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RESONANCE

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RESONANCE

INTRODUCTION

Resonance is defined as the intensification and enrichment of a musical tone by supplementary vibration. It is also a quality that evokes a response. The sound and resonance of a Korean Buddhist bronze bell was used to awaken the feelings of sacrifice and spirituality in those who heard its haunting tone. *Resonance* was the title of a Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibit that explored the meaning of such bells from a Western perspective.

In response to their beauty and craftsmanship, we view ancient bells with awe and amazement without thought to the extreme cost of their production. When rung, these bells were meant to embody faith and sacrifice, yet they were also reminders of and perhaps confirmation of the reality of status and servitude.

The focus of *Resonance* was a visual art exhibition centered on the interpretation and modification of the Korean Buddhist bronze temple bell. As an artist of part Korean descent, heavily influenced by popular American culture and traditional Italian glassblowing techniques, it was my goal to create glass forms based on historical objects. The glass forms reflect my personal, technical and material interests. They are also an interpretation of the bell within contemporary and historical culture. The exhibition examined the way an object both physically and spiritually contained resonance and how that resonance affected all that heard it.

The Korean temple bell from the Unified Silla period (676 AD-918 AD) is an example of superb craftsmanship and devotion to king and religion. It also represents the expenses incurred in production, which put innumerable hardships on the lower class.

The peasants were obliged to pay heavy taxes, donate their personal bronze objects, and provide labor resulting in an “increasing impoverishment [in] the lives of the common people. Increasing numbers of them could not repay their debts and were reduced to slavery.” (Eckert, 49) If a King wanted to produce a great work of art to honor the Buddha, it was the peasantry who sacrificed and provided for its creation.

During one such project, the immense Emille bell was cast in the year 771 AD. The largest bell in Korea, when struck could be heard for forty miles on a clear night. One has to wonder what emotions were felt when the immense bronze bell was seen or heard. Twelve hundred years ago, the king might have felt great pride, a Buddhist monk perhaps intense piety, but how did the lower class feel? A peasant working, relaxing, or sleeping forty miles away was supposed to envision the voice of Buddha. But more than likely, they were reminded of their need to pay taxes and tribute.

The Korean temple bell was used as a tool to communicate from one group to another without personal interaction. The enlightened used it to communicate with the commoners, the wealthy to the indentured, and it reinforced the repressive nature of a monarchy that closely aligned itself with religion. It was used as a reminder to enforce the hierarchical status quo.

BUDDHISM AND THE BELL IN KOREA

The Emille bell, cast during the height of the Unified Silla period in Korea, has an inscription on its side. It reads,

True religion lies beyond the realm of visible things; its source is nowhere seen. As a sound it is heard through the air without any clue to its whereabouts, so is religion. Thus we hang up this great bell that it may awaken the call of Buddha. (McCune, 100)

This statement exemplifies the resonance that such a great bell conjures up and the power it contains. To this day, the bronze bell in Korea retains its power and significance. Like other symbols of faith; i.e. the crucifix, it is a tool to send a message and remind the populace of their devotion and need for sacrifice. The ringing of the Emille Bell reinforced the power and strength of Buddha, the beauty of bronze, and the authoritarian strength of government. During the Unified Silla period in Korea, Buddhism was the dominant influential religion, challenged only by Confucianism.

During the early 4th century AD, a monk named Shun Tao introduced Buddhism to the Korean peninsula. In 384 AD the religion was officially adopted by the Paekche kingdom and would eventually “give the nation spiritual unity.” (Eckert, 26) Temples enjoyed tax-free status, monks traveled to China and India to learn the way of the Buddha, and state sponsored projects reinforced Buddhist thought. Like the rest of Korean society at the time, religious life was highly stratified along class lines.

The ruling class adopted the sect of Hwaom Buddhism. Hwaom taught the “doctrine of all encompassing harmony that the one contains the multitude and the multitude is as one.” (Eckert, 50-52) This doctrine served the centralized power structure of the Unified Silla, reinforcing the idea that all beings were included within the one

Buddha mind, and all owed reverence to that thought. The Hwaom sect was an intellectual form of Buddhism, requiring intimate knowledge of various doctrines of the Buddhist sutras. This suited the ruling elite and monks who were literate and had access to Buddhist text.

The rest of the population followed a form of Buddhism called Pure Land. A monk-scholar by the name of Wonhyo was one of sect's most ardent propagators. He traveled throughout the Korean countryside preaching that all will be reborn in paradise if they followed one rule. Instead of studying obscure texts, one only had to repeat the chant, "Nammu Amit'a Pul" as a way to pay respect to the "Buddha of Infinite Light." Performing this simple task would allow the practitioner a chance to be reborn in the "Pure Land" where the Amitabha Buddha lived. The simplicity of Pure Land Buddhism made it attractive to the uneducated "because it offered hope of an escape from the despair of lives filled with day to day suffering, a condition brought about by the gross inequities of [Unified] Silla society." (Eckert, 51)

State-sponsored religion enabled public projects designed to honor the Buddha. Like religion, Korea had also received metallurgy technology from China. With this knowledge, workshops began to produce monumental bronze bells for the temples. Even though the original form of the Korean bell is based on Chinese design, the Korean artisans developed a distinct style very much their own. The earliest known Buddhist bell in Korea, the bell at Sangwon-sa was cast in 725 AD. Later in 771 AD, the Pondok-sa, or Emille, bell was created.

The Emille Bell, the largest cast in Korea, is the perfect example of a Unified Silla period temple bell. It was cast in posthumous honor of King Songdok. This bell is

over seven feet in diameter, ten feet in height and weighs almost nineteen tons. (Portal, 75) It was meant to evoke the voice, spirit, and soul of Buddha. However, there are many tales that reflect the burden that the commoners must have felt when donating their bronze objects for the production of their temple bell.

According to legend, the Emille Bell signifies tragic sacrifice from the very beginning of its production. The bell would not make any sound at all when it was first cast. It was recast and during the melting process, a young girl was thrown into the molten bronze as a human sacrifice. Her screams for her mother, “Emille,” are believed to have given the bell its haunting ring and it has been since known as the Emille Bell.

Bronze, the traditional material to create bells, was in great demand because the vast amounts needed to cast the large bells. This need for bronze must have been “a major burden on the people, since the monks and government agencies ordered compulsory donation of used bronze ware for casting new bells.” (Kim, 195) Objects such as cooking vessels and incense burners were melted and used in the public projects. Another legend speaks of a monster called “Pulgasari” which literally means Buddhist Temple Dweller. This monster had a voracious appetite and lived only on bronze and iron. (Kim, 195)

These tales are reflections of the personal and human sacrifices that burdened the lower class during this time in history. Perhaps most moving is the tale of human sacrifice. To sacrifice one’s own daughter for the greater good of the state horrifies us now. Yet it also demonstrates just how far some religious zealots were willing to go for their country and religion.

INDIVIDUAL WORKS

Resonance, a thesis exhibition, was composed of two sets of separate, yet symbolically integrated components comprised of multiple objects chosen to address the way the bell and striker were tools to communicate and reinforce class/hierarchical structure. The *Bells* referred to a form of non-verbal means of communication utilized by human beings. The *Strikers* were the tools used to facilitate effective communication. Separately, they are non-functional objects; in concert they become instruments of the ruling class to reinforce their dominance.

The focus of my exhibition was not to exactly replicate the Korean Buddhist bronze temple bell or striker, but to deconstruct its function through reinterpretation of its form and material. My choice to recreate the bronze bells in glass short circuits its original utility. The Korean bell form itself is simple and sleek, the walls bulge slightly as they flow from the top, then continue straight down. Inscriptions on the side of the bells detailed when and for whom they were cast, designs marked where the bell should be struck and the overall theme of the surface designs reinforced Buddhist thought. The surface design elements, while symbolic, did not affect the physical function to the sound of the bell.

The *Strikers* were also reinterpretations of the original forms. Although made out of the same material as the originals were, they were nearly ten times the size necessary for the bells in the exhibition. Each striker was ten feet long and tapered from eight inches at its widest point, to six inches at its narrowest. By overemphasizing the size of the striker, it was my goal to call attention to the delicacy of the material of the bells and the power the upper class possessed. These strikers, like drumsticks to drums or a bow to

a violin, are required for the instruments to make their specific sound. But they acted as more than just instruments, they were potential weapons as well, capable of destroying that which they were intended to “play,” just as an overly materialistic ruling class will destroy itself.

The sound potentially created by a bell is, I believe, more important than any surface decoration. Each bell in the exhibit was created and decorated to reflect a portion of real life rather than an idealized philosophy. The sound of the bell, its voice, comes from within. Using glass as a material to represent a bell allows the viewer to see inside the form; the space that is never seen, where the voice of a bell resonates.

THE EXHIBITION

In order to access the main exhibition space, one had to walk to the very back of the gallery. While bells in many Korean towns were hung in prominent places, the large bells, the “important” ones were tucked away within the temples. The bells in this exhibit were meant to be more than just ordinary, everyday objects. They were placed within a separate space that could not be easily accessed.

The Commons Gallery was walled in half lengthwise. As the viewer entered and followed the wall towards the rear of the gallery, they first had to pass a large wooden striker. This ten-foot pole was suspended horizontally from two wooden rafters by hand wrought steel chains. (plate 3) This large piece of wood had been sanded smooth, the surface finished to give it a weathered appearance. The head had been beaten, slightly mushroomed to give the impression of years of use. A metal band near the head wraps the wood and works to prevent the wood from further splitting. (plate 5)

By itself, the striker is useless, but this object made of a common, more accessible material was essential in the use of the bell. It hangs in the front of the gallery to attract the viewer, they do not find out the purpose of the striker until they enter the back room. This striker confronts the viewer as they walk in. As someone approaches, they momentarily occupy the position of a bell, the object that is struck in order to make noise. When the viewer is in front of this striker, they are at the mercy of those on the other side, it is controlled by those with power.

As the viewer entered the back, or inner, room of the exhibition through a doorway at the end of the wall bisecting the length of the gallery, she/he encountered another striker. Towards the middle of the gallery and continuing at even intervals back

in space are three blown glass bells. They graduate in size from small to large, less significant to more--representing the triptych of class: the common, the educated, and the wealthy. Underneath each of these bells stood a ceremonial offering bowl filled with items representative of each class. (plate 6) Nearest to the striker was the smallest bell, and at the far end of the gallery, was the largest glass bell. The striker is exactly like the one hanging in the outer room. (plate 7) This object is the impetus that creates the sound. The head of the striker is beaten and worn, as if it has been used to strike thousands of times. (plate 8) It is identical in size and form to the other striker, except this one is poised, ready to swing at the first and smallest glass bell and shatter the silence of the space.

The interior space of the gallery was painted a light gray, to contrast with the surfaces of the three bells. Underneath each bell, on individual wooden platforms are large offering bowls. These bowls, reminiscent of ceramic forms from the Unified Silla Period, are large low bowls elevated by conical feet. They are all enameled a rough black and lined with gold leaf. Spotlights illuminated the individual elements. (plate 9)

The first and smallest bell hung, as the strikers did, by hand wrought chain links, reminiscent of metal seen in Korea. (plate 10) This bell is common in size, dirty, and scuffed; the surface has been enameled a rough black. Underneath this bell, stood a large offering bowl. It was also a rough black, but lined with gold leaf and overfilled with rice. (plate 11) Rice was the crop that most peasants lived to produce, eat and pay taxes with. The rice in this bowl remains unadulterated, pure, because if there is any fault to it, it becomes worthless and payment to the upper class will not be honored. This bell was nearest to the striker because it was their life that is most easily shattered due to

weather, war, or a tyrannical government. They were the first to suffer, the first to become indentured to those with power.

Next was the medium sized bell. (plate 12) It too hung from a rafter, supported by chain. This bell was clear, its surface unadorned, and it had a scalloped edge to reference the lotus blossom, to represent the “pureness” of Buddhist thought.

Underneath this bell was another offering bowl containing objects of intellectual importance--a brush and a stack of mulberry paper, items used to communicate through the written language. (plate 13) Like the rice in the first bowl, these items remain unadulterated. Rather than be transformed into something useless, they remain totally utilitarian. The religious/intellectual classes’ ability to read and write gave them power to dictate ethics and values within a given society. They influence the lower class not with threat of physical violence, but with threat of never being able to escape the suffering of life. This influence over the commoners also gave the educated some distance from danger. Their lives were more stable, secure, and filled with fewer hardships than the peasantry.

Finally, at the rear of the space, hung the largest bell, covered in gold leaf. (plate 14) Underneath this bell was an empty offering bowl. (plate 15) While the other classes gave food, labor, literature, and religion to the country, the elite just exploited the labor of others, offering nothing in return. This bell of the upper class remained furthest from the striker. This group governed the daily life of all who dwelt within their land. They had the power to grant freedom, take life, start war or encourage peace. By ruling with an iron fist, this class enjoyed the pleasantries of life and was furthest from imminent danger.

CONTEXT

Glass has been a material for the masses since the blowpipe was first used over two thousand years ago. The invention of optical glass has changed the way we look at the world and ourselves. Eyeglasses improved vision and extended the productive lives for most of humankind. Glass in the telescope helped take our planet and the human race from a geocentric view into a heliocentric view of the world. Glass used in televisions, cameras, and computers brings us our daily information. The material has expanded the forty-mile radius of the Emille Bell all around the world. Glass, transparent and colorless, acts as a tool to give the viewers a chance to see what was once invisible.

In this thesis, glass was chosen to reinterpret and reconstruct the bronze bell because of its symbolic associations and contradictions. It is at once fragile yet strong, clear or opaque, functional or totally useless. When an artist recreates an object out of a material other than its original substance, both a physical and conceptual transformation occurs. The artist who recreates an object out of an alternative material, in my case a dysfunctional material, it serves to draw the viewer's attention away from the original purpose of that object and focuses attention on the "new" meaning, the hidden meaning, behind the objects.

When Andy Warhol fabricated his *Brillo Box* sculptures and other artworks, he did so to reflect and criticize the interests of the growing middle class in 1960's America. While mainstream America was becoming more aware of the inequalities between class, gender and race, the problems continued to grow and are still prevalent today even with the acknowledgement of such issues. The new symbols of American comfort and modernity as lionized by Warhol were Campbell's Soup cans, Brillo boxes and Coca-

Cola. While taking a tongue in cheek approach to art, creating artwork about the new symbols of value, Warhol demonstrated just how frivolous those objects were and yet how potent they were as symbols of a country's changing identity.

By presenting stenciled wooden boxes as sculpture, Warhol also challenged the whole idea about what could and could not be considered art. These new sculptures were very time and place specific as only in New York City in the late twentieth century could they be considered art. It would be ridiculous to think that they would have been acceptable, even thought of, one hundred years, or even a few decades earlier. Like Marcel Duchamp and his *Ready-Mades* before him, Warhol and Pop Art changed the way we look at art and “demonstrated that art and reality could resemble one another to whatever degree one desired.” (Danto, 5) Duchamp challenged what could be considered art-making materials by using found objects to create his *Ready-Mades*. Warhol followed by taking one step further and presented commercial objects recreated for a sculptural context.

Warhol demonstrated how changing the material of an object alters its function, value and significance. This allowed artists like Jeff Koons and Mona Hatoum to work in a similar matter. In the 1986, artist Jeff Koons cast an inflatable Easter bunny out of stainless steel. Casting an otherwise throwaway object out of more permanent materials added value and importance to the object and made it serious and permanent, exactly opposite its original use. In the 1990's, Mona Hatoum had a baby crib recreated out of glass, giving the recognizable object a sense of delicacy and power because of the new material it was made out of.

During the rise of Warhol and Pop Art, the Studio Glass movement began and would challenge the ideas of what was deemed to be valid art material. In 1962, Professor Harvey K. Littleton, of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, began the first small-scale glassblowing studio in an educational environment. This act took glass beyond the realm of the factory and into the hands of individual artists. Since then glass artists have taken the material beyond craft and into the fine art world. Erwin Eisch created blown glass telephones, Dante Marioni reinterprets classical Greek ceramic forms, and Richard Marquis has redefined the teapot.

While the intention of the bells were conceptually different than what Warhol and Koons were doing, making them out of glass drew attention to the symbolic meaning of the object rather than the actual, utilitarian function. The material is the opposite of bronze because the Korean bells were supposed to withstand generations of striking. Struck once, glass bells will shatter, which demonstrated the delicate balance of class structure.

Artists who work with glass have the ability to manipulate the material to create and transform objects in order to add delicacy and power to the aforementioned artwork. Warhol was also able to manipulate different materials and “[p]eople loved the fact that Warhol made art out of the most common of common things.” (Danto, 37) The transformation of an object is what entertained people the most. Like Warhol and his Brillo boxes, glass artists and their work have to be looked at within a certain context. It took a combination of the Arts and Crafts movement of the late nineteenth century, combined with Pop Art and the Studio Glass movements to have glass be accepted as a legitimate sculptural material by the fine art world.

CONCLUSION

Many simple acts and ordinary objects can be seen as microcosms of a society. Artists like Andy Warhol saw the potential of everyday items and the power they possess and use their work to draw attention to their inherent meanings.

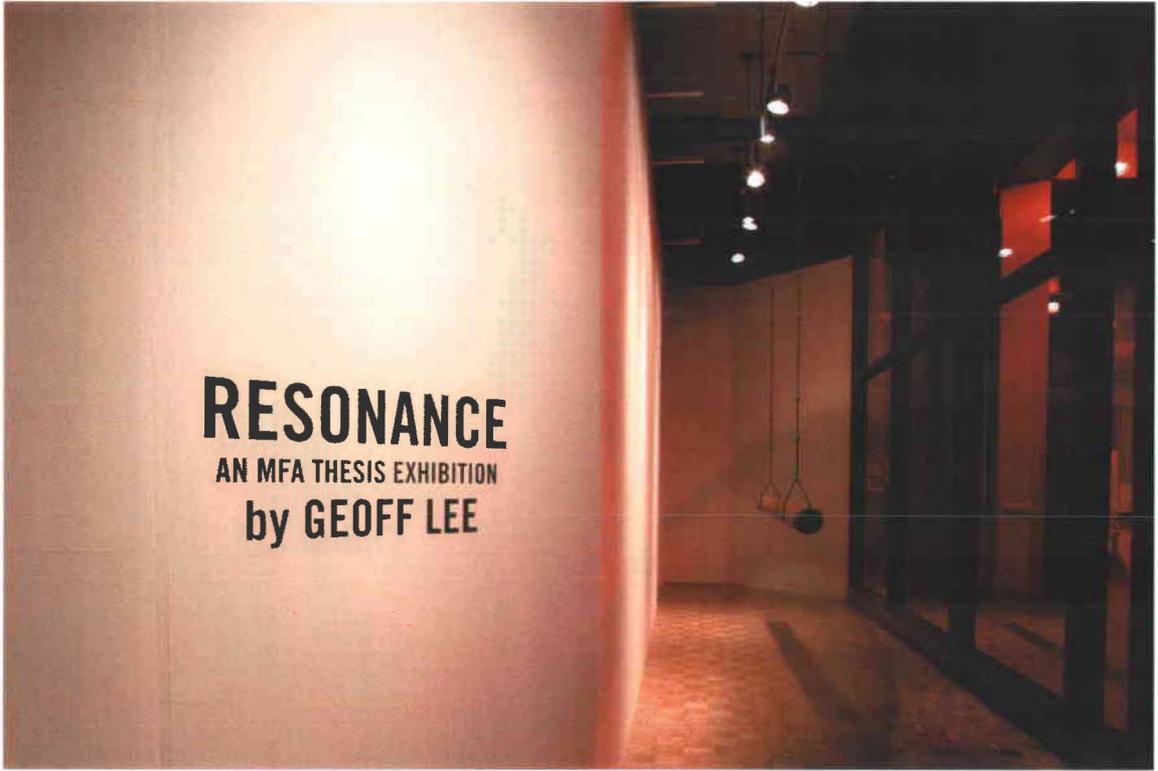
Glass is seen by many as an everyday ordinary material. We drink from it, look through it, and for the most part take it for granted. Artistically, the use of glass has the potential to add a sense of power and fragility to an object.

I strive to use glass as a means of communication. The simple act of striking a Korean temple bell, while originally meant to invoke the voice of Buddha, had the ability of reminding a society their position within a stratified culture. A glass bell is useless and destroyed if struck; yet it too has the ability to speak and be heard without saying anything and to awaken the senses of those who experience it.

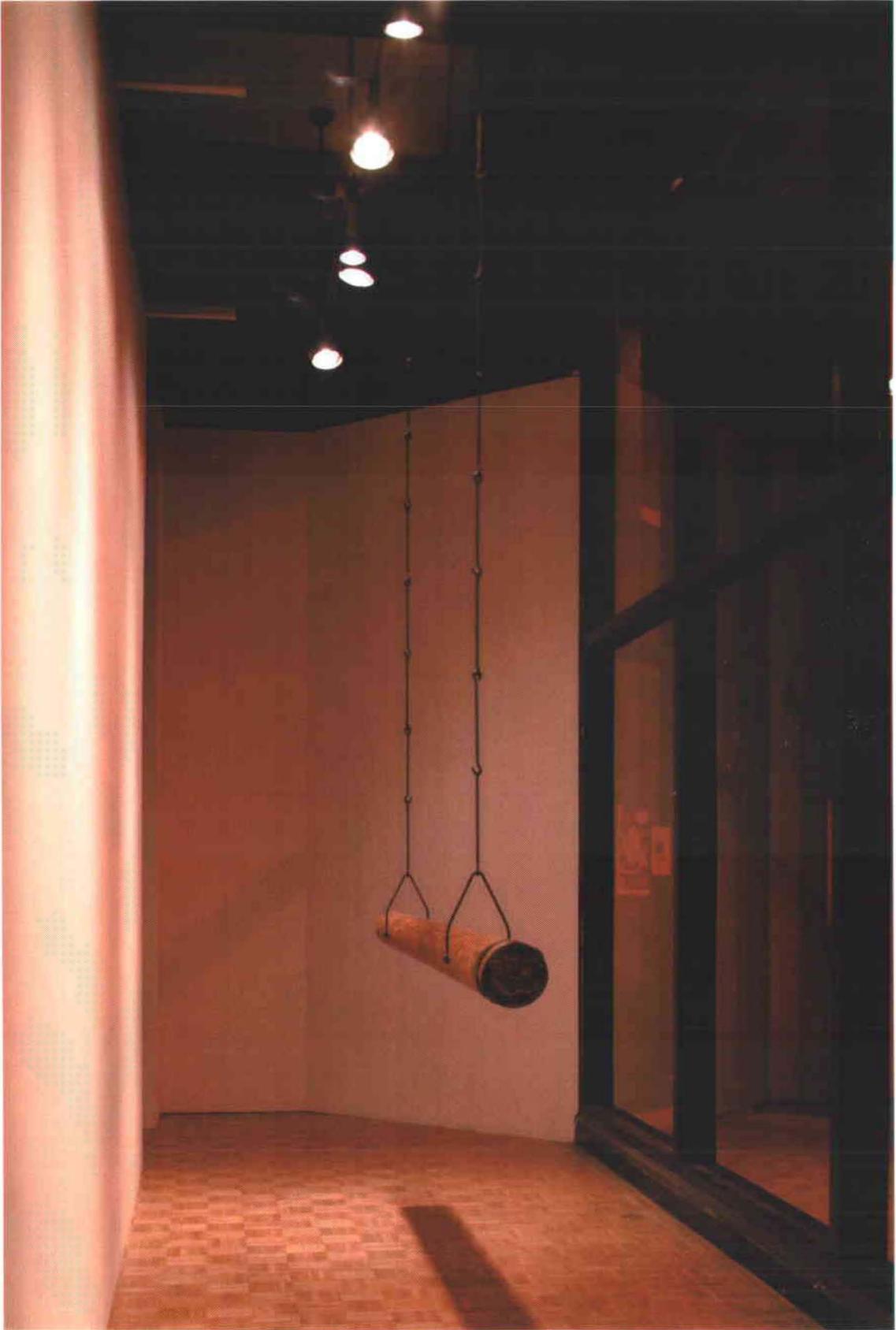
Resonance was an examination of a means of communication between the empowered and the exploited. The exhibit was inspired by the magnificence of the Korean bronze bells and the ways in which its magnificence was used by a group or groups to control another through manipulating ideology to justify exploitation.



OVERVIEW FROM OUTSIDE



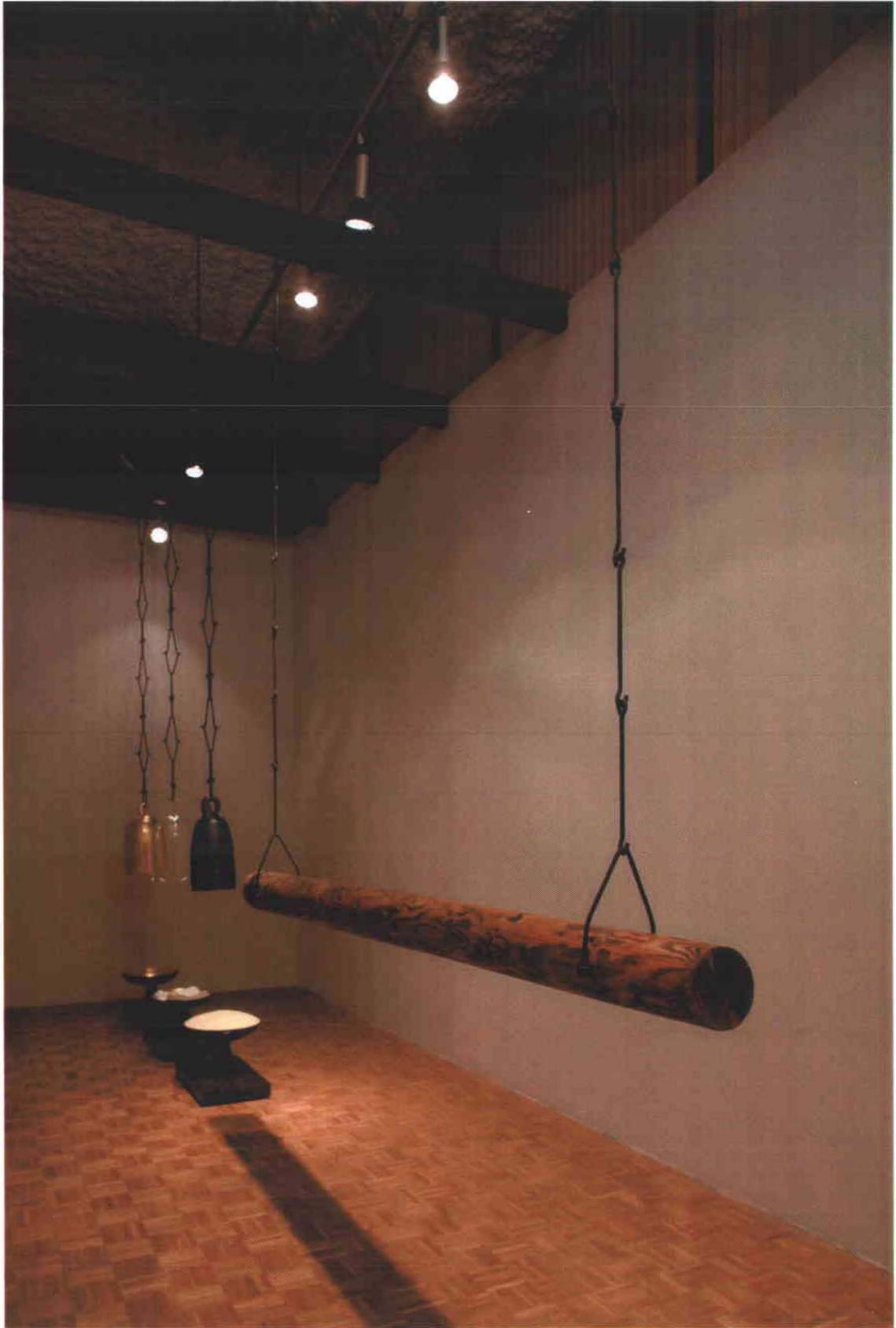
OVERVIEW FROM ENTRANCE



OUTER ROOM STRIKER



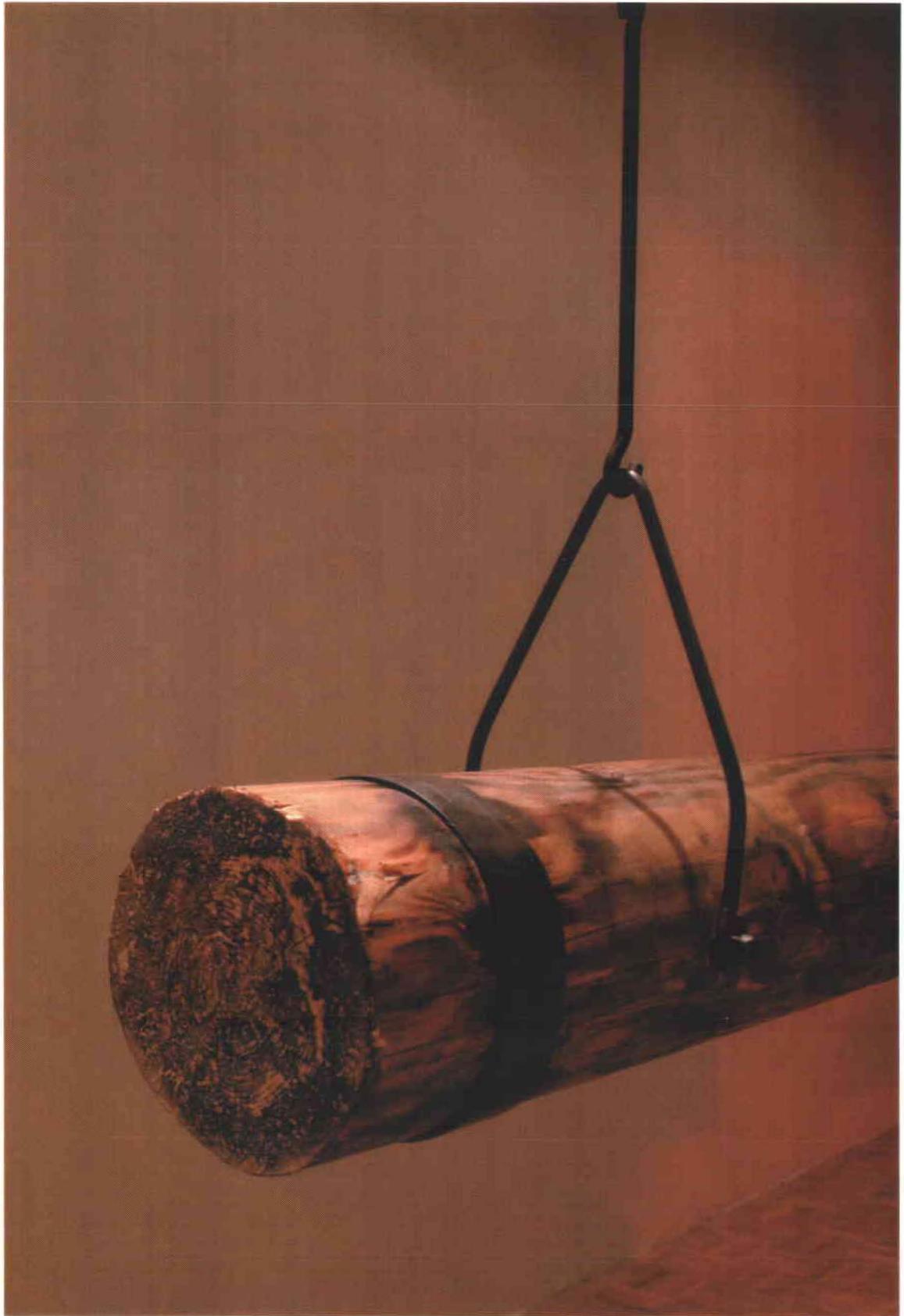
OUTER ROOM STRIKER, DETAIL



OVERVIEW OF INNER ROOM



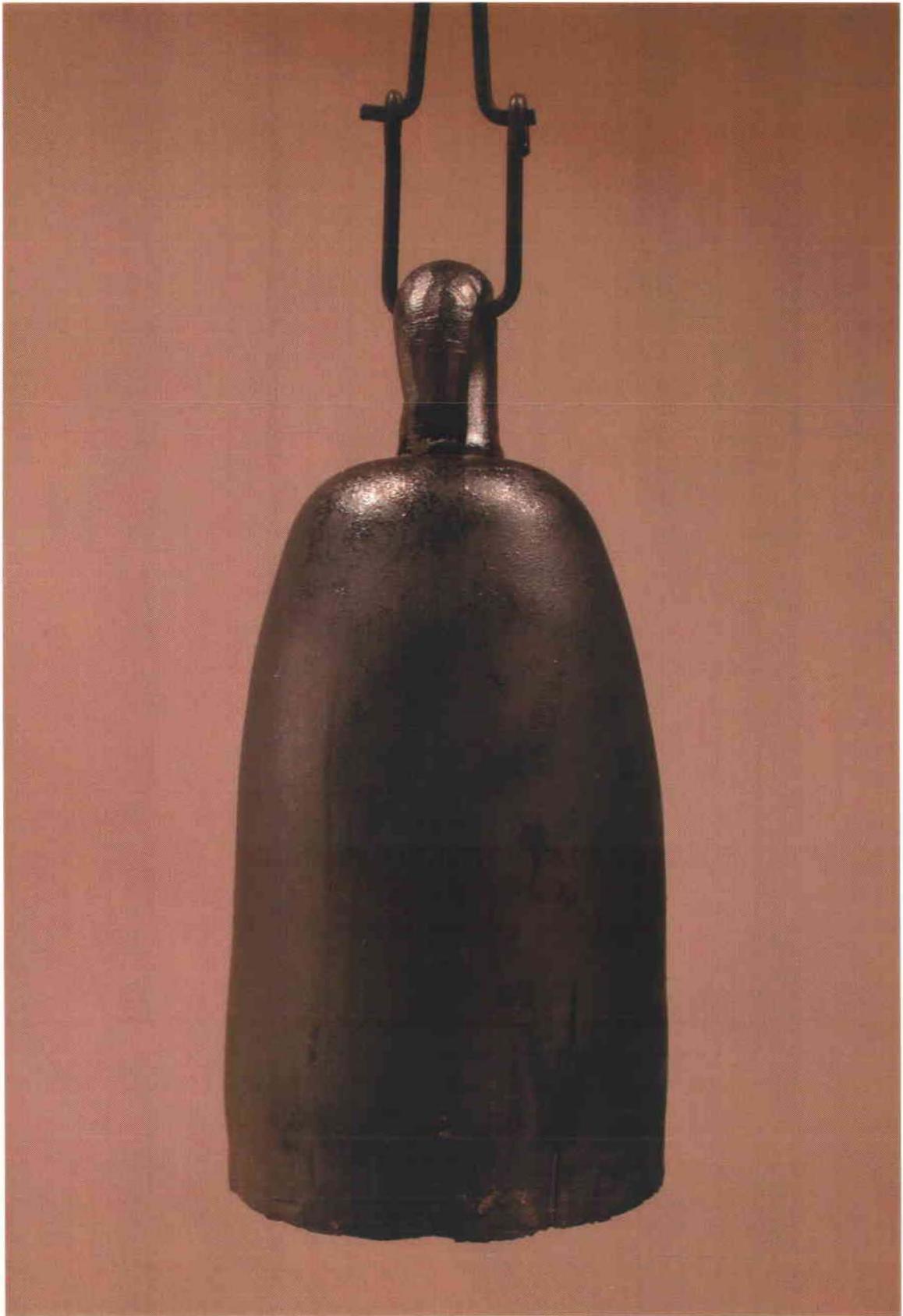
INNER ROOM STRIKER



INNER ROOM STRIKER, DETAIL



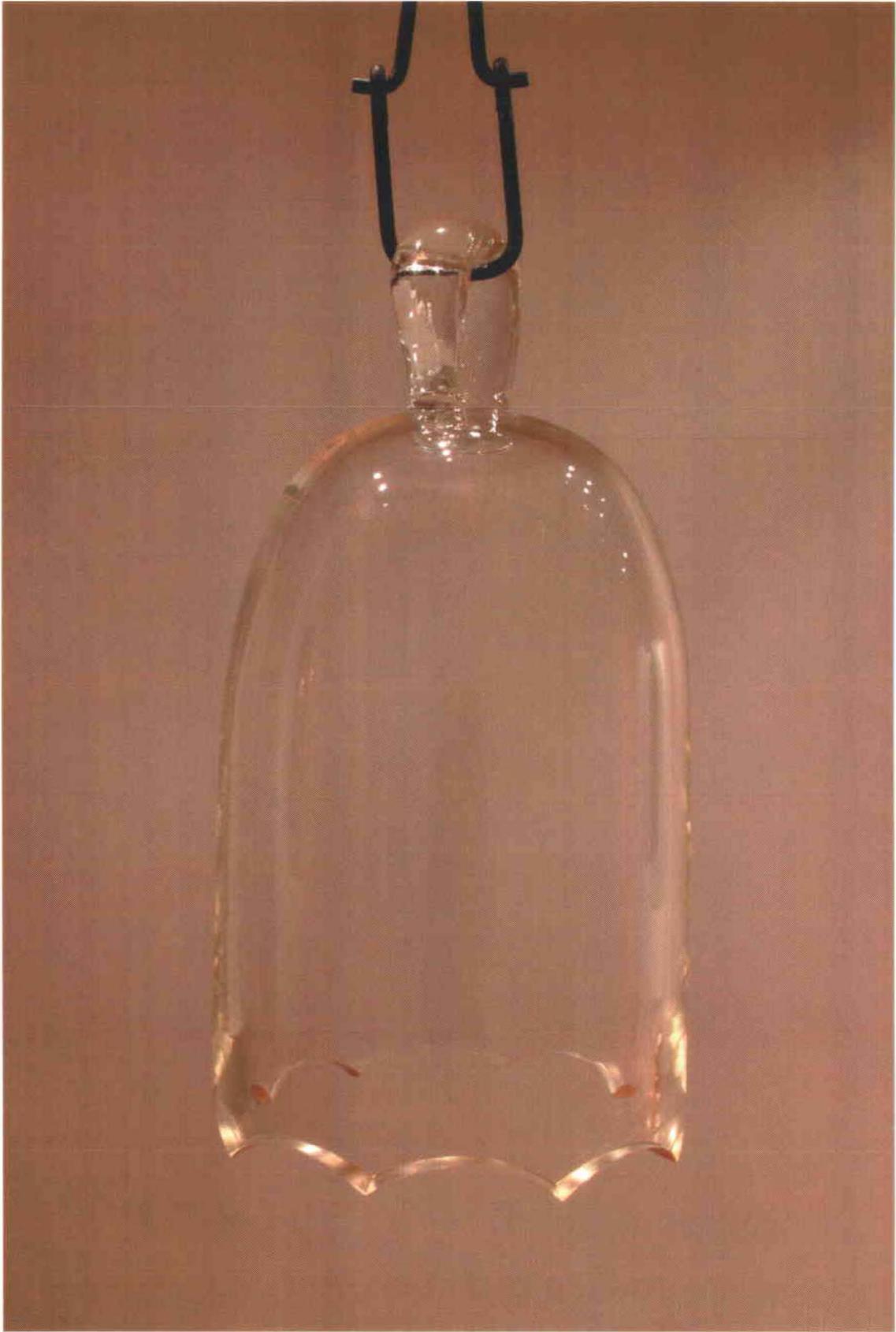
BELLS WITH OFFERING BOWLS



ENAMELED BELL



OFFERING BOWL WITH RICE



CLEAR BELL



OFFERING BOWL WITH PAPER AND BRUSH



GILT BELL



EMPTY OFFERING BOWL

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