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Lithophone

RISD Museum

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I'm Shawn Greenlee. I'm a professor at RISD in the Foundation Studies Division. I'm also a composer and sound artist, and I'm here with a lithophone from China from the 1700s made of jade.

I think with this instrument, it's not so clear when you first see it that it's something you play.

My understanding about lithophones is basically that they are meant to be hung, and there are a number of them. So each one will produce a particular tone, and they're a similar kind of thing to what we'd think of as a xylophone today, where you have different sizes of metal, for instance.

So I think that is a pretty important aspect of this particular lithophone, to imagine that this is just a piece of a larger instrument. This isn't just an isolated thing that was struck, that it would be something that's quite large, and you'd have stones that are smaller and stones that are much larger to play.

There's a sort of preciousness to this object that now forbids a certain usage of it that was not forbidden when it was most likely intended to be used for some court music.

I think the decorative quality is actually unimportant if we're thinking about this as a musical instrument. The decorative quality might be something that is meaningful for the player. And that's in relationship to the playing of the instrument, that the player would see these inscriptions, that that might inform their playing.