

China (Asia, T'ang dynasty, 7th-8th Century)

Horse, early 8th century

Earthenware with polychrome glaze

H.20½ x L.20¼ inches

The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund, 49.1.6

Theme

Strong, noble, and splendid, this ceramic horse conveys the love and admiration that T'ang (tahng) society felt toward its steeds. Not only were horses important in daily life, they were a part of death as well—replicated as ceramic tomb figurines to accompany and entertain the deceased in the afterlife.

Background

The very name T'ang dynasty conjures up a vision of wealth, sophistication, and splendor of a kind that no other Chinese dynastic name can evoke. There springs to the mind's eye a picture of richly caparisoned horses, gay clothes, dancers, musicians, merchants of all nations, vast teeming cities into which the wealth of Asia seems to pour in a steady stream. There comes to mind a sense of a robust forward-looking people of education, endowed with a keen appreciation of the arts.¹

One of the most vigorous cultural periods in Chinese history, the T'ang dynasty, from 618 to 906 A.D., was an era of expansion, ferment, and prosperity. The major power between the Yellow Sea and Persia, China held widespread influence and traded extensively with countries far beyond its own frontiers. As the largest and strongest power on earth, her trade goods—particularly silks, ceramics, and metalwork—were highly regarded by the rest of the world. During the T'ang, the famous trans-Asian "Silk Road" was at its peak, remaining for centuries the world's greatest trade corridor. Covering over 7,000 miles, the silk routes stretched from India to China—skirting the scorching deserts of Central Asia and ending in the cosmopolitan cities of Chang-an (present-day Xian), the capital, and Lo-yang. Diverse people traveled along these routes, including merchants in caravans bearing exotic luxury items, as well as diplomatic emissaries, monks, pilgrims, and entertainers.

During this period, the influx of foreigners had an invigorating effect on the Chinese intellect and creative spirit. A number of influences entered into T'ang aristocratic life, for example, Indian religions and astronomy, Persian textile patterns and metal craft, Turkish costume, and horses from Central Asia. The impact of these influences on Chinese art was significant and pottery was one of the art forms clearly affected. T'ang

¹ Margaret Medley, *T'ang Pottery and Porcelain* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 11.

ceramics display the robust vitality, cosmopolitanism, and technical advances that characterize the period.²

Though it was an era of exotic taste, the Chinese continued their long-established practice of placing wood and clay figurines of humans and animals in the burial chambers of the deceased. These articles, which are referred to as *ming-ch'i* (ming-chee), meaning "spirit articles," were produced to accompany and protect the dead in the afterlife. Hundreds of figures, including soldiers, servants, musicians, tomb guardians, horses, camels, and models of articles used in everyday life, were placed in tombs.

These figures were produced in abundance during the T'ang period, when funeral processions and burials became quite extravagant. In fact, a special imperial government office was created for the production and supervision of *ming-ch'i*, regulating the number and type of grave objects. The office also regulated the arrangements of funeral processions not only of the aristocracy but of the common classes as well. T'ang funeral processions were relatively festive occasions, as well as somewhat ostentatious gestures of filial piety. Mourners would often carry the grave furnishings, including ceramics, to the tomb while crowds of people stood by to observe the procession. An ancient account relates that some families, in an effort to compete with their neighbors, incurred financial disaster.³ Eventually, an imperial decree issued in 742 set limits on the size and number of tomb pieces allowed, based on the rank of the deceased.

T'ang Horse

This blue-glazed ceramic horse belongs to a group of ten figurines excavated in 1948 from an imperial tomb near Lo-yang. Comprising five pairs of figures—court officials, warrior guardians, earth spirits, horses, and camels—the set is distinguished by its finely modeled forms, large-scale figures, abundant use of rare cobalt blue glaze, excellent surface condition, and the fact that it has survived intact. It is one of the few complete tomb sets in existence and one of only two in Western collections.

The horse was perhaps the most popular of all subjects to the T'ang potter. It is portrayed here with a lively, robust quality typical of T'ang ceramic art. One of only three such blue-glazed horses known to exist and the largest and best of those three, the horse is the highlight of the Minneapolis tomb set. It stands four-square on an unglazed rectangular base, with its neck arched, its head down and turned slightly to one side. The dynamic curve of the mane creates a striking profile and accentuates the tense energy of the powerful neck. Although standing at ease, the horse appears to be full of spirit, poised to move at any moment. Elegant and noble in appearance, this steed is glazed in a brilliant, deep cobalt with a contrasting white-and-brown streaked mane. The lavish use of cobalt blue, instead of the ordinary straw-colored glaze, indicates that the retinue was commissioned by a wealthy family who could afford this rare and costly material imported from Persia. The saddle has been left unglazed, and the paint that

² Much of this article is adapted from Robert Jacobsen, "Ceramic Tomb Sets of Early T'ang," *Minneapolis Institute of Arts Bulletin*, vol. 64 (1981).

³ M. Prodan, *The Art of the T'ang Potter* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1960), 64.

once decorated it is now gone. (Real saddles in the T'ang period were probably wooden and covered with leather.) The richly ornamented harness trappings are derived from Sassanian Persian metalwork design, and reflect the T'ang love of the exotic.

Eagerly sought for centuries, fine horses came to China from professional horse dealers of western Asia. The animals were of tremendous importance to T'ang China rulers, who used them for military purposes and diplomatic tribute. Vast horse herds were maintained by the Chinese government and horsemanship was regarded as an aristocratic privilege. Horses were important in providing an efficient mode of travel on the Silk Road and were vital to the military forces defending the borders of T'ang China. It is not surprising that the Chinese chose the horse—their favorite riding animal—to accompany them in the afterlife. Besides providing the deceased with a means to ride into battle, play polo, or hunt, the horse was a symbol of power, prestige, and wealth.

Style/Technique

This horse, made of white clay, was cast from molds. Typically, most T'ang pottery figures were mold-made in mass quantity, although on occasion they could be modeled entirely by hand. Larger figures, such as this horse, were often made by combining several molds with some hand-modeling to construct large, hollow pieces of sculpture. All works, whether mass-produced or otherwise, had to be finished by hand, a process that displayed the artist's skill, as is evident here in the horse's sense of proportion, spontaneity, and movement. The T'ang interest in naturalism is apparent in the careful attention given to the form of the horse, with its accurate proportions, distinct musculature, and lifelike posture. Its modeling conveys the artist's thorough understanding of a horse's anatomy.

This horse is made with the glazing technique of *san t'sai* (tsahn-tsigh), one of the unique ceramic developments of the T'ang period. *San t'sai* means "three-color" and usually refers to green, amber, and cream glazes found on T'ang burial ceramics. Many variations of the hues were used, however, so that the colors were not necessarily limited to three, and black and blue glazes were often included as well. The glazes produced a brilliant effect, well suited to the splendor of the age. The palette primarily used here includes blue, green, and caramel-colored glazes. The rare and costly blue glaze, usually reserved for the best and most striking figures, was associated with more important tombs.

In the *san t'sai* process, the figure was covered with a white slip before the glaze was applied. Slip is a fluid mixture of clay and water that works like a primer coat of paint or gesso, smoothing out the surface and giving it an even color. The use of slip helps to impart a clearer, brighter quality to the colored glazes than would be the case if the glazes were applied directly to the earthenware. (Because earthenware is composed of iron, it tends to discolor glazes.) After the application of slip, the body was covered with colored lead glazes. Because of their liquidity, lead glazes tend to run and streak. They flow and blend during the firing process, resulting in a luxurious interplay of colors, splashes, and drips. The fluidity of the colors was often exploited by the T'ang potter to obtain unexpected streaks and drips, contributing to the object's beauty. Despite the free and random nature of this process, it required extreme skill and sensitivity.

While the artist's interest in realistic detail is apparent in the horse's form, a quality of fantasy and generalization is also conveyed by the treatment of color. The glazes have been applied to produce a decorative and sumptuous effect rather than a realistic portrayal of the horse's color. The dynamic curve of the mane is heightened by its light colors and striped design, which contrast with the deep, brilliant blue of the body. The horse's bold colors and forms create a striking figure of remarkable splendor.

Artist

The manufacture of T'ang ceramics was a vital industry consisting of large workshops. While little is known about these workshops or the individual artists involved, this horse clearly was made by artists of the highest technical and artistic skill.

Suggested Questions

1. What kind of animal is this? Does this look like a real horse? Have you ever seen a horse that looks like this? What is naturalistic about this horse? What is not naturalistic?
2. What is this horse wearing? What does this tell us about how the horse was used?
3. How would you describe this horse? Is the horse showing any physical movement? Where? Would you want to ride this horse? Why or why not?
4. Can you tell what material was used to make this horse? Where did the artist find the material? Have you made anything out of clay? Do you think it was difficult to make? Why do you think so?
5. The technique used to glaze this horse is called *san t'sai*, which means "three-color." What colors are used here?
6. Why do you think the horse was important to Chinese people?
7. **Explain the significance of tomb figures and the belief in an afterlife.** Why would someone want to bring a horse into the afterlife?
8. What other object in this set may have been made to include in a tomb? Both used ceramics for works of art. Which culture do you think was more advanced in its ceramic techniques? Why?