

Neolithic jar

陶罐
taoguan
earthenware jar

氣
qi
life force

仰韶文化
Yangshao wenhua
Yangshao culture

This bulbous jar seems impregnated with life force (*qi* 氣). Its fullness is echoed in the decoration. Abstract patterns of powerful brushstrokes in black and violet-brown evoke melons with basket designs, leaves or drooping fruits. The vegetal forms and the burnished red clay draw one into the abundance and fertility of earth.

Stylistically, the jar bears a close resemblance to the painted pottery excavated from archaeological sites in Banshan 半山, Gansu 甘肅 province. It was made by hand, using the coiled method. The clay was rolled into coils that were then built up and smoothed together to form the even surface. The earthenware was fired inside a kiln at a temperature below 1000 degree centigrade. Rich in oxygen, the oxidizing atmosphere inside the kiln rendered the clay red and the mineral pigments black in colour. The jar has very thin walls and is extremely light in weight, almost as light as paper.

Neolithic ceramic vessels have been discovered in dwelling sites as well as burial sites. This jar was apparently used as an everyday storage jar before being buried with the deceased. A porous body created by a low firing temperature made the vessel suitable for storing only dry goods, most probably grain. Surface decoration is confined to the top two-thirds of the vessel. It is possible that the jar was stabilised by having its narrow base buried in sand or earth.

The Banshan sites are dated c. 2400 BC, the middle period of the Neolithic culture of Yangshao 仰韶文化. When first discovered in the early twentieth century, painted pottery of the Yangshao culture was related to certain Neolithic wares of the Near East and Eastern Europe, and was thought to have been introduced to China from the West.¹ However, the organic form and dynamic linear movement of the brush decoration are uniquely Chinese, thus strengthening the claim based on archaeological evidence that such painted wares are indigenous in origin and foreshadowed later Chinese art.² Moreover, the Neolithic ceramics testify the mastery of ceramic techniques achieved by Chinese potters at a prehistoric time.

CHINESE
Jar 陶罐
Neolithic period, Yangshao culture
仰韶文化, 2400 BC, Banshan
半山文化, Gansu 甘肅 province,
North China
earthenware, pigment
36.3 x 39.7 x 35.9 cm
Felton Bequest, 1947 (641-D4)

- ¹ In the early twentieth century, the Swedish archaeologist J. Gunnar Andersson discovered ceramic vessels in burial sites of the Yangshao culture and thought these vessels were made just for burial.
- ² Over six thousand Neolithic sites were discovered in The People's Republic of China between 1949 and 1979 and since then, other Neolithic sites continue to be discovered.

