from the 16th century to the 20th, and while wood predominates, the metals on hand here are among the most varied anywhere in the museum. They range from the superfine elegance of a cast gold pendant of a coiled snake eating a toad to a sturdy wood Kakongo power figure whose chest bristles with rusty nails and knife blades. It makes sense that the only uses of found metal objects at Brooklyn are in works from Africa, where modern sculpture began. (Looking closely reveals that many of the carved wood figures on view are adorned with iron pendants or wire earrings that combine found and made elements.) There is a serene Kota figure from Gabon whose flat elliptical face is quilted with thin strips of brass and copper. The adaptation of foreign goods is visible in a thronelike akonkromfi (praying mantis) chair from Ghana densely decorated with brass upholstery tacks, and the highest level of indigenous sophistication and originality shines through in a cluster of the museum's great Benin bronzes (actually made of copper alloy). One Benin case holds the magisterial "Horn Blower," with his monumental feet, finely detailed garments and implacable stare; another displays a waist pendant showing three elegant women, with a reverse side, visible in a photograph, that bears a rare maker's mark. Other standouts include a blunt copper mask made by the Yoruban artist Ali Amonikoji in 1910, which shows the influence of woodcarving and a vitrine holding more than two dozen Ethiopian crosses, large and small, mostly of silver, iron and copper alloy and whose designs represent a confluence of Indian and Christian cultures.

6. Americas

A Panamanian Cocle sun disc, its ferocious god depicted in hammered gold so thin and delicate it resembles folded paper. Northwest Coast Indian shieldlike plaque called a copper, which was used in Potlatch rites; its kindly bear face is painted in black on the glowing copper.