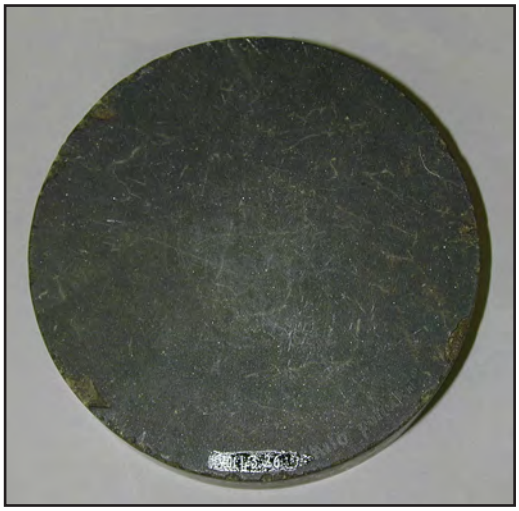
Body Arts
Mirrors

Stone, Horn, and Water

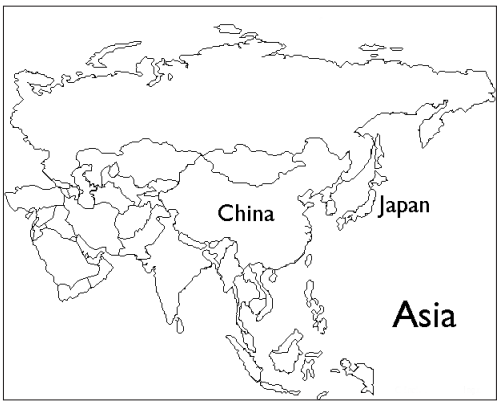
The first people ever to see their own reflection probably did so in water.

This round black stone mirror is from Hawaii. Mirrors of horn and stone need to be placed in water to work. This is because a mirror works by reflecting light. When light falls on an object some of it is reflected and some of it is absorbed. To give a reflection, a mirror must reflect as much light as possible and absorb very little. When dry, the stone and horn mirrors absorb more light than they reflect. In order to work they were placed in water. Water is highly reflective, especially when seen against a dark background like black stone or brown horn.



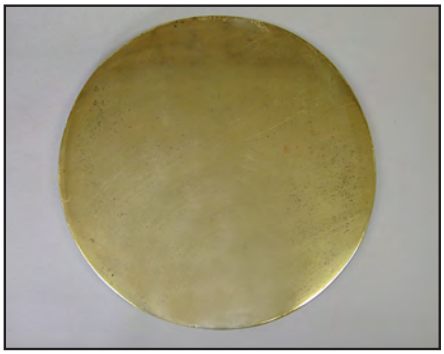
Black stone mirror, Hawaii, 1901.43.26

Metal



Cast-bronze mirrors were made in many parts of East Asia until the seventeenth century. They were usually round in shape, and were often held by a fabric cord. They were placed on a mirror-stand and when they were not in use they were wrapped in a cloth and stored in a decorated wooden box. These round mirrors were gradually dispensed with during the seventeenth century, in favour of mirrors with flat rectangular handles, usually bound with rattan.

When this large, round cast-bronze mirror from China was given to the Museum, staff were told that the small copper inserts, on the mirror's surface, indicated the astrological position of the stars on the birthday of the person for whom the mirror was made. It is now known that any imperfections in a mirror's surface that were made during the casting process were filled in with copper.



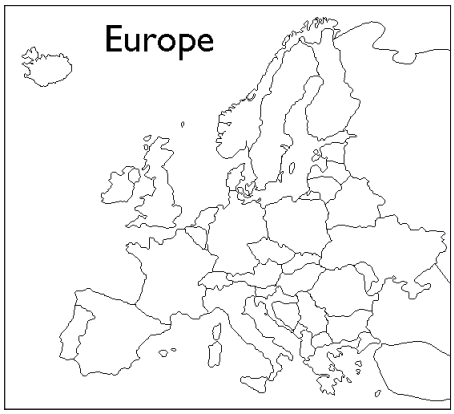
Bronze circular mirror, China
1916.2.27

The entire surface of the mirror was then covered with a mercury amalgam that created a silvery, reflective surface and completely hid the copper inserts. On this mirror the mercury amalgam has worn off revealing the copper beneath. Around the edges of this mirror are small holes where the copper has fallen out.

The advent of mass-produced glass mirrors in the nineteenth century meant the end of traditional cast-bronze mirrors.

Glass

Today the material most commonly used to make mirrors is glass. The Romans made glass mirrors by blowing large glass bubbles, cutting these into sections and backing them with a dark resin or metallic substance. Although the technique of making glass mirrors has changed over time, the principle has remained the same: modern glass mirrors are made from sheet-glass backed with a thin layer of aluminium or silver.



Glass mirror, Britain, 1949.9.396

For a long time glass mirrors were difficult and expensive to make. Consequently they were rare and owned only by an exclusive minority. In seventeenth-century Europe, kings, queens, and ambassadors would give each other mirrors as gifts.

It is probably because mirror-glass was so highly valued that it was framed, placed in protective boxes, or elaborately decorated. In some parts of the world mirror-frames were replaced as fashions changed. This is because the frame was usually cheaper to replace than the mirror-glass. Today the opposite is the case: glass mirrors are so cheap and easy to produce that they are often valued for their frames and not the mirror-glass itself.

Further Reading

Further information can be found in the Body Arts Gallery and on our Body Arts website: http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/bodyarts

Sources

TURNER, JANE (ed.), *The Dictionary of Art,* London: Macmillan, Volume 21 (1996), pp. 711 - 722.

Objects featured in this fact sheet can be found in the following cases:

First Floor (Lower Gallery) L54A for black stone mirror from Hawaii and bronze mirror from China

First Floor (Lower Gallery) L54B for glass mirror from Britain

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