The most conspicuous feature of this hu is its flattened ellipse cross section, making its decoration almost fully visible from a single frontal vantage point. Set on a conical foot, the body has a pear-shaped profile. At the neck, the silhouette is interrupted by a pair of vertical lugs curved to repeat the profile of the vessel. The lugs, which are V-shaped in cross section, lie on mold lines, one of which has an irregular opening near the foot.

This vessel is homogeneously covered from mouth to foot with patterns in flat relief set against a meander background. The only protruding elements are the hemispherical eyes of various animals that appear in five of the six registers of decoration. Two taotie on the central flanges are flanked by four dragons on the foot register and the two main body registers (fig. 1), while the mouth register has two taotie flanked by four birds (fig. 2). On the foot register, the dragons are centered on the central flanges, while the taotie are centered on the vertical line through the lugs. On the narrow mouth and foot registers, the dragon bodies are elongated and horizontal, whereas on the main body registers, the dragon bodies are more vertical. On the neck register are four dragons that flank the two lugs. The dragons have leaf-shaped ears and long sinuous bodies with whirls at the bends of their torsos (fig. 3). These whirls are likely visual manifestations of qi energy, the intrinsic energy that permeates the entire universe, and signify the animation and movement of the dragon through water. The middle narrow register is formed of four asymmetrical units, each unit consisting of a broad, hooked-ribbon set with a single eye (fig. 4). Each of the animals in the six decorative registers is arranged horizontally in opposition to the adjacent register. In other words, the mouth register is centered on the flange, while the neck register is centered on the lugs, and so on down the body of the vessel. Each of the lugs is decorated with an animal head with huge horns. The complexity of each element, as well as the overall decorative scheme, cannot be overemphasized.

On the interior of the mouth is a pictographic inscription, usually called a lineage emblem. This particular graph has been found on four other vessels and has been transcribed as ji, but this transcription is still considered very
tentative. On one vessel this graph stands alone, just like the MacLean Collection piece (app., cat. 12, 1:1). On the second, this graph is followed by Fu Xin, or Father Xin (app., cat. 12, 1:2). On the third, it is combined with two pictographs of books and followed by a long inscription (app., cat. 12, 1:4). Pottery antecedents of this type of bronze hu can be traced back to the Erlitou culture, and even to Neolithic cultures. Those pottery hu have two vertical lugs and a conical foot, but the cross sections of their bodies are circular. It is worth mentioning that the Chinese character hu was derived from the pictograph showing this type of vessel. Comparing Late Shang period bronze examples and their pottery antecedents with flaring mouths, rounded bodies and high footrings, we can conclude that the MacLean hu should be dated to the earlier periods of the Late Shang. This speculation is confirmed by archaeological finds. One of the two examples from Fuhao’s tomb is very similar to the MacLean piece, with a round lower body and a flaring mouth (app., cat. 12, 2). Many similar examples are found in various museums. 

Comparing Late Shang period bronze examples and their pottery antecedents with flaring mouths, rounded bodies and high footrings, we can conclude that the MacLean hu should be dated to the earlier periods of the Late Shang. This speculation is confirmed by archaeological finds. One of the two examples from Fuhao’s tomb is very similar to the MacLean piece, with a round lower body and a flaring mouth (app., cat. 12, 2). Many similar examples are found in various museums.