LOT 507
PROPERTY OF THE ALBRIGHT-KNOX ART GALLERY, BUFFALO, NEW YORK, TO BENEFIT THE RESTRICTED ENDOWMENT FOR THE PURCHASE OF WORKS OF ART
AN EXTREMELY RARE AND IMPORTANT ARCHAIC BRONZE WINE VESSEL AND COVER, (FANGJIA)
LATE SHANG DYNASTY, 13TH - 11TH CENTURY BC

the robustly cast body of square section with a bombé S-profile curving up to a flared rim set with a pair of pyramidal-shaped finials, all four sides crisply cast in low-relief, one main side cast with a loop handle issuing out from the mouth of a bovine mask linking to another animal mask cast in low-relief with bulbous eyes and curled horns, below a pair of addorsed dragons and four sun whorls, all set against a squared leiwen ground, the three other sides adorned with sculpturally and strikingly rendered central owl heads with saucer-like beady eyes staring out from below bushy brows and perked ears, all centered by a sharp beak and flanked by a pair of confronting dragons, the feathered body, wings and talons finely articulated and set against a leiwen ground, the main side cast with a further pair of confronting snakes flanking the owl, all supported on four powerful splayed blade-like legs each cast with a pair of deconstructed dragons and leiwen, the flat rectangular cover surmounted by a pair of addorsed openwork birds encircled by four pairs of confronting birds around the edge cast in low-relief each within a rectangular panel against a leiwen ground, the surface covered with a smooth green malachite patina with traces of cinnabar, the base of the interior cast with a single pictogram (2)

2.0
12 1/8 by 8 by 7 3/8 in., 30.7 by 20.4 by 18.8 cm

ESTIMATE ▼2,000,000-3,000,000 USD
Lot Sold: 8,104,000 USD

PROVENANCE
By repute found at Anyang shortly before 1944.
Acquired by Dr. Otto Burchard in Beijing in 1944.
Mathias Komor, New York.

EXHIBITED
Ritual Vessels of Bronze Age China, Asia House Gallery, New York, 1968, cat.no. 31 (illustrated).
Ancient Chinese Bronze Art: Casting the Precious Sacral Vessel, China Institute in America, New York, 1991, cat.no. 6 (illustrated).

LITERATURE
P.J. Kelleher, Gallery Notes, January 1954, pp. 18-22.
E. Consten, Das Alte China, Stuttgart, 1958, p. 35, pl. 28.
The pictogram on this vessel depicts a clan sign representing an arrow (shi) (see detail on page 36).

Fangjia are among the rarest ritual vessels of the bronze age, and only a small number of examples can be found in museums and private collections. No other fangjia with this magnificent owl design appears to have been recorded. Vessels of this form were made for use in ancestral worship or sacrificial ceremonies and demonstrate the high level of achievement of bronze casting during the Shang dynasty. This type of wine-warming vessel was intended to hold black millet wine that was poured directly into the ground. The vessel is a square variant of the more commonly found rounded jia of the period. Jia vessels disappeared soon after the fall of the Shang dynasty presumably because the ritual for which they were used was no longer appropriate or the shape was viewed with disfavour among the Zhou rulers.

The square form and the magnificent size of this piece give it a sense of balance and strength reinforcing the importance of the vessel. The majority of fang-shaped vessels have been found in tombs belonging to royalty or high-ranking officials. They are generally monumental and clearly rectangular in section and are decorated in a highly ornate fashion.

For examples of preserved fangjia see one in the British Museum, London, illustrated in William Watson, Ancient Chinese Bronzes, London, 1962, pl. 8, where Watson (p. 32) notes that the four-legged fangjia are the rarest amongst wine vessels although jia is one of the earliest Shang bronze forms. Another smaller fangjia, its cover similarly crowned with a pair of addorsed birds, in the Avery Brundage collection, is included in René-Yvon Lefebvre d’Argencé, Bronze Vessels of Ancient China in the Avery Brundage Collection, San Francisco, 1977, pl. XXIII, right; a large example in the Freer Collection is published in John Alexander Pope, The Freer Chinese Bronzes, Washington, 1967, col.pl. 22; another was included in the exhibition A Selection of Early Chinese Bronzes, Eskenazi, New York, 2006, cat.no. 1; one in the Palace Museum, Beijing, is illustrated in Bronzes in the Palace Museum, Beijing, 1999, pl. 37 (Fig. 3); and one lacking its cover, included in the exhibition Ancient Chinese Ritual Bronzes, C.T. Loo, Detroit, 1940, cat.no. 3, is now in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and is published in Bernhard Karlgren, A Catalogue of the Chinese Bronzes in the Alfred F. Pillsbury Collection, Minneapolis, 1952, pl. 15.

The strikingly rendered owl design found on the three sides of this vessel is most distinctive and no other similar fangjia decorated in this manner appears to be recorded. Although the owl is not completely understood in terms of its symbolism, during the Shang dynasty this bird was clearly considered an auspicious creature. According to Wolfram Eberhard, owls on ancient vessels were supposed to shelter inmates from thunder and fire (Wolfram Eberhard, A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols, London, 1983, p. 222).

Vessels with owl decoration can be found in various forms; see a jia in the Henan Provincial Museum, illustrated in Zhongguo wenwu jinghua daquan. Qingtong juan, Hong Kong, 1994, pl. 01848; a you from the Chinese Science and Archaeological Institute, Beijing, illustrated in Zhongguo qingtongqi quanji, vol. 3, Beijing, 1997, no. 136; and a fangyi, formerly in the collection of H.W. Siegel and now in the Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst, Cologne, included in Chinese Bronzes: A Selection from European Collections, Beijing, 1995, pl. 45. Compare also a zhi decorated with four owls in profile illustrated in René-Yvon Lefebvre d’Argencé, Bronze Vessels of Ancient China in the Avery Brundage Collection, San Francisco, 1977, pl. XIX, where (p. 54) it is mentioned that this zhi is the most spectacular vessel of this form in the collection (Fig. 1).

The use of the owl motif on bronzes can also be seen on pieces from the famous Fu Hao tomb discovered at the late
Shang capital of Anyang, Henan province in 1976. Fu Hao is believed to be the royal consort and lady-general of the fourth king of Anyang, Wu Ding. She was mentioned repeatedly on oracle bones as leading military expeditions on behalf of the king and also participating in state sacrifices. Amongst the bronze vessels found in Fu Hao’s tomb, several pieces had owl or bird motifs, including a pair of bronze bird-form zun illustrated in Wen Fong (ed.), The Great Bronze Age of China, New York, 1980, pl. 29, pp. 162, 183-184 (Fig. 2), as well as an unusual bronze guang with a bovine front half and an owl back half, pl. 30.