

The Arts of China Before and After the Terracotta Warriors: A self-guide

China's New Stone Age
10,000 – 2,000 BCE

In his quest for immortality, China's First Emperor, Qin Shihuang, began plans for his extravagant tomb complex and eternal empire at age 13. Elaborate burial customs and ritual practices started in China long before the Qin (Chin) Dynasty (221-206 BCE). During China's Neolithic period (new stone age), small farming communities developed along the Yellow and Yangzi rivers. A more sedentary lifestyle encouraged development of woven textiles, painted ceramics, lacquer ware and carved jades, many of which accompanied the deceased into the next world in the form of grave goods.



Gallery 204

Storage Vessel, Neolithic period, Ma-chia-yao culture, 3000 BCE, earthenware with painted designs and burnished surface

Chinese Neolithic pottery was delicate and durable to serve both practical and ritual purposes. Earthenware jars were used for stores of rice and millet whereas the more elaborate pedestal and tripod (three-legged) pottery forms were likely reserved for ritual and ceremonial use. Found in burial sites, these elaborate vessels reflect a belief in the afterlife and serve as symbols of prestige bestowed upon the deceased.

Based on their forms, which vessels might have been used for storing grains? Which vessels might have been used for ritual purposes?

Shang Dynasty
1600-1046 BCE



Gallery 215

Animal Face Appliqué, Shang dynasty, 1766-1122 BCE, calcified green jade

Recovered from ancient tombs, jade carvings include ritual blades and axes and small amulets in the shape of birds, animals and dragons. These ornamental jades most likely helped distinguish a person's social status while serving as protective role in burial. Jade is extremely hard and brittle and is shaped by grinding with abrasive sand in a slow, labor intensive process.

As you explore these ancient jades, notice the many different carved figures and shapes. Which is your favorite?

Zhou Dynasty
1046-256 BCE



Gallery 214

Sheng Ting, 6th century BCE., Zhou dynasty, Spring and Autumn period, bronze

During the Zhou dynasty, the development of more complex social systems resulted in sophisticated metal-working techniques and large-scale bronze production. Smelting metal ores likely derived from high-temperature kilns used for producing ceramics. Chinese bronze objects include a variety of shapes and sizes made for both sacrificial ritual and real-world use. The complex designs were made from mold casting. The green patina on the once brightly polished bronze developed naturally over thousands of years.

Take note of the shape, size of and ornamentation on the bronze objects. Look carefully at the intricate patterning.

Birth of Daoism (570 BCE), Confucianism (551 BCE) and Buddhism (6th-5th century BCE)

Warring States Period
475-221 BCE



Gallery 214

Kneeling Figure, 4th century B.C., Zhou dynasty; Warring States period, bronze

Qin Shihuang, First Emperor, was born in the Warring States period, a time of great turmoil in China's history. Iron replaces bronze, a vast improvement in the weaponry for the warring infantries and cavalries. Bronze production turns to the natural world to emphasize the earthly power of the warring kingdoms. Forms and symbols move away from the spiritual realm, to images from nature and vessels with patterns of gold and silver inlay to delight the eye rather than to inspire religious reverence.

What clues and secrets are revealed about life in ancient China through these objects?

Qin Dynasty
221- 206 BCE



Target Gallery

Charioteer, Qin dynasty, 221-206 BCE

The Warring States period ends when Qin Shihuang conquers the seven warring states and declares himself First Emperor. Ruthless and aggressive, he unifies the dynasty and brings a standardized system of writing, measurement, and currency to all of China. After only fifteen years of rule, the First Emperor's death is prompted by his quest for power and immortality.

For the complete story of Qin Shihuang and his empire visit China's Terracotta Warriors: The First Emperor's Legacy.

Han Dynasty
206 BCE – 220 CE



Gallery 206

Celestial Horse, 1st century, Eastern Han (25-220), bronze with traces of polychrome

The short-lived Qin dynasty was weakened after the First Emperor's death and quickly overthrown by the Han dynasty. The long and prosperous Han dynasty brought great advancement and expansion. China exported silk and lacquer by way of the 5000-mile over-land trade route known as the Silk Road in exchange for silver, gold and a larger, faster, stronger breed of horse.

As you explore the various objects in this gallery, note the variety of materials and construction techniques.

China's Enduring Traditions



Gallery 206

Funerary Model of a Pig Sty, Han dynasty, 2nd century BCE, Western Han dynasty, earthenware

Models of spiritual and everyday objects called *ming-ch'i* (ming-chee) or spirit articles were made to accompany the deceased into the afterlife. Luxury goods of gold, silver, silk, lacquer ware, jade and bronze have all been excavated from tombs. More affordable ceramic spirit articles were mass-produced in great numbers in order to provide everything one would need in the afterlife. These well preserved tomb objects reveal much about life in ancient China.

In this gallery, look for items that you would want to take into the next world.



Gallery 200

Jade Mountain Illustrating the Gathering of Poets at the Lan T'ing Pavilion, 1784, Ch'ing dynasty (164-1911), light green jade (nephrite)

From its origins to present day, China's great civilization has endured for thirty five centuries. China's great artistic legacy stems from a respect for tradition and history and technical excellence born of innovation and exploration.

Look for items, materials, symbols, forms and shapes that have continued throughout China's history.

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