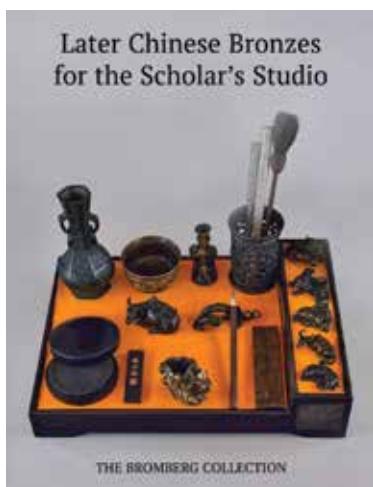


BOOK REVIEW: LATER CHINESE BRONZES FOR THE SCHOLAR'S STUDIO

Jackie Menzies



Later Chinese Bronzes for the Scholar's Studio

Paul Bromberg

Arts of Asia Publications Ltd, Hong Kong

RRP: US \$80, Hardcover, 172 pages, English with Chinese captions

This engaging book focuses on one distinct aspect of later Chinese bronzes: the small, utilitarian desk pieces of great visual, tactile and literary appeal created for the delectation of the literati class of the Ming and Qing dynasties. It covers bronzes created 1100 to 1900, from the Song to Qing dynasties, referencing an area of collecting that has been gaining more attention amongst collectors, dealers and curators since the 1980s, capped by a show earlier this year at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Lu 2025).

This publication presents 122 later Chinese bronzes from the collection of the author Paul Bromberg, formed between 2018 and 2024. Each piece has its own half-page illustration and is catalogued meticulously, including details of provenance and comparable pieces in publications on public and private collections, as well as dealer and auction catalogues. A comprehensive bibliography entices further exploration of the subject.

The author/collector's passion and enthusiasm are conveyed from his foreword and sustained through his two essays that precede the catalogue. In his foreword he informs the reader his inspiration for collecting later Chinese bronzes was triggered in 2018 when he came across a charming 19th century bronze scroll weight which he found 'highly attractive in terms of its aesthetic and tactile qualities' (p.8).

Rose Kerr, formerly Keeper of the Far Eastern Department at the Victoria and Albert Museum which published her own 1990 book on 'Later Chinese Bronzes' has written the introduction 'Later Bronzes in the Chinese Scholar's World'. This is followed by two essays by Bromberg: 'Later Bronzes for the Chinese Scholar's Studio: Form and Function' and 'Consideration of Later Bronze Paperweights'.

With his lucid and precise writing Bromberg has applied here the same detailed knowledge and enthusiasm he has brought to his other areas of collecting such as Thai art, examples of which appear in his book *THAI SILVER and Nielloware* (River Books, Bangkok, 2019) and in his article 'The Betel Set: An Icon of Thai Silverware' in the *TAASA Review* (Vol.31, No.2, June 2022).

His first essay establishes the centrality of the studio to the lifestyle of the scholar-literati class in Ming China, where all accoutrements have been carefully selected 'to be enjoyed for their aesthetic qualities and antiquarian associations' (p.12). There were style guidebooks to the choice of desktop items, collectively known as study playthings (*wenfang qinggong*). The most notable of these is the *Treatise on Superfluous Things* by the 17th century connoisseur Wen Zhenheng.

Although some text in this essay overlaps with some in the next, the reader is compensated by the illustrations which include a selection of some fine paintings and bronzes in public collections. For added appreciation, there is an image of a 'Buddhist lion' censer in action, exhaling smoke, and groupings according to function such as an array of flower vases which were 'produced in prodigious numbers, as flower arranging was a popular pastime for the Ming scholar-literati' (p.19).

In the second essay, *Consideration of Later Bronze Paperweights*, much of which had appeared in *Arts of Asia*, Autumn 2021, pp.60-74, Bromberg points out that although the Four Treasures of the Study (*wenfang si bao*) – namely paper, brush, ink and inkstone – have received a lot of attention, this is not the case for paperweights, a situation he remedies in this thorough essay. He uses the term paperweights to cover water droppers, brush rests and incense holders - incense being 'a luxury at the time, used to repel insects while

simultaneously dispensing a pleasant aroma' (p25). He informs us that it is not known where the majority of bronze paperweights were manufactured, or by whom, and that dating of these bronzes remains problematic.

Stylistically pieces range from the formal, often tinged with antiquarian allusions, to the naturalistic and whimsical. Regarding the many animals depicted, we again see his expertise: 'Chinese bronze paperweights comprise multiple zoomorphic sculpted figures - real and mythical, menacing and charming – which depict associations with philosophical, metaphorical and historical concepts' (p.27). The section on Mythical Beasts exemplifies the imagination and artistic licence applied to such figures. Rebuses and puns, 'already ingrained as standard artistic iconography by the middle of the Ming dynasty', provide rich sources of auspicious wishes and amusement.

The cover of the book references the layout of such desk delights: all bronze in this case, although typically there was a mixture of materials such as porcelain, wood and jade. The objects illustrated comprise a reticulated brush pot, an incense holder, a dated (1612) parcel-gilt bronze incense burner of a quality and design reminiscent of pieces manufactured by the renowned Hu Wenming atelier, a vase, brush rest, water dropper, scroll weights, water coupe, ink stick and inkstone (the last two not bronze). Along the right side are five desk pieces which capture the rich variety, skill, liveliness and carefully observed naturalism of many of these paperweights, as borne out by the catalogue illustrations which I guarantee will repeatedly draw back the reader and collector.

Jackie Menzies is the President of TAASA.

REFERENCES

Lu, Pengliang, 2025. *Recasting the Past, The Art of Chinese Bronzes 1100-1900*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2025