



APRIL 2015

Acrobats and the Afterlife

Tripod Vessel with Acrobats Balanced on Rim



VISIT THE BMA
and see *Tripod Vessel*
with Acrobats
Balanced on Rim
when the Asian
galleries reopen
on April 26.

Detail, *Tripod Vessel with Acrobats Balanced on Rim*. c. 200. China. Earthenware with unfired pigments over slip. 8 x 5¾ x 5 inches. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Julius Levy Memorial Fund, BMA 1988.2

Children everywhere enjoy the feeling of throwing their feet into the air and standing upside down on their hands for a moment or two, whether on soft grass or a smooth floor. But these two acrobats, about four inches tall, practice their handstands on the thin rim of a clay vessel nearly 2,000 years old. Gripping the sides with their fingers and supporting themselves on strong arms and shoulders, the two young girls lift their heads and lock eyes as their feet meet in mid-air.

The tradition of Chinese acrobatics developed more than 2,000 years ago. During the cold and dreary months of winter when there was little farm work to be done, some rural families kept busy practicing stunts that required strength, agility, and superb balance. When the weather turned warm, they eagerly displayed their newly-acquired skills at village festivals. Those with special talent formed groups that traveled throughout the countryside entertaining people with amazing acrobatic feats. The best might have even performed for the emperor.

This vessel, shaped like a traditional container for warming wine, was never meant to be used. Instead, it was placed in a tomb alongside clay figures of dancers, jugglers, and musicians so that the soul of the person who had died would be happily entertained in the afterworld. For centuries the clay vessel remained untouched. After nearly 2,000 years, the young acrobats still seem vigorous and alive, as if they had just leapt up onto the rim and stood on their hands, holding their balance as long as they could before running off to perform another stunt.

CHALLENGE FOR STUDENTS

Handstands are the foundation for many of the daring feats performed by Chinese acrobats today. Google *youtube peking acrobats* to see videos of their amazing skills.

Read more about Chinese acrobatics at <http://bit.ly/1NCtYFD>.
See young people training to do handstands on page 5.

Try a handstand yourself. How long can you hold your balance? What part of your body gets tired? For instructions: <http://bit.ly/1qzenrB>

Write a story about how the world looks when you see it upside down. Illustrate your story.

PRINT THE IMAGE ON PAGE 2 FOR YOUR STUDENTS.



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