

DROUOT
PARIS

TESSIER **TS** SARROU

AN IMPERIAL BELL UNDER THE HAMMER

AUCTION ON MONDAY 16 DECEMBER 2019 AT DROUOT



A Kangxi (1662-1722) gilt-bronze *bianzhong* bell
H. 21 cm ; Weight : 4,7 kg
Estimate: €200,000-300,000

Expert: Cabinet Portier

During the traditional Asian arts week at Drouot, auction house Tessier & Sarrou will present its sale on Monday 16 December. It includes a major work of art: a Chinese Imperial gilt-bronze *bianzhong* bell from the Qing dynasty (1644-1912). The bell is estimated to reach €200,000 to €300,000. This auction marks the first appearance of this bell on the art market, as it has been kept within the family since Robert de Semallé's return in France in 1884.

Robert de Semallé (1849-1936) was sent to China to pacify the political tensions between France and China that the "Tonkin Affair" generated. He worked at the Beijing embassy from 1880 and 1884, as illustrated by the photographs he brought back – which sold for €640,000 last June also by Tessier & Sarrou. During his stay in China, Semallé wrote *Four years in Beijing*, in which he writes about his journeys, his missions in the South of China or the numerous incursions in Tonkin. The works of art he brings back with him to France comprise important pieces, including this stunning bell.



This Imperial bell, called *bianzhong* is, in many ways, exceptional. The magnificent and highly detailed chiseling of the bell speaks for itself: this *bianzhong* is truly a superb example of Kangxi refinement. A two-faced dragon stands on top of the bell, its muscular body firmly standing on clawed legs, used to hang the bell from the wooden frame. The body of the bell is divided in three registers: the upper one holds a pattern of stylized clouds, so does the lower one, with added perfectly round medallions, where the bell is hit to produce the sound. In between, the dragon's bodies chasing the pearl among swirls of clouds unfurls, revealing glistening scales chiseled to perfection.

Bianzhong bells are grouped as carillons. Each carillon includes 16 bells: 12 notes and 4 flat tones. There were carillons of small *bianzhong*, measuring 15-centimeter-high, used for indoor ceremonies, carillons of large *bianzhong* measuring 30-centimeter-high, used for outdoor ceremonies, mainly military celebrations and carillons of medium *bianzhong* measuring 21-centimeter-high, for which the use has not yet been revealed. The latter are extremely rare as only two complete sets of medium *bianzhong* are to be found in the Forbidden City Museum in Beijing.



Not only the 16 December bell is from the rarest ensemble of *bianzhongs*, but it also generates the most important tone. One of the inscriptions on the bell reads *huangzhong*: it corresponds to the first note of the scale, and is the *yang* note, male and powerful. From *huangzhong* stems the Chinese scale and harmony, but also music itself. *Huangzhong* is considered as a founding principle of music, a note played at the beginning of each ritual in order to attract good fortune and blessings.

Finally, the other inscription, *Kang Xi Bing Shen Nian Zhi* chiseled on one side corresponds to 1716. It reveals that the bell was made shortly after Kangxi's decision to set a new formal musical scale. It marks the exact moment when imperial workshops were at their peak: they made refined new instruments for the Imperial court in order to promote the new Chinese musical scale.



BEFORE 1713: ARCHAIC CARILLONS

Bianzhong bells are not played alone, but as a carillon. The most ancient sets of *bianzhong* date back to the Western Zhou dynasty (3000 BC) and comprise 3 bells. Sets of 9 bells have also been found dating back to the Spring and Autumn period (770–403 BC). The biggest set ever excavated in the whole history of China was the one from Zeng Hou Yi tomb, 65 bells dated between 777 and 733 BC. The *Zhou Li*, compiled between 500 and 200 BC during the Warring States period, lists 8 materials for Chinese musical instruments: metal, stone, terracotta, leather, cords, wood, gourd and bamboo. Amongst these materials, stone and metal appear as the most important ones, and among metal, one instrument rises above the others: the *bianzhong* bell.

Archaic *bianzhong* carillons hold an indefinite number of bells, and these bells vary in size. The note depends on the size of the bell: the smaller, the higher the sound. Moreover, each bell can produce two different sounds, depending on where the body of the bell is hit, side or front. It is then possible to achieve an infinity of notes, depending on the bells in the carillon and the way they are hit.



UNDER THE QING, MUSIC AS A TOOL TO UNIFY THE EMPIRE

When the Qing Dynasty is established in 1644, new rulers decide to lean on music to establish their domination in a stable way. New Emperors being Mandchu, their customs differ from the ones of the Han majority of the Empire. In order to install a harmonious dynasty, Emperors encourage a refined court music, inspired from Han music. They decide to codify it in order to give the Empire a sense of unity. Under the rule of Emperors Kangxi (1661-1722), Yongzheng (1722-1735) and Qianlong (1735-1796), a great quantity of high-quality music instruments is made, and the Imperial orchestra includes over 200 musicians.

FROM 1713 UNDER THE KANGXI REIGN: DEFINITION OF A MUSIC INSTRUMENT

In September 1713, Kangxi commands to gather in Beijing a group of the most skilled musicians, technicians and musicologists in order to set the musical scale of the Empire. By the end of 1713, the *Lu Lü Zheng Yi*, compiling the research and the new scale is published, the Emperor having decided himself of the notes making up that new scale. This scale is the very first one officially established in the China Empire. It is made of 12 notes, in reference to the 12 months of the year, plus 4 flat notes, making up a total of 16 notes. Notes are alternatively *yang* (male principle) for the odds and *yin* (female principle) for the even notes.

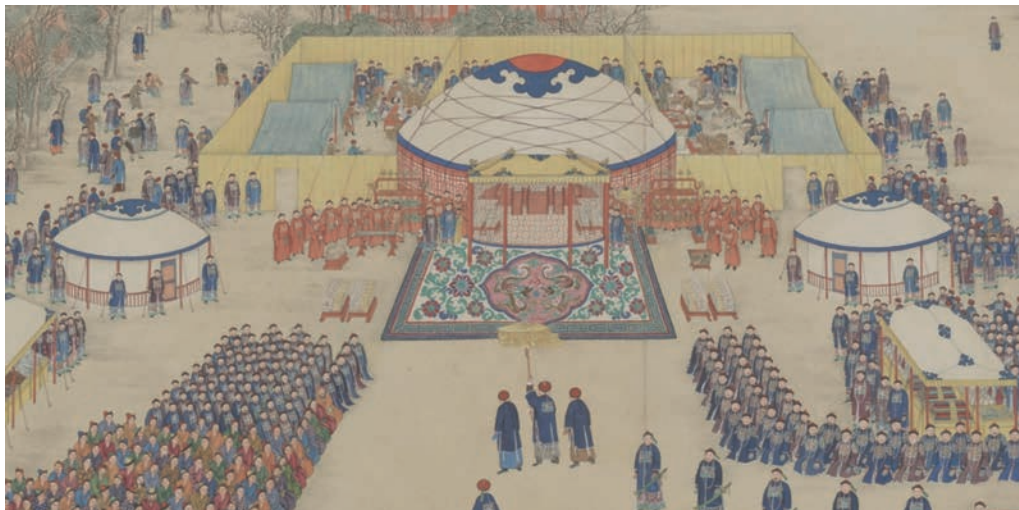
The historical archives of Qing dynasty, the *Qing Sho Gao*, written between 1914 and 1927, state that from 1713, *bianzhong* carillons have a fixed set of 16 bells. From the lower note to the higher one, bells follow the order *huangzhong*, *dalü*, *taicu*, *jiayong*, *guxi*, *zhonglu*, *ruibin*, *lingzhong*, *yize*, *nanlu*, *wuyi* and *yingzhong*, plus the flat tones *pei yize*, *pei nanlu*, *pei wuyi* and *pei yingzhong*.

Unlike the archaic *bianzhong* bells, all the bells from one carillon are of the same size. The note is determi-



ned by the thickness and the weight of the bell. Each bronze belt is smelted, and hand chiseled before being gilded, in order to attain a precise note. This note does not change depending on the place where the bell is hit: each bell only produces one pure sound.

In Qing court, music plays a major role: musicians support calendar rites, official receptions but also banquets and festivities. Depending on the ceremony, the musical instruments change. *Bianzhong* bells always have 16 bells, but the size of these 16 bells can vary according to the place and type of rite. There are carillons of large bells, medium bells and small bells. The bells can be ornate with two types of patterns: dragons chasing the flaming pearl among swirls of clouds of *ba gua* trigrams.



PUBLIC AUCTION - DROUOT - SALEROOM 16
Monday 16 December – 2pm

PUBLIC EXHIBITION - DROUOT - SALEROOM 16
Saturday 14 December - 11am / 6pm
Monday 16 December – 11am / 12pm

PRESS CONTACTS

Mathilde FENNEBRESQUE

mfennebresque@drouot.com | +33 (0)1 48 00 20 42

Adélaïde STEPHAN

astephan@drouot.com | +33 (0)1 48 00 20 37

About Drouot

Founded in 1852, Drouot is the largest auction place in the world ever since. The institution now gathers 63 auction houses and hosted over 1,000 auctions in 2018 that totalled €376M. Each year, Drouot welcomes 500,000 visitors, who browse through the 17 salesrooms which feature the works of art from over 21 categories, from antiquities to street art. The Drouot Group includes several branches, including Auctionspress which publishes the weekly Gazette Drouot and Drouot Digital, the e-commerce platform that offers 'live' services (auction streaming and live bidding) and online-only sales.

Interviews and images on request

