
Title of Object

Tang Tomb Retinue (The retinue comprises five pairs of figures: lokapalas; qi tou or earth deities; civil officials; camels; and horses.)

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: Unknown

Culture: China (Tang Dynasty)

Date of Object: early 8th century

Country: China

Accession Number: 49.1.1 (for Civil Dignitary)

File Created: 5/18/2016

Material/Medium: Earthenware with polychrome glaze

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Last Updated/Reviewed: 6/30/2016

Tour Topics

Group 4 tour, ancient culture, animals/birds, celebration, cultural encounters/exchanges, ceramics, fashion/dress, funerary/afterlife, power/status, ritual/ceremony, spirituality/sacred, symbolism, Confucianism, Buddhism

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

By looking at these five pairs of figures, let's see if we can determine why they were chosen to accompany this person into the Afterlife.

How are the heavenly guardian warriors different than the earth deity guardians?

What are some of the characteristics of horses that would make someone want to have horses with them in the afterlife?

Today, what beautiful, fast, strong, and prestigious mode of transportation might someone want to include for his or her afterlife?

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

1. The retinue comprises five pairs of figures: lokapalas, which are heavenly guardian warriors of Buddhist origin shown standing on bulls; earth deity guardians which are composite creatures with feline bodies, flaring wings, hooves, and flame-like crests and though each part is separately defined, we are aware of the entire figure and its sense of pent-up energy; scholar-officials identified by their hats, long robes with wide sleeves, and turned-up shoes; camels; and two exceptionally fine horses.

2. Tomb figures were generally made of earthenware and shaped in one or more molds. The drip-glaze decoration of lead glazes was applied by a traditional Tang technique called san cai (three-color). Additional pigments and gilding would sometimes be applied after firing. The majority of sancai wares were made during the late 7th and early 8th centuries. (Asia Society)

3. The retinue is remarkable for its large size, its use of expensive cobalt-blue glaze, and the fact that it is a complete and intact excavated tomb set.

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

1. Buried tomb figures reveal how people in the Tang Dynasty approached death and how they lived. They viewed the afterlife as an extension of earthly life. They believed that they needed to furnish their tombs with all the things essential to them and their status in life as well as in the next life.

2. The scholar-officials were included to maintain order, provide lively conversation, and conduct Confucian ceremonies. The horses and camels show that this person was rich and they show the trading links through the Silk Road. The horses represent a prized new breed—elegant and strong—they are today's Bentleys and Porsches or private jet planes. The two camels are heavy-goods carriers, capable of traveling over rough terrain, and are seen as a symbol of loyalty. The earth deity guardians serve to protect the tomb's occupant, and the heavenly guardians which guard the four cardinal points of a compass for heavenly protection. Their armor contains elements of Sassanian influence (from Iran).

3. Between their manufacture and their entombment, the ceramic figures would have been displayed to the living only once, when they were carried in the funeral cortege. They were never intended to be seen again. Once in the tomb, they took up their unchanging positions around the sarcophagus, and then the stone door was firmly closed for eternity.

4. The whole assemblage of the Tang tomb retinue speaks of China's steady westward expansion under the Tang, the wealth that came to it from trade routes, and the social and intellectual sophistication of its governing elite. Because the imperial person buried in this tomb believed in life after death, he believed that by including these specific figures, the Golden Age he enjoyed during his earthly life would continue in the afterlife.

5. "Archeological discoveries reveal that in early Chinese history, sacrificial victims were buried with the bodies of royalty and the nobility. By the 4th century BCE, these practices began to change and tomb figurines were substituted. These tomb furnishings, which included models of attendants, entertainers, and pets as well as reproductions of the daily world of home and farm, attest to the belief in an afterlife

in which the activities of this world continued. During the Tang dynasty (618-906 C.E.), China was powerful and prosperous. Trade was extensive and tomb sculpture reflected the influences from other regions that were pervasive during that time.” (Asia Society)

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

This set of ten figurines was excavated intact in 1948 from an imperial tomb at An Jia Kou, near Luoyang, the site of the ancient Tang capital in Henan province. The retinue comprises five pairs of figures: lokapalas, guardian warriors of Indian Buddhist origin often shown (as here) standing on bulls; qi tou or earth deities, composite creatures with feline bodies, grotesque heads, flaring wings, and flame-like crests; civil officials; camels; and two exceptionally fine horses. The drip-glaze decoration was applied by a traditional T'ang technique called san cai (three-color). The retinue is remarkable for its large size, fine modeling, lavish use of rare cobalt-blue glaze, and the fact that it is apparently one of only two complete excavated tomb sets in western collections.

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

Asian Art Outlook: Teacher Resources from the Asia Society:

<http://sites.asiasociety.org/education/AsianArt/slideshow11.htm>

Episode 55 - Chinese Tang tomb figures (from a History of the World in 100 objects)

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/about/transcripts/episode55/>

Stokstad, v. 3, page 349: “A Broader Look: The Silk Road during the Tang Period.”