

Below: finely cast,
Han Dynasty Chinese
bronze mirror
206BCE - 220CE



MIRROR SMITH

For around 4,000 years,
people have been casting
bronze mirrors for use in
shamanism and ritual

Modernday Mirror Smith
Marco Hadjidakis

looks at the tradition,
the method of casting and
the use of bronze mirrors

Shamanic mirrors are metallic discs made of bronze or other metals, polished on one side - their 'face' - and usually decorated on the other - their 'back' - in the centre of which is often a knob or boss with a hole in it. This hole is to allow a cord, silk ribbon or scarf to be passed through it, which enables the mirror to be suspended or tied onto a costume etc. Some mirrors have a loop on their top edge for this purpose rather than a boss on the back. Suspending a mirror makes it easier to handle it without touching and dirtying the polished metal face.

The origin of ceremonial mirrors developed in Neolithic times with the art of grinding and polishing stone. Obsidian and jade were often used in ancient mirrors, and these stones are found in different locations around the world, such as Mexico, Anatolia and China.

Polished, iron-rich, meteorites may also predate cast bronze mirrors, and these have been used for a very long time in Tibet to create mirrors and other sacred objects. Ancient arrowheads, made from iron-rich meteorites, have also been found on the Eurasian steppes, and clearly show the early use of this powerful material.

Since the early Bronze Age [Around 3.000-2.000 BCE] the development of bronze casting spread quickly across the world.



The nomadic tribes who lived on the Central Asian steppes spread their bronze technology across a wide band, stretching from Eastern Europe, all the way to the Pacific coast of Northern China. They influenced Chinese Bronze Age culture, and subsequently Chinese influence then spread to neighbouring cultures, such as Japan and Korea to the east, and Iran and Anatolia to the west.

In Egypt, bronze mirrors were connected with the cult of Hathor, and in pre-Christian Europe, bronze mirrors were used by the Greeks, Etruscans and Celts in a religious context. It appears to have only been the Romans who restricted the use of mirrors to profane uses.

The ancient, worldwide development and spread of bronze casting and mirror making is too vast a subject - and too little researched - to fit into this article in any depth, so instead, I will focus on Asian and Central Asian cultures, and highlight their use of mirrors in shamanic practices.

MIRRORS AND THE ANCESTORS

Ancestor cults are China's root connection with mirrors; the durability of bronze created the possibility for a Chinese person to inherit an ancient mirror, dating back perhaps as far as 30 generations in their ancestral line. Such a mirror is very powerful, it has connections with all those spirits of the family lineage, and such mirrors are highly respected, and consulted with if there were important issues within the family.

There is evidence to suggest that the ritual use of mirrors grew out of this ancient Chinese ancestor practice, with ideas about mirrors then spreading to regions outside of China; enabling the use of mirrors to be taken up by the shamanic cultures there.

However, there is also evidence to suggest that shamanic cultures greatly influenced ancient China, which makes it seem likely that there was cross pollination of ideas regarding the ritual use of mirrors



between China and the shamanic cultures of Central Asia - each influencing the other.

Over a long period of time, shamans have found many ways to use their mirrors. Some shamans use mirrors - often known as *toli* - to give to spirits as a house for the spirit to live in. Some shamans use them by entering a trance and working with the energies amplified by, or inherently present, in the mirror. Shamans use them for performing healings, for exorcism, for soul retrieval, and for divination.

Mirrors also form part of a shaman's armour, protecting their bodies while spirit-traveling in trance to the other worlds.

When a shaman dies, traditionally their body was left in a remote place, far out in nature; often on a platform in a tree. There they were laid - with all their mirrors, their drum and other sacred items. Later generations would then accidentally 'find' the deceased shaman's mirrors and other bronze objects, and after consulting the spirit of the deceased shaman to ask for permission to adopt the mirror, the shaman who found these ancient objects could use them in his own work.

Ancient bronze mirrors did not only become sacred tools in shamanism, they also became adopted into Buddhist practice.

Buddhist mirrors are called *melong* in China and Tibet, and *darpan* in Sanskrit, and these mirrors are used in Buddhist initiations to represent the nature of the enlightened mind.

At one point in these initiations, the Lama shows the student the melong and tells them: "Your mind is like this mirror, in itself empty, but it will reflect everything that is exposed to it without changing because it has no judgment or attachment on what it reflects."

Many Buddhist altars contain metal mirrors, which can be truth-revealing mirrors, or part of an offering to the five senses, the mirror representing the offering of sight.

The durability of bronze means a Chinese person can inherit an ancient mirror, dating back perhaps as far as 30 generations in their ancestral line. Such a mirror is very powerful, it has connections with all those spirits of the family lineage, and such mirrors are highly respected and consulted with



The syncretic blend of Buddhist and shamanism found in Tibet, which is sometimes called 'Lamaism', has followers in Mongolia, China and Nepal.

In this tradition, mahasiddhas (great adepts or mystics), oracles and healers all have melongs or 'heart protecting mirrors.' I have also been told that a melong is involved in hungry ghost offering ceremonies.

An other magical use of mirrors within Buddhism can be seen on a relief on the 9th Borobudur stupa in Java. The relief shows the Buddha surrounded by monks, who are lifting their handled mirrors, as to charge them with the high energy of his enlightened being. This use of mirrors as a sort of 'sacred battery' which holds a spiritual charge also occurs in medieval Europe as Christian relics were sometimes viewed in a mirror, the mirror capturing and holding the reflection of the sacred relic for the pilgrim to take away with them.

Above: Tang dynasty bronze mirror with a dragon design 618-906CE

Left: Lost-wax mirror with four directions design



Above and left: the backs of simple home-cast shaman's mirror, dressed with remnants of old silk khadag. C18 - early C20th



Below - left: the back of, what is probably a Chinese mirror, imported into Mongolia and used as a shaman's mirror. The mirror has an eagle pattern fabric attached to it, which is bound in rawhide to form a grip. A bronze ring has been put on the fabric, and there is an old Buddhist tSog offering spoon and an eagle talon also attached. C1600 - 1900

Below - right: the back of a small Mongolian 'inch mirror'



Mirrors are multi-functional sacred objects, and shamans use them for: divination, finding lost objects, healing, exorcism, soul retrieval, and protection. They are also used when working with harmful spirits, and both to create, and also fight against, 'black' magic too.

Depending on their culture of origin, they can also be used in Sun worship, divination, as a door to communicate with the ancestors, as protector of a house or sacred place (for example the use of mirrors in traditional feng shui), as an initiation tool, as a house for spirit helpers to live within, as a healing tool, or to direct energies and intentions.

They can also act as a shield to reflect negative energies, as a symbol of authority, as a representation of a divinity or a kami (a Shinto nature spirit), as a tool for introspection, as a signal device (by reflecting light, so another can see the 'flash') and simply as an everyday mirror.

Ceremonies held to assist the soul of a person who has died are a major part of many shamanic traditions, and when using mirrors for this, two mirrors are required - one to protect the shaman in trance, during their travels in the underworld, and one to shine light and illuminate the 'path of the soul,' to help the soul find the land of the ancestors.

Some mirrors are very large - over 30 cm across, while others are small - perhaps only 2 - 5 cm across, and are more like amulets. These have been made since ancient times, and in literature they are sometimes called 'inch mirrors.' The smaller ones could easily be mistaken for bronze buttons, they are so small.

Some have simple designs on their backs: perhaps a yin- yang, four Chinese characters, or the eight trigrams (I Ching trigrams). Some have flowers, or the animals of the Chinese zodiac.

In Mongolia these small toli are often attached to ceremonial headgear and other ritual objects such as phurbas and divination arrows. Shaman's ritual objects don't need to be large to be effective in the spirit world, and small objects can be used without attracting too much attention. Small, inch mirrors, are perfect for protection while traveling, or to work with when the shamanic work needs to be unobtrusive.





Left - top: old Tibetan melongs
C18-19th

Left - centre: a small Buddhist altar melong on a stand
C19-20th

Left - bottom: an old Buryat shaman's toli with concentric rings, and its back, with Buddhist mantras
C17-19th

A WORLD OF MIRRORS

The face of a bronze mirror is generally convex, although some are flat.

Concave mirrors are rare. In historical and ancient China, household fires were kept alive both day and night, but once a year all the fires had to die. The next day, at noon, new fires were ceremonial lit by a shaman or priest, who used a concave bronze mirror. When using such a mirror, the sun's rays are reflected back from the mirror into a single point, which generates enough heat to light the kindling. Today we can achieve the same result by the use of a glass lens.

Himalayan melong mirrors, with a bronze loop on their top edge, are sometimes polished on both sides. These are convex on the one face, and concave on the other. As a heart protecting mirror, the convex side is worn outward. Once I heard a shaman explain: 'The convex side is to see into the future, and the concave side to see into the past.'

Some rare shaman's mirrors have a face full of small concentric waves - almost looking as if a drop of water had

fallen into a pool. Mirrors like this can not produce a recognisable reflection, and I think their function could be to disintegrate spirits during exorcism rituals, so as to disperse their power.

Both before and after the shaman works with them, mirrors are generally smudged in the smoke of herbs or incense.

Bronze is very sensitive to oxidation, and the acid from our skin can easily affect their polished surface.

Therefore, the tassel or silk scarves that are attached to the knob provide for a handle. Bronze mirrors are wrapped in silks, or stored in bags or boxes when not in use. This wrapping up and putting away also helps to protect them from energetic intrusions and accidental reflections - just as a blessed reflection can be held in a mirror,

Below: female shaman costume hung with many Chinese bronze mirrors
Evenk-Manegri people (Amur River valley), Eastern Siberia
C1900





To add a personalised element of magic into the mix, I often like to add - and recycle - an old ring or other precious metal object that already belongs to the owner of the new mirror, to create a stronger bond between practitioner and ceremonial tool

so too can the reflection of something harmful.

Some traditions say that only 'altar mirrors' should be displayed openly. In the case of a Buddhist altar, these are placed to symbolise radiant emptiness, or, on a shamanic altar, they are placed as homes for helper spirits and symbols of shamanic power.

Ritual mirrors - as living things in their own right, with their own 'master spirits' - may have their own preference as to how they are cleaned, stored and 'dressed.' One needs to 'listen' to them to find the correct way to work with them, including what kind of offerings they require.

Some traditional offerings to mirrors are incense, juniper or sage smoke, alcohol - generally vodka - songs and the sounds of drums rattles and bells.

In Mongolia shaman's mirrors were, and still are, blooded in the blood of a sacrificed sheep. The blood is said to transfers the life force of the animal to the mirror.

Dressing a mirrors complements the 'hot' male energy of the bronze

by the use of the 'cool' female quality of the fabric - usually silk - fixed to the mirror. This cloth becomes part of the sacred nature of the mirror and the combined qualities of heat and cool both play a role in healing or other work done with the mirror.

Silks are one of the traditional offerings which people who had been cured could offer a shaman to express their gratitude. The colours of the silk fabric used to 'dress' a mirror represent connections with both the four (or five) elements, and the sacred directions.

Some spirits ask for additional offerings to be attached to their mirror, such as beads, stones, shells or small bells too.

FORGING A MIRROR PATH

Since childhood, I have had an interest in archeology, ethnography, and arts. I am a self-taught artist, sculptor, painter and silversmith, and over the years, I have studied and collected sacred objects and amulets, trying to discover the 'mystic bond' between spirit and matter.

The first bronze mirror I acquired came from a local market. It had a landscape with a tree, rocks, water, some plants, and an archaic character on it's back. It was dented and scratched, and had an old repair, which helped convince me it wasn't a modern replica, but instead, an old and genuine object. It had an energetic quality that I simply couldn't resist.

I had seen pictures of Tibetan oracles and Mongolian shamans wearing mirrors, so I started to investigate them in literature and in meditations. The perfect circle must have been the oldest sacred symbol - representing the cosmos, the Sun, the radiation of light.

This first mirror was quite large, with a diameter of around 17 cm. Seeing the photos of shamans with mirrors on their chests, I tried wearing it like that, and when I did I felt a sense of protection from it, not only a protection of my heart



area, but a sort of protective resonance that seemed to be in my whole aura.

To my surprise, this first mirror seemed to attract other bronze mirrors to it and hence to me, and soon there were many in my possession, upon which, I thought it was about time I looked for other people who were also interested in shamanic mirrors.

In 2000 I met Daan van Kampenhout, the founder of the school for Shamanism and Ritual in Amsterdam. Daan had written a few articles on shamanism and mirrors, and his students were beginning to work with mirrors from my collection.

It can be difficult to find a match between an ancient mirror and a new owner. Also finding authentic ancient mirrors on the market gets

harder and harder, and so I saw it as my mission to continue the ancient craft of providing mirrors for those who were ready to enter this study.

One of Daan's students, Linda Wormhoudt, a teacher in shamanic practices - including mirror work - initiated me in the arts of working with mirrors, and in fact she was the first person to commission me to make a mirror especially for her.

Linda understood and explained to me how old shaman's mirrors can contain intentions, and can be a home to spirits which are not always compatible with new owners and their intentions.

If intentions match, it is perfectly alright for a modern day practitioner to use an ancient mirror. If they don't match, there is little chance of achieving positive



Above: the back of sand-cast mould for the back of a mirror

results, and quite possibly the mirror will stop being used or continue on its way, seeking to find a better match.

There are plenty of reproductions of old mirrors from China on the



Left: seven lost-wax mirrors. The mirrors with birds on them are intended as 'soul carriers' for soul retrieval and death-work, while the two mirrors with winged figures on are intended to be protectors

Opposite page Top: after a small offering to the fire, Marco smudges the open air foundry

Centre: the smithing fire, with a crucible of molten bronze

Bottom: pouring the molten bronze into a and mould



market, but I felt that reproductions have often been made with the intention of fooling the buyer, and for me, that felt like that disqualified them from any sacred use. And so, I made the decision to start making mirrors myself.

Bronze is an alloy of copper and tin (Cu and Sn), and the percentage of tin varies from about 10% to 30%. The tin content changes the colour and hardness of the bronze; for example, a high level of tin makes the mirror brittle, and it will be prone to break easy, whereas a low level of tin gives a warm red shine, but will easily oxidize.

Sometimes quantities of gold, silver, lead and sometimes zinc, can be added to the bronze, which all influence the resulting metal.

In the Tibetan language there are five different words for bronze. [The Tibetans also had great expertise in the making of alloys, including their sacred alloy panchdhatu - five metals - which is an alloy of gold (Au), silver (Ag), copper (Cu), iron (often from meteorites) (Fe) and lead (Pb)]

It has taken me years of experimenting to master this art; there are so many factors that must be taken into account. To add a personalised element of magic into the mix, I often like to add - and recycle - an old ring or other precious metal object that already belongs to the owner of the new mirror, to create a stronger bond between practitioner and ceremonial tool.

Back in July 2001 I met the Japanese doctor, Masaru Emoto who presented his work about human consciousness having an effect on the molecular structure of water. Doctor Emoto's theory is that, in the liquid stage, the water molecules can absorb information, which in a solid stage as ice, is frozen into the ice crystals.

Left: three of Marco's mirrors. From top to bottom: a labyrinth, a raven and the tree of life

Right: Mirrors are purified in a shaman's ceremony in Buryatia, Siberia

Opposite Page: a Buryat black shamans in ritual costume wears mirrors on their chests

It seemed very obvious to me that this would also apply to metals; and any programming done in the liquid stage would, when the bronze cools, become permanently stored in the crystal structure of the solid mirror or other object.

This programmed intention - through prayer and mantra - added to the intent in the original wax design - made me realise that a cast bronze mirror could be a powerful holder of intent and focus.

The melting of bronze requires a lot of heat (1300° C), and so my first attempts at creating mirrors were done in silver, which has a much lower melting point (893° C). Gradually I began to use a mixture of bronze and silver, which I called silver-bronze (±50% silver) and finally moved on to bronze itself.

The first mirrors I made were small, undecorated sand casts. A sandcasting is when a shape is pressed into sand, to leave an impression, and then molten metal is poured into this depression and left to cool.

Sandcasting is crude, and can not produce fine detail, so to make decorated mirrors I needed to use another technique.

This technique is called the 'lost wax' method, and it is capable of producing much finer castings. Using the lost wax method, an object is first sculpted in wax. This sculpture - with added wax rods - is then covered in plaster, the wax rods going out to the surface of the plaster. These wax rods are



important, as they will create airways in the finished mould.

The plaster mould is then heated, which makes the wax inside melt, and this runs out through one airway to leave a hole inside the plaster, exactly the same shape as the original wax sculpture.

When all the wax has been removed, and after two days in an oven at 750°C, the mould is ready to receive the bronze, which fills the empty space inside the mould, and creates a bronze replica of the original wax sculpture.

The bronze is poured down one airway, and the air in the mould is pushed out through another. The plaster is then broken off and the bronze casting cleaned up and polished.

The benefits of the lost wax method is the fine castings it can produce, but the downside is a mould like this can only be used once, making a bronze object which is cast this way a unique one off.

In 2010, I made the first group of lost wax mirrors, but it was not until several years later that I met Gerrit Ton, a master bronze caster, who admired my work.

Gerrit took me as an apprentice, and was open minded enough to allow me to smudge the tools and the foundry where we made our castings.

Because I was making sacred objects it was important to me to do them in a sacred manner. So, while the bronze is melting, I make an offering to the fire and I smudge the work. When the bronze is ready to be poured, I focus on the person that will work with the mirror, and whisper the intentions into the liquid bronze.

I then pray and recite mantras while I do the pouring, which has to be done smoothly, without any interruptions, as interruptions will cause flaws in the casting.

After breaking the mould, the airways [sprue] - through which the bronze was poured in, and through which the air inside escaped out - have to be removed. Then the mirror needs to be cleaned and polished. At the end of my process - as a mirror smith - I add a prayer to welcome the mirror into the world, which has the potential to be around for the next few millennia. Now it is up to the practitioner to "dress" it and to initiate it in its first ceremony.

Marco Hadjidakis was born in 1957 in Holland and has studied altered states and healing since 1991, and made mirrors to commission since 2010. He is an artist, mystic and mirror-smith.
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