

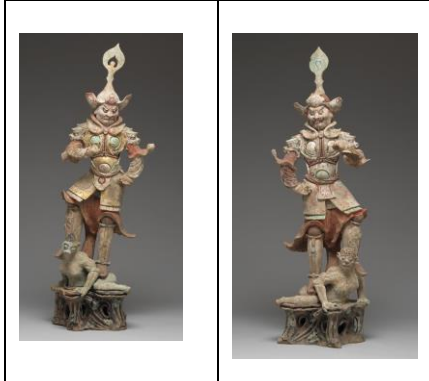
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## Title of Object

Lokapala Guardian Kings (pair)

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## Photo of Object (optional)



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## Object Information

**Artist:** Unknown

**Culture:** Chinese Tang Dynasty

**Date of Object:** late 7<sup>th</sup> – early 8<sup>th</sup> century

**Country:** China

**Accession Number:** 2003.242.1.1 and 2

**File Created:** 5/11/2016

**Material/Medium:** Earthenware with molded and carved décor under polychrome pigments and gold

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**Reviewer of File:** Kara ZumBahlen

**Department:** Chinese, South and Southeast Asian Art

**Last Updated/Reviewed:** 6/6/2016

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## Tour Topics

Group 2 tour, ancient culture, ceramics, funerary/afterlife, gods/goddesses, innovation/avant-garde, power/status, ritual/ceremony, spirituality/sacred, symbolism, Buddhism

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## Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

1. Take time to walk around and look at this pair of Lokapala Guardian Kings from several different viewpoints. What impresses you most about these figures? Note the finely painted facial features. These pieces are exemplary for the combining of the arts of painting and sculpture.
2. What do you see on these figures that indicates protection or power?
3. The Tang Dynasty was considered the “golden age” in Chinese history. The Silk Road’s advancement of trade and international communication during this period established China as a cosmopolitan center with a rich and sophisticated cultural climate. These elaborately decorated and sculpted Lokapalas reflect that sophistication and, as funerary objects, were likely paraded down the streets for all to see

while en route to a loved-one's burial. It is believed that these guardians would have been placed near the entrance of in the corners of the burial chamber. Thinking about our present-day society, what objects are associated with funerals or burials? (urn or casket, an American flag draped over casket of a veteran and some government officials, headstones, flowers on the gravesite)

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### **Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)**

This pair of figures is made of clay. Separately molded body parts were joined while the clay was still pliable. The use of molds made it possible to mass-produce hundreds, even thousands, of similar figures.

These figures were once completely polychromed with red, pink, green, blue, white, and black pigments as well as gold. It is likely that these tomb ceramics preceded the famous three-color (san cai) glazed wares that were introduced around 700 CE (Mia label).

These guardians are unique for the exceptional combination of the arts of sculpture and painting (Mia label).

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### **Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)**

These Buddhist lokapalas or guardian kings originally served as tomb guardians in an aristocratic Tang burial. They would have been placed inside the entrance of the tomb, in the corners. Guardian figures became associated with the popular concept of the Four Heavenly Kings of Buddhism, the four guardian gods who watched over the four compass directions. The Buddhist guardians of the north, south, east and west integrated easily with the Daoist Heavenly Kings, who were also guardians of the four directions. As guardians, they could call on the spirits of the next world to help them protect the tomb. Their fierce, aggressive expressions were meant to ward off any evil spirits that might enter the tomb. They are each standing on top of a demon to demonstrate their power over natural elements and evil forces. Note their clenched hands; it is likely that they once held weapons.

Tang Chinese believed that the soul of the deceased had two distinct parts, one part that remains with the human body at death, and one that traveled to paradise. The part of the spirit that remained on earth must be reassured in familiar surroundings and protected from evil forces. Many tombs of royals and high-status individuals were elaborately decorated, and funerary art became a means for a public display of wealth in funeral processions that paraded such objects through the streets just prior to burial.

“Although mass-produced by anonymous artisans, these clay figures were sculpturally imaginative, exquisitely detailed and thematically diverse. Intended only for the tomb, this type of sculpture was never used above the ground and was not likely considered to be fine art in this day.” (Mia gallery 207 label). They were never intended to be seen again. The fact that the Lokapala guardians were able to be mass produced means that many, if not most, major museums have a pair.

Funerary objects known as Ming qi (pron: ming chee) or “spirit objects” became prevalent during the Han Dynasty, and in so doing, replaced the earlier practices of sacrificing live humans or animals to serve the spirit of the deceased.

It was during the Tang Dynasty that tomb sculpture reached its high point. These sculptures provide remarkable insight into life in China during this time. However, tomb figures became so popular during

the Tang Dynasty that, at various times, edicts were issued dictating the number and type of figures allowed in accordance with the rank of the deceased.

The Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE) unified China and is often referred to as the “golden age” in Chinese history. The Silk Road’s advancement of trade and international communication during this period established China as a cosmopolitan center with a rich and sophisticated cultural climate.

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### Current Mia Label Information (optional)

These magnificent Buddhist lokapalas or guardian kings originally served as tomb guardians in an aristocratic Tang burial. Wearing elaborate headdresses and armor, and with a fierce expression on their faces, each king tramples underfoot a demon clinging desperately to a rockwork base. Their clenched hands perhaps once held weapons. These tomb figures are particularly masterful in their combination of the arts of sculpture and painting. The superbly modeled face of each king reveals finely painted moustaches, eyebrows and other details. The exotic suits of armor featuring decorative breast plates, animal head ornaments, and elaborate helmets were once completely polychromed with red, pink, green, blue, white, and black pigments as well as gold. Painted tomb ceramics such as these probably preceded the famous three-color (san cai) glazed wares that were introduced around 700 CE. This pair is exceptional for its size, detailed modeling, and amount of original colored pigments that remain on the surface after thirteen centuries of burial.

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### Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

1. Artsconnected: Tang Tomb Retinue Lokapala (website is being taken down this summer 2016, so information is captured here)

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.

2. Instructional Resources: Comparing: Four Figures: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

Ann Brubaker, Cammie Downing, Diana Swezy, Richard Bay

Art Education, Vol. 49, No. 4, Contexts: Tradition and Innovation (Jul, 1996), p. 27)

3. The Australian: Tang-Dynasty Tomb Sculptures Strike A Pose, June 25, 2011

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/tang-dynasty-tomb-sculptures-strike-a-pose/story-e6frg8n6-1226080604714>

4. artsmia.org (collections) as well as gallery label in gallery 207.

5. Similar pair of guardians in the Asian Art Museum:

<http://education.asianart.org/explore-resources/artwork/pair-tomb-guardians>

6. BBC: A History of the World in 100 Objects. Episode 55: Chinese Tang Tomb Figures

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/12yJk10b3cgg4Nng22C8QFg/episode-transcript-episode-55-chinese-tang-tomb-figures>