

National Gallery of Art

NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
August 23, 1999

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THE BRONZE BELLS OF THE MARQUIS YI OF ZENG

WILL RING IN CELEBRATION OF "THE GOLDEN AGE OF ARCHAEOLOGY,"

AT NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, SEPTEMBER 19, 1999 – JANUARY 2, 2000

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The public is invited to free musical performances of "The Bronze Bells of the Marquis Yi of Zeng" in celebration of the opening of The Golden Age of Chinese Archaeology: Celebrated Discoveries from The People's Republic of China. Twelve Chinese musicians will play traditional music on the set of 65 bells, which are handcrafted replicas of bells created in the fifth century B.C., and range in size from eight inches high (5 lbs) to five feet high (448 lbs). Performances will also feature other instruments of the kind found in the royal tomb of the Marquis Yi – a lord of a small state south of the Yellow River - including a bamboo flute (*chi*), a reed-pipe (*sheng*), a 25-stringed lute (*se*), a zither with moveable bridges (*guzheng*), and a drum. Free performances will take place next to the exhibition entrance on the mezzanine level, East Building, at the following times:

Friday, September 17
11:00 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.
3:00 p.m. – 3:30 p.m.

Saturday, September 18
11:00 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.
3:00 p.m. – 3:30 p.m.

Sunday, September 19 – opening of the exhibition at 11 a.m.
noon – 12:30 p.m.
3:00 p.m. – 3:30 p.m.

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Fourth Street at Constitution Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20565

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BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

The word for "music" in Chinese is written with the same character as "enjoyment." Since Confucian times, the Chinese have not only enjoyed the pleasures of music but have also believed in its healing powers, thought to create inner harmony and calm the spirit. The Chinese philosopher Confucius wrote, "When music goes forth, orderly relations are clear, the ears are sharp, the eyes bright, bringing life to a state of harmony and balance. Transforming ways and refining customs, music brings peace to all the world."

In 1978, 124 musical instruments were unearthed from the fifth-century tomb of the Marquis Yi of Zeng in what is now Hubei Province in eastern China. Among them was a set of 65 bronze bells, which are considered to be among the finest relics of the Warring States period (475-221 B.C.). The central bell bears an inscription that indicates it was a gift to Marquis Yi from King Hui of Chu and cast in 433 B.C., the year the Marquis was buried. The bells are believed to have been played in court rituals to ensure the posterity of the imperial reign.

Since the original bells have never been allowed to leave China, the bells that will be played at the National Gallery are handcrafted replicas, cast to the same precise pitch -- a task that challenged the technological skills of modern metallurgists some fifteen centuries after the first set was created. The flawless casting of the original bells, now in the collection of the Hubei Provincial Museum, is considered to be one of the most extraordinary technological achievements of Chinese civilization in the fifth century B.C.

The frame on which the bells will be suspended at the Gallery is identical to the original frame, a magnificent three-level copper and wooden structure, with red and black lacquered details and exquisite bronze fittings, including bronze support posts in the form of warrior figures. The largest set of bells will hang from the clawed feet of cast bronze lions. The 65-bell set is divided into eight groups and covers approximately five octaves. Inscriptions on each bell record the bell's position in the set and its pitch. Each bell produces two different tones, depending on where it is struck.

The Golden Age of Chinese Archaeology: Celebrated Discoveries from The People's Republic of China is organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, and The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, in cooperation with the State Administration of Cultural Heritage and Art Exhibitions China, The People's Republic of China.

The exhibition is sponsored by Eastman Kodak Company.

The exhibition is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities. Additional support has been provided by The Henry Luce Foundation. The catalogue is supported by a grant from the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation.

The National Gallery of Art, located on the National Mall at Fourth Street and Constitution Avenue, N.W., is open Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. Admission is free. For general information, call (202) 737-4215, or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176, or visit the National Gallery of Art's Web site at <http://www.nga.gov>. To receive the Gallery's free bimonthly Calendar of Events, call (202) 842-6662.