

Tomb Retinue

About 725

Chinese, T'ang Dynasty (618-906)

Earthenware with polychrome glaze

The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund 49.1.1-10

INTRODUCTION This retinue was reportedly excavated in early April of 1948 from an imperial tomb at An Chia Kou near Lo-yang in Honan Province. It is comprised of five pairs of court officials, warrior guardians, earth spirits, horses, and camels. The set is distinguished by its fine modeling, large-scale figures, abundant use of rare cobalt blue glaze, excellent surface condition and the fact that it has survived intact, constituting one of the few complete tomb sets in existence.

BACKGROUND The T'ang dynasty (618-906) has long been considered by the Chinese as a "Golden Age," and it certainly ranks as one of their most vigorous cultural periods. It might be argued that it is the art of pottery, with its robust vitality, cosmopolitan character and technical advances, that affords us the most tangible link to T'ang artistic genius.

One can also not overemphasize the invigorating effect that the influx of foreigners during the 7th and 8th centuries had on the Chinese intellect and creative spirit. During most of the 7th century, China was militarily expansive, incorporating Mongolia, Chinese Turkestan, and Korea. Eventually, her political influence extended into Russian Turkestan, Transoxiana, and she administered Kashmir, Kabul, and Balkh through the Chinese viceroy at Kucha in Turkestan. During this period of relative prosperity, China was the major power between the Yellow Sea and Persia, and her trade goods were highly regarded by the rest of the world.

The great capital, Chang-an, had, by the 8th century, nearly two million taxable residents, including a sizable foreign population comprised chiefly of envoys, clerics, and merchants from the West and North: Turks, Uighurs, Tocharians, Sogdians, Arabs, Persians, and Hindus. Much of the exotic wealth brought into China, and the silks, ceramics, and metalwork traded for it, travelled along the great overland silk routes. The routes stretched from the teeming cities of Yang-chou, Lo-yang, and Chang-an out

through the northwestern frontier of China along the edge of the Gobi desert, leading eventually to Samarkand, Persia, and Syria. Accordingly, the influence of Indian religions and astronomy, Persian textile patterns, Sassanian metalcraft, Tocharian music and dance, Turkish costume, and horses from Farghana entered into the mainstream of T'ang aristocratic life. It is this basic cosmopolitanism which lies behind the extraordinary variety of motif and figures encountered in the Minneapolis tomb set and, for that matter, in most forms of T'ang art.

MING-CH'I

During this era of exotic taste, however, the Chinese continued their long established practice of interring wood and clay figurines of humans and animals in the burial chambers of their deceased.¹ The Chinese term for these articles, *ming-ch'i*, is perhaps best translated as "spirit articles," and they were meant to accompany and protect the dead in the afterlife. Although already popular during Western Han (206 BC-AD 9), it was during the early T'ang (618-756) that they were produced in their greatest numbers at a time when funeral processions and burial had become most extravagant. In fact, a special imperial government office, the *Chen-Kuan-shu*, was created for the production and supervision of *ming-ch'i*. Regulations were established as to the number and type of grave objects and the arrangements of the funeral procession according to rank, not only of the aristocracy, but of the common classes as well. T'ang funeral processions were relatively festive occasions, and mourners would often carry the grave furnishings, including ceramics, to the tomb in full view of massed crowds as a somewhat ostentatious gesture of filial piety. An ancient account relates that some families, in an effort to compete with their neighbors, were faced with financial disaster.² Eventually, an imperial decree issued in 742 set limits upon the size and number of tomb pieces allowed according to the rank of the deceased.

TECHNIQUE

Typically, most pottery figures were mold-made in mass quantity, and both glazed and unglazed figurines could be interred in the

¹ The ancient Chinese believed in an afterlife, and human and animal sacrifice during the Shang and Chou dynasties (1766-255 BC) was often practiced as archaeology has shown. Exactly when the changeover to replicas took place is not certain, but Confucius (6th century BC) condemned the tradition of human sacrifice, and the *Chou li* (*Book of Chou*, ca. 4th century BC) mentions the substitution of *ming-ch'i* for human sacrifice.

² M. Prodan. *The Art of the T'ang Potter*. (London: 1960), p. 64.

same tomb, even when it was a royal burial, as recent excavations have shown. Glazed wares were usually decorated over a white slip with a palette of green, amber, cream, and straw yellow to produce the unique *san t'sai* or three-color glaze which typified T'ang ceramics. Although *san t'sai* means three-color, many variations of the above hues were used in *san t'sai* ceramics so that the colors were not necessarily limited to three. On occasion, rare and costly blue glazes were also applied, but the scarcity of this fourth color suggests that it was usually reserved for the best and most striking figures, and it has been associated with more important tombs.³ Although other tomb sets exist, only one other predominantly blue glazed group is known. It is part of a Japanese collection but is smaller in scale and less articulately modeled than the Minneapolis set.

DATING

The MIA Tomb Retinue is dated within the first half of the 8th century. This date is based on stylistic and technological evidence. First, excavations of T'ang tombs have established that the height of polychromed ceramics lasted from 700 to 756, ending when the country was shaken by the disastrous An Lushan rebellion. Second, samples from the Minneapolis group underwent thermoluminescence tests at the Research Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art, Oxford, in June of 1978, and the results were positive, placing the works within the range 718-1000.

T'ANG TOMB RETINUE Standing Court Officials

The pair of standing court officials with hands clasped and wearing long robes is perhaps the most stereotyped form among the tomb figurines. Both figures are poised on rock formation pedestals, perhaps to emphasize their exalted position, and each is clad in the wide-sleeved robe, long underskirt, and turned-up shoes which was traditional attire for court officials. One robe is glazed predominantly in blue while its counterpart is decorated in brown with blue trim. The taller figure sports a so-called "butterfly hat" which had evolved from the official cap common to the earlier Han court. Each image has a perforation in his hand where originally his symbol of rank (*kuei*) was carried. Typical of the type, the heads are unglazed, but the faces are crisply sculptured and cold pigments have been added to complete the

³ The blue coloring agent was cobalt oxide, a highly sought-after import item first brought into China from the Middle East during early T'ang. When added to a lead silicate glaze and fired in oxidizing conditions, it will mature as a pale cornflower blue, or when properly concentrated in an alkaline solution, it deepens into a brilliant Prussian blue.

effect of life-like portraits. The figures seem to be of different ethnic types, or perhaps represent a human being and a deity.

**T'ANG TOMB
RETINUE:
Lokapala**

In direct contrast to the static character of the court dignitaries are two powerful guardian deities who each strike a vigorous pose, right arm upraised, while standing on a recumbent bull. Usually referred to as *Fang-hsiang* or *Lokapala*, the figures are clearly drawn from the Buddhist pantheon, their compelling poses and their sculptural character definitely rooted in the Buddhist figural tradition. Lokapalas are the “four heavenly kings,” guardians of the cardinal points of the compass, and are often seen at the four quarters of Chinese and Japanese Buddhist altars protecting the main image from evil forces. Typical of T'ang Lokapala figures, these are shown standing on a demon or bull and are clad in full-plate armor. Originally, each brandished a sword or spear in his clenched fist, but these weapons, probably made of wood, have long ago turned to dust. Although sheet armor of this type is typical of 8th-century Buddhist art, it is quite fanciful, containing decorative elements of Sassanian design and elaborate horned masks at the shoulders. The faces evince a wrathful physiognomy scowling with bulging eyes and are modeled with powerful conviction. The symbolic phoenix headdresses are common to other large T'ang guardians, and they add a dramatic accent to these dynamic images. In this instance, however, the motif is indigenous to China, the fantastic bird being one of the “four heavenly creatures” of Chinese mythology and, as such, it seems appropriate that it be associated in this fashion with the Lokapalas who themselves are heavenly kings.

**T'ANG TOMB
RETINUE:
Earth Spirits**

An equally compelling pair of guardians include the two fantastic winged monsters commonly referred to as chimera, earth spirits. These ferocious composite creatures seem to blend a feline body with the horns and hooves of a deer, a grotesque head, flaring wings, and flame-like finials. Both figures sit on standard rock-work pedestals and are decorated with elaborate drip patterns in blue, amber, and white. One beast has a human face with enormous ears, all of which has been left unglazed.

**T'ANG TOMB
RETINUE:
Horses**

Perhaps the most popular of all subjects for the T'ang potter was the horse, and, indeed, the type has now become stereotypical of T'ang ceramic art. The two large horses in this set are truly outstanding. They stand four-square on unglazed rectangular plinthes, necks arched, heads down to one side, creating a taut profile, the linear rhythm being reminiscent of Chinese pictorial art. One steed is glaz

in a brilliant, deep cobalt with a contrasting white and brown streak mane. One of only three such blue-glazed horses known to exist, and the largest and best of those three, it stands as the highlight of the Minneapolis retinue. The saddle has been left unglazed, and the pigment which once decorated it is now gone; the harness trappings are of Sassanian origin. This horse is paired with a companion glazed in chestnut brown with a blue saddle and drip-glazed blanket. The trimmed bristle mane accentuates the tensed energy of its powerful neck.

Horses were of tremendous importance to the rulers of T'ang. The horse was considered an instrument of diplomatic (tribute) and military policy, and horsemanship was regarded to be an aristocratic privilege. Foreign horses poured into the T'ang empire from the nomadic horse dealers in the region of Ferghana as far West as Samarkand, but it was the Turks who dominated the horse market through the 8th century. In those last decades, the price of an Uighur horse became 40 bolts of Chinese silk, an extraordinary sum. Accordingly, the horse became a symbol of status and power to the 8th-century Chinese aristocrats, and it is little wonder that they chose to be accompanied in death by images of their favorite riding animals. Given the infinite variety of superb ceramic steeds in the total repertoire, it may be stated that the T'ang realistic style reached its height with figures of horses.

**T'ANG TOMB
RETINUE:
Camels**

Last to be considered in this group of grave furnishings are sculptures of another popular animal type, the Bactrian (two-humped) camel. During T'ang, the Chinese empire extended across most of Central Asia, and camels were treasured for their reliability in transporting men and trade merchandise through the desert wastes of Gobi and Tarim. Like horses, camels had to be found abroad to meet domestic needs, and they, too, came as presents to the throne, commodities, and war booty. Like the imperial steeds, vast camel herds were maintained by the Chinese government on the broad grasslands of Shensi and Kansu. Private gentlemen also kept camels as riding animals and beasts of burden, although most camel herders were foreigners from Mongolia, Tibet, and central Asia. Undoubtedly, the great, dusty beasts thronging the sprawling Southern Market of Lo-yang afforded T'ang potters ample opportunity to study their every characteristic. The animals' exotic nature, as well as the wealth they represented, made them likely candidates for tomb furnishings.

The Minneapolis camels are rendered realistically, heads thrown back with snarling mouths; they easily convey the animals' surly nature. Both are splash-glazed with a chestnut color. One is predominantly white; the other is brown. The twin humps are draped with richly decorated blue blankets with Sassanian floret designs. One camel seems to be carrying cargo in the form of a large ogre mask. This motif, perhaps representing tooled leather saddle bags, is often encountered on other large T'ang camels, but its symbolic content remains speculative. Notably, however, where pairs of camels have survived, it is common that only one will be saddled with pack and mask. The burden usually consists of food, drink, or wild game, and it is tempting to think it represents sustenance for the deceased in his afterlife.

[The above is an adaptation of an article written by Robert Jacobsen in June, 1979.

See Docent Files: Robert Jacobsen, "Ceramic Tomb Sets of Early T'ang" in *The Minneapolis Institute of Arts Bulletin* (Vol LXIV, 1978-1980), pp. 5-23.]