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Immortality of the Spirit: Chinese Funerary Art from the Han and Tang Dynasties Exhibition Catalogue

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Immortality of the Spirit:
*Chinese Funerary Art from the
Han and Tang Dynasties*



Just over a year ago, Jane and Leopold Swergold surprised and delighted the Bellarmine Museum of Art with a gift of four Han and Tang pottery objects from their stellar collection of ancient Chinese art. We were, of course, thrilled to accept their generous donation, which not only filled an important gap in the museum's permanent collection but also catalyzed a series of enriching conversations about Chinese art and culture at the museum; conversations that culminated in *Immortality of the Spirit: Chinese Funerary Art from the Han and Tang Dynasties*, on view at the Bellarmine from April 12-June 6, 2012. This exhibition was envisioned by the museum as a platform not only for highlighting the Swergolds' remarkable gift but also enhancing our visitors' understanding of ancient Chinese funerary art by placing such objects in a broader cultural context. Thus the Bellarmine's *Sichuan Qin Player*, *Pair of Green Glazed Grooms*, and *Figure of a Soldier* are accompanied in our galleries by nine related objects, all of which were generously lent to the museum by the Swergolds for this show.

The care with which the Swergolds' collection was assembled is evinced both by its exceptionally high quality and by its remarkable internal coherence. Their fine holdings equally bear witness to the vast stores of knowledge they have accumulated over the course of the past two decades, as the Swergolds developed into world-class *connoisseurs* (a favorable term, derived from the French verb *connaître*, that suggests expansive knowledge and nuanced understanding) of Chinese art. The depth of their learning (Mrs. Swergold, who taught Interior Design at Fairfield University for over twenty years, wrote her MA thesis on Chinese tester beds, while Mr. Swergold has served as a trustee at the Smithsonian Institution's Freer-Sackler Galleries in Washington, DC, currently sits on the Collections Committee of the Harvard University Museums and organized and directed *Treasures Rediscovered - Chinese Stone Sculpture from the Sackler Collections at Columbia University*, an exhibition which premiered in Manhattan in the spring of 2008 before traveling to the Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Florida, the University of Michigan Museum of Art and the University of Virginia Art Museum) is equally revealed in the essays that follow, which were authored by Mr. Swergold in collaboration with Fairfield University adjunct professor of art history Dr. Ive Covaci.

Like all of our undertakings at the Bellarmine Museum of Art, this exhibition would not have been possible were it not for our supporters' generosity and unflagging belief in the power of art to transform lives. Thus we extend our abiding thanks not only to our parent institution, Fairfield University, but also our campus partners for their collegial support, above all Dr. Covaci and the entire faculty of the Asian Studies Program. We are equally grateful to our media partner, Morris Media Group, and the National Endowment for the Humanities for their support. Our deepest debt of gratitude, however, is reserved for Jane and Leopold Swergold, without whom *Immortality of Spirit* would never have come to pass. Thank you.

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INTRODUCTION

For the ancient Chinese, life in the afterworld was as important as one's existence on earth. This belief structure led to the creation of elaborate – often lavish – burial rituals in which the dead were laid to rest in tombs intended to replicate splendid earthly dwellings. These final resting places were, therefore, well-provisioned by surviving family members with *mingqi*, or “spirit articles,” for the deceased's journey into the afterlife; an essential component of such rites, since those not properly prepared for the next world could return to visit misfortune upon the living. This exhibition, *Immortality of the Spirit: Chinese Funerary Art from the Han and Tang Dynasties*, features thirteen pottery funerary objects from the Han (206 BCE–220 CE) and Tang (618–907 CE) Imperial dynasties, on loan from the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Leopold Swergold. Such artifacts provide us with great insights into daily life during these critical periods in Chinese history and are pointed reminders of these societies' clearly delineated class hierarchies and carefully orchestrated societal rituals.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Considered a “Golden Age” of Chinese civilization, the Han dynasty was an era of relative peace, prosperity, and Imperial expansion. The period is divided into the Western Han (206 BCE–9 CE), when the capital was located at Chang'an (modern Xi'an), and the Eastern Han (25–220), when the capital was moved 100 km east to Luoyang. Under the Han emperors, government apparatus and imperial bureaucracies were strengthened according to Confucian tenets. This led to the creation of a powerful centralized state headed by the emperor and his family, together with an elite, educated class of officials and aristocrats. The dynasty also fostered great developments in the performing and visual arts, including music, poetry and calligraphy. Trade flourished as well: the progressive Han rulers established control of trade routes to Central Asia in 101 BCE, ensuring the flow of goods between East and West. Indeed, Chinese silk was present in Rome by the death of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE, becoming increasingly popular in the 1st century CE. In turn, the Chinese imported horses, foodstuffs, gold and other luxury items from the West. Nomadic tribes on the empire's borders, however, posed a constant threat, forcing the dynasty to launch numerous, expensive campaigns against such “barbarians.”

Centuries of disunity followed the fall of the Han until the late 7th century, when the Tang dynasty (618–907) ushered in another long period of stability and prosperity. Like the Han before them, they made their capital in Chang'an, transforming it into the largest, most cosmopolitan city in the world at that time (its population peaked at around a million people in the mid-8th century). Foreigners – including merchants, entertainers, monks, diplomatic envoys, and horse grooms from as far away as Persia and Syria – flooded the city, as the *Pair of Sancai Glazed Grooms* (p. 6) included in this exhibition remind us. Meanwhile, the imperial family and aristocrats living in the area around the capital created a steady demand for exotic luxury goods from the West, in addition to adopting foreign fashions and leisure pursuits. Buttressed by the court's unwavering patronage, art and culture flourished in the empire, giving rise to a new interest in naturalism in the visual arts in particular. This trend is manifest in a number of objects on view at the Bellarmine, including the impressively modeled *Sancai Glazed Horse* (p. 5) and the lush *Figure of a Standing Court Lady* (cover and p. 10), who seems to sway in her gentle *contrapposto* stance.

BELIEFS IN THE AFTERLIFE

Funerary figures, like those featured in this exhibition, were placed inside burial chambers, which were conceived of as eternal dwellings for the deceased. By the Han dynasty, the tombs that housed such chambers had evolved from relatively simple vertical shafts to multi-chamber structures cut directly into the mountainsides. Discrete “rooms” held objects associated with their appointed functions; toiletry sets and attendants, for example, could be found in private chambers, while musical instruments and entertainers were placed in main halls. Ceramic tomb figurines proliferated in this period, replacing – as discussed below – the earlier tradition of actual human and animal sacrifice. The basic principle, however, remained the same: everything needed in life was also needed in death, including horses, chariots, farm animals, guards, attendants, entertainers, and vessels for lavish banquets.

While personal possessions and items used in daily life could be interred with the dead, the majority of grave goods were created specifically for funerary purposes. These replicas, the so-called *mingqi*, were distinguished from their real counterparts by deliberate changes in material, color, size, technique, or function. The *Hill Jar (Lian)* (p. 16) in this exhibition, for example, echoes the form of a bronze incense burner, but lacks the holes in its lid that would have allowed real smoke to escape. Such practices accord well with the teachings of Confucius (traditional dates, 551–479 BCE), who reportedly spoke of the necessity for *mingqi* to differ from their earthly counterparts, saying:

In dealing with the dead, if we treat them as if they were entirely dead, that would show a want of affection, and should not be done; or if we treat them as if they were entirely alive, that would show a want of intelligence, and should not be done. On this account the

bamboo artifacts (made for the dead) should not be suited for actual use; those of earthenware should not be able to contain water; those of wood should not be finely carved; the zithers should be strung, but not evenly. (Wu, p. 88–89)

Such objects and figurines – and there could be hundreds in any given tomb – occupied spaces adorned with wall paintings and pictorial bricks showing processions, banquets, historical narratives and other subjects. It is within this broader context that one must imagine the objects in this exhibition.

Tombs, and the objects that populated them, were used to broadcast the wealth and status not only of the dead but also of their living ancestors. In fact, goods intended for burial were exhibited during lavish funerary rites before being sealed in a tomb, thus providing convenient opportunities for overt displays of affluence and material success. By the time of the Tang dynasty, matters seem to have spiraled out of control, spurring the emperors to issue sumptuary laws that restricted the types, sizes, and number of grave goods one could have according to his or her rank and status. Modern excavations, however, suggest that such laws frequently were flouted, in addition to making clear that grave goods could reflect the aspirations, rather than the reality, of a given tomb's occupant. (Bower, p. 48)

Finally, tombs were seen as gateways to immortality, envisioned as a state achievable only after death rather than the eternal preservation of an earthly body. It is no surprise, then, that symbols of ever-lasting life – such as mysterious mountains, mythic animals, winged immortal beings, cranes flying through clouds, and images of Daoist deities – pervade tombs from the Han and Tang dynasties. The lid of the *Hill Jar* (p. 16), for example, shows a mountain enshrouded by wave-like clouds, indicating an abode of the immortals. These depictions were provided, no doubt, in the hope that the dead would attain this status and ascend to paradise.

MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES

Many funerary objects, like those showcased in the Bellarmine Museum, were made of earthenware pottery. Unlike porcelain, which has a different clay body, earthenware has a porous, opaque surface. This is due to the relatively lower temperature at which such objects are fired (1000 degrees Celsius as opposed to 1300 degrees Celsius for porcelain, which gives the latter its typically vitreous finish). Like porcelain (which, not incidentally, was developed in 6th-century China), earthenware can be painted or glazed. It can also be fired without any further surface decoration.

Undecorated earthenware pottery can range in color from buff to red or gray. Coloration, in this case, depends on the composition of the clay used since the firing process catalyzes distinct chemical reactions in different materials, which in turn alter surface appearances. For painted pieces, on the other hand, a slip of white clay could be applied directly to the surface of the unfired clay, creating a ground for further decoration, which would have been executed in pigments such as red vermilion, green malachite, and black carbon. The ease with which such mineral-based colors flake and abrade may be one reason painted earthenware was generally reserved for funerary use.

Lead glazes in shades of green and brown became popular in the Han dynasty as a means of rendering the earthenware non-porous. Glazing also had the effect of imitating the appearance of more expensive bronze vessels, which had been a staple of tomb furnishings since the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–1050 BCE). The characteristic iridescence of such objects results from their exposure to moisture in damp tombs. The Tang dynasty, in particular, is associated with *sancai*, or three-color, glazes, which were commonly used in late 7th- and mid-8th-century imperial and elite tomb goods. Oxides are responsible for the characteristic colors of *sancai* glazes: when fired, copper changes to green, iron creates a brown or yellow shade, and manganese or cobalt (a commodity more precious than gold at the time) turns blue. These glazes were applied to objects by dipping, pouring, and painting. Heads and extremities of figures often were left unglazed, so that details could be painted directly onto the earthenware. Scholars have speculated that the lead-based *sancai* wares were restricted to tombs and ritual use in part because their glazes were not only beautiful but also toxic, rendering them unfit for daily use. Whatever the case, it is clear that their presence was a mark of high status, and hence restricted to imperial and elite tombs and regulated by sumptuary laws.

The popularity of funerary goods under the Han and Tang dynasties meant that workshops had to use molds in order to keep pace with demand. Fine details could be shaped by hand but often decorations, such as that seen on the *Green Glazed Jar (Hu)* (p. 17) were molded as well. The shapes of vessels, in particular, often echo metal prototypes, whether ancient Chinese or foreign in origin. Note, for example, the vestigial ring handles fused to the body in both the *Hill Jar* and the *Hu*. (pp. 16 and 17)

GROUP ONE: ANIMALS AND TRANSPORTATION

The vast land mass controlled by the Han and Tang dynasties necessitated great quantities of camels, oxen and horses, all of which were used to ferry people and goods over enormous distances. Camels, for instance, carried materials, both raw and finished, across the expansive deserts linking China to the West. It is telling, in this context, to realize that the original purpose of the Silk Road was to trade silk for horses bred by nomadic people living on the Western and Northern borders of the Han empire. Essential to the military strategy of the expanding empire, the Han strained their financial resources to procure the steeds necessary to defend their dominions. When the dynasty fell, the equine trade lulled until it was revived with vigor by the Tang government. Indeed, at one point, Emperor Taizong (reigned 626–649 CE) controlled a herd of over 700,000 horses. The Tang government strictly controlled the acquisition and dispersal of horses and camels. They also regulated the care of these animals, which frequently were tended to by foreigners from Central Asia; a fact that resonates in the *Pair of Sancai Glazed Grooms* (p. 6) displayed in this exhibition.

The importance of the horse in ancient China cannot be overstated. It comes as no surprise, then, that these animals were not only analogized to mythical creatures and deities but also associated with water, a critical resource for any agrarian society. It is equally unsurprising that their pottery avatars were often interred in tombs, as evidenced by the beautiful *Sancai Glazed Horse* (p. 5). Indeed, Emperor Taizong commissioned portraits of his six most prized chargers, immortalized as life-size bas-relief sculptures carved onto stone slabs, for his own tomb complex. (Watt, p. 308) Other animals, including camels and ox-drawn carriages, were also popular in Han and Tang dynasty tomb sculpture, as were equestrian figures, grooms, and honor guards. In each instance, the figures – which formed a core group of funerary figures placed in niches along the corridor leading to the tomb chamber – were rendered with a naturalism that endowed them with a great sense of animation and individuality. Similar groupings in tomb murals support the theory that these figures played an important role in funerary processions.



SANCAI GLAZED HORSE

Tang dynasty (618-907)

19 ½ inches tall

Powerfully modeled, standing foursquare with its head inclined to the left, this sculpture reminds us of the care and attention lavished on horses during the Tang dynasty. The animal's body, covered in an even buff glaze, is dappled with green glazed spots. Its upturned forelock, hogged mane, docked tail, and saddle are picked out in amber, while its bridle, straps and saddle blanket combine the two hues, creating an ensemble that is quite rare for this class of object. To create these coloristic effects, *sancai* glazes were applied to the fired earthenware body of the figure before the entire piece was fired a second time. It was this subsequent firing that melted the glazes, creating a smooth, glass-like surface on the finished piece. Figures glazed in this fashion – including animals, human figures, and vessels – seem to have been restricted to the tombs of imperial family members and the elite, suggesting that they were items of great prestige. Interestingly, the production of *sancai* figures, which became popular during the reign of the Tang dynasty empress Wu Zetian (reigned 690–705 CE), ceased after the rebellions and invasions of the mid-8th century.





PAIR OF SANCAI GLAZED GROOMS

Tang dynasty (618-907)

13 ¼ inches tall

Each groom stands with his right arm raised, as if holding reins. Their lapelled cloaks (glazed in amber and green), and trousers and high boots, mark them as Persians. The figures' unglazed heads retain discernible traces of their facial features, which were painted directly onto the surface of the earthenware pottery body. Like their costumes, these painted details further underline their foreignness, since the grooms' noses as well as their eyes have a distinctively "Western" appearance. The historical explanation for this is simple: Central Asian grooms (who were more experienced horsemen than the Chinese) managed the horses of the Tang elite, and thus were a familiar sight in Chang'an, the capital under this dynasty. Figures such as these suggest that the deceased was wealthy enough to have kept stables with imported horses and grooms, or at least aspired to have done so. Not exclusively for military use, horses were ridden by both male and female aristocrats in Tang China, and polo – another import from the West – was a favorite pastime for both men and women.



OX AND CART

Tang dynasty (618-907)

Cart 13 inches tall at front; 9 ¾ inches long. Ox 6 inches tall; 8 ½ inches long

Made of unglazed earthenware, this pottery ox stands foursquare, facing forward with its neck craning upward. The animal, with its pronounced hump and dewlap, wears a harness that terminates in leaf appliques at the neck. Behind it is a cart, the arched roof of which projects over both ends, protecting a doorway in back and a low overhung enclosure in front. Traces of black, red, orange, and pale green pigment as well as a white slip are visible on the objects' surfaces. Pottery models of ox carts such as this were standard burial objects during the Han and Tang eras, while pictorial tomb art from the earlier dynasty includes scenes of these beasts of burden plowing fields. As with horses, the popularity of such figures can be attributed to their utility. Valuable not only in an agricultural context, oxen were also capable of pulling carts, laden with family groups and supplies, over considerable distances. During the centuries preceding the Tang dynasty, it became the fashion for elites to ride in ox-drawn carts, but this practice declined in favor of horse transport after the early Tang. For an agrarian family, ownership of an ox or oxen would have denoted a certain measure of wealth. Thus the inclusion of their pottery counterparts in a burial chamber would suggest a fairly elevated status or, as we have seen before, the aspiration thereto.

GROUP TWO: ATTENDANTS AND ENTERTAINERS

During the Shang (1600-1050 BCE) and Zhou (1050-256 BCE) dynasties, it was customary to bury the dead with members of their entourages, including concubines, attendants, household help, guards, horses, and pets. This gruesome rite was eventually supplanted by the use of replicas, in wood or ceramic, of both humans and animals. The shift, though, was gradual, as specific individuals – including concubines or favored attendants – continued to be sacrificed and buried with their masters or mistresses up until the time of the Han dynasty. More generic roles, on the other hand, were easily filled by fabricated replicas, as Qin Shi Huang's (reigned 221-210 BCE) famed "terracotta army" (which comprises some 8,000 life-size soldiers buried in pits near the First Emperor of China's tomb) attests. By the time of the Han emperors, human sacrifice had been supplanted almost entirely by the use of inanimate substitutes, which served as stand-ins for the martial and domestic types required for a palatial existence in the afterlife. (Bower, p. 24)

The use of pottery figures in burial chambers flourished in the Han and Tang dynasties, though not on the same extravagant scale as under the Qin emperor; indeed most figurines produced during these later eras were no more than 1/3 life-size. Further, as suggested above, Tang emperors strictly regulated both the scope and scale of funerary objects according to one's rank: a member of the 3rd rank was entitled to be buried with 90 pieces; 4th and 5th ranks, 70 pieces; 6th-9th ranks, 40 pieces. Members of the imperial family, on the other hand, might have hundreds of large-size funerary objects interred with them. Special workshops were established to produce these *mingqi*, leading to a lively commerce in multiple mold manufacturing.

A well-preserved 2nd-century CE tomb near Luoyang gives us a good idea of how such objects were arranged in burial chambers. This particular tomb was found to contain a large reception room with an empty space, presumably for the deceased, before which was placed a table arranged with trays, dishes, chopsticks, etc. From this seat, the deceased would have faced six clay figures of musicians and several acrobats; a lamp and a mountain censer were nearby. (Nickel, p. 73) The prominent position of performing figures, often placed in the center of the front chamber, reflects the high status of the arts in Han society. (Li, p. 177)



FIGURE OF A SOLDIER

Tang dynasty (618-907)

15 inches tall

This figure, in buff clay, boasts highly detailed painted armor, intended to replicate contemporary design. Straps secure the breastplates over the shoulders of the soldier, who wears a short split skirt with a "key" design. His simulated leather hat has a back flap, designed to protect his neck from the hot sun of arid Western China. His demeanor is stern but restrained, in contrast to the more fierce expressions of later Tang guards. The soldier stands in a natural pose, with his weight shifted to one leg. His hands likely would have originally held a weapon or banner. Military figurines appear in fewer numbers in Tang tombs compared with the preceding periods of disunion, although a wealthy person might have had his own military group.



FIGURE OF A STANDING COURT LADY

Tang dynasty (618-907)

19 inches tall

Naturalistic, meticulously rendered details of garments, hair, jewels, and personal articles are the hallmark of Tang style, as this standing figure of a court lady amply demonstrates. She wears an untailored, loose gown with long sleeves that hide her clasped hands. Her elaborate coiffure, with hair piled up toward the right side, reflects the fashion of those times. Traces of paint remain on the lips of her plump, rounded face, and her expression has a graceful, regal quality. Early Tang female figurines are tall and slender but, by the mid-8th century, more voluptuous statuettes – complete with plump bodies, full faces, and cloud-like hairstyles that emphasized their roundness – were favored. This shift has traditionally been attributed to the infatuation of Emperor Xuanzong (reigned 713–756) with one of his full-figured concubines, the famed beauty Yang Guifei. Given that objects of this type have been found in tombs predating Yang Guifei's ascent, however, it is more likely that the increasingly sedentary and luxurious lifestyle of the Tang elites contributed to changing body types and ideals of beauty. (Fontein and Wu, p. 175; Yang, p. 505) By the mid-9th century, following a long period of economic and political turmoil, female figures had slimmed down considerably.



FIGURE OF A MALE MANNEQUIN

Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE)

24 inches tall

Nude figures such as this would originally have been dressed in actual garments before being placed in a burial chamber, where they would have formed part of a large household retinue for the deceased. This clothing has long since disappeared, as have the mannequin's arms, which would have been made of wood. Figures of this type are always anatomically correct; most are male, though some female figures have also been found. (Jenkins, p. 104) First uncovered in the early 1990's near Xi'an at the tomb of Emperor Jing (reigned 157-141 BCE) and Empress Wang, these figures have been found near other Han imperial tombs, as well as at workshop and kiln sites in Xi'an. These objects form a distinct category within Chinese tomb sculpture: excavations have yielded molds and unfinished figures, revealing that they were produced from four-part forms with hand modeling of the sensitive, individualized faces. The surfaces of their bodies were then polished smooth and painted orange to imitate skin, while the facial features and hair were delicately painted with black pigment. The practice of creating a nude body to be clothed could be related to wooden burial figurines with real silk garments from the southern state of Chu, which had been absorbed into the Western Han dynasty. (Li, pp. 112-13) Although a large number of figurines similar to this one were produced in the 2nd century BCE, the practice did not survive after the fall of the Han.



SEATED STORY TELLER

Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE)

8 ¼ inches tall

This entertainer – a story teller – is an unusually expressive example of Han tomb sculpture, which tended to be more gesturally restrained. The figure leans slightly forward, his arms outstretched as if making a point, his mouth open and teeth visible. He wears a long robe and a broad hat. Typically the faces of such objects would be painted, while the figures themselves were molded. This piece would have been included in a larger group of entertainers, including dancers and musicians, which would have been intended to divert the deceased in the afterlife, just as he or she had been while still living. Such performers were especially popular in Han dynasty tomb sculpture, and scenes of banqueting and entertainment appear frequently on the carved stone slabs and molded bricks of tombs from that period.



FIGURE OF A DANCER

Eastern Han dynasty (25-220)

10 ½ inches tall

Made of Sichuan red pottery, this animated figure wears long flowing robes with flaring scalloped sleeves. She is shown mid-step, her right arm raised as her left hand grasps her layered skirt to reveal a voluminous ruffled hem below. She wears an elaborate headdress tied at the back, and her face has the softly modeled features typical of this class of objects. Tomb figures produced in Sichuan during the Han dynasty, like this piece, are remarkable for their vitality and sense of movement; characteristics heightened in this example by the artful flow of the dancer's costume. Her attire also serves as a pointed reminder of the fact that long sleeves played an important role in Chinese dance at the time, for both visual and symbolic reasons. Indeed the "Sleeve Dance" commemorates the story of how the Han warlord Liu Zhang (d. 219 CE), was protected from a potential assassin during a sword dance by his loyal general Zhang Ren who, dressed as a woman (male dancers frequently assumed the roles – including the costuming and demeanor – of females at this time) in a robe with wide sleeves, assumed the guise of the would-be murderer's partner. While playing an important role in entertainment, texts suggest that dancers such as this also served as spirit mediums during the Han dynasty, with women "mak[ing] the Spirits come down by dancing." Scenes of entertainment and banqueting could, therefore, also be seen as preparations for ceremonies and rites, marking important occasions, seasonal observances, and offerings to the ancestors. (Rawson, p. 11) The red pottery of which this object is made shows traces of white slip and buff-colored earth encrustation from burial.



SICHUAN QIN PLAYER

Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE)

25 inches tall, 16 inches wide with instrument, and 11 ½ inches deep

This seated female figure holds a seven-stringed musical instrument called the *qin*, or zither. Made of lacquered wood, the *qin* was designed to be plucked rather than strummed. First played for entertainment, as this figure does, this instrument was later favored by scholar officials and ranked among the “four great accomplishments” of a gentleman, along with painting, calligraphy, and chess. The *qin* also had cosmological significance: the domed upper surface represented heaven, while the flat lower surface was a simulacrum of the earth. According to Han dynasty sources, playing – and presumably hearing – the music of the *qin* could aid in cultivating good moral character and was pleasing to the gods. The Confucian philosopher Xunzi (ca. 310–220 BCE) wrote that, by playing appropriate music, a ruler could promote harmony and restraint among the common people. (Ebrey, p. 50) Actual musical instruments have been excavated from Han dynasty tombs, indicating that music played a central role in the afterlife. The inclusion of replicas of such objects in burial tombs, then, was an indication of great wealth, learning and taste. This figure originally would have formed part of a group, the gestures and poses of which would have related subtly to one another. Although the style of this figure echoes that found in other parts of China, the red clay, relatively large size, and detachable heads of these figures are typical Sichuan characteristics. The musician’s distinctive flower headdress equally identifies her as southern in origin. (Jenkins, p. 134)

GROUP THREE: CONTAINERS

As was the custom since the Neolithic era, a variety of containers were buried alongside the dead under the Han and Tang dynasties. Manufactured as multiples, they were bought “off the shelf” and used specifically for funerary rites; generally in sets.

Under the Tang dynasty, the shapes and decoration of containers frequently replicated Central Asian and Western metalware, including ewers, amphorae, and flasks that would have arrived with the traders’ caravans in Chang’an. Despite the shared profiles of ancient bronzewares and their earthenware counterparts, however, the former were, quite obviously, much more highly prized than the latter. Thus, within tombs themselves, pottery containers tended to be placed in the reception hall chamber or in areas intended to replicate a kitchen or pantry, while bronze objects actually used during the occupant’s lifetime maintained a privileged status and, as such, were located in the sarcophagus chamber itself.

The two Han dynasty containers included in this exhibition display the distinctively zoomorphic, mask-like *taotie* associated with Shang dynasty ritual bronzes. The significance of this motif to the Shang people is unknown; later legends refer to such entities, alternatively, as a man-eating beast or a “glutton.” On these ceramic objects, the *taotie* holds vestigial ring handles in its mouth, a reminder once again of the bronze prototypes that these vessels were imitating.





HILL JAR (LIAN)

Eastern Han dynasty (25-220)

10 inches tall; 8 inch diameter

The patina of this glazed earthenware jar has shifted to a luminescent green as a result of its having been buried for centuries in damp conditions. The body shape mimics, in pottery, an archaic bronze *lian*, which would have been used for warming wine. Notable are the ersatz metal rings clasped by *taotie* masks on the sides of the vessel as well as the three bears that serve as the container's feet. The imagery and the shape of the lid, however, are closely related to mountain-shaped bronze incense burners (*boshanlu*) popular during the Han dynasty. (Erickson, p. 13) The mountain on these censers and hill jars represent a Daoist paradise, the abode of the immortals, a place to which the occupant of the tomb could hope to ascend after death. Wave-like clouds weave through the trees and mountains on the lid. In a functional censer, smoke rising from the incense burning within would have represented the mist on the mountains. This ceramic version, however, lacks perforations and, as such, is clearly a non-functional *mingqi*, made exclusively for funerary purposes. The molded decoration on jars such as this typically featured wild animal and mythological creatures chasing human figures within a wide banded field. This imagery also relates to the theme of immortality, since it suggests an otherworldly mountain landscape inhabited by strange beasts. (See Jenkins, p. 34-35)



GREEN GLAZED JAR (HU)

Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE)

18 inches tall; mouth diameter 7 inches; base diameter 7 inches

One of the most common types of vessels found in tombs, this dark green glazed earthenware container has the classic rounded shape of the *hu* storage jar. Its dimensions, however, are larger than usual. A centrally-placed molded bas-relief frieze shows a hunting scene that features fantastical creatures, echoing that on the *Hill Jar* described above. Among the figures depicted in the pictorial field is an archer who sits on a horse as he shoots at a leaping feline. Other figures include dragons, monkeys, boars, birds, horses, felines, and a man holding a bird mask as if stalking a dragon. A ribbon undulates throughout the frieze, forming a kind of mountain landscape in which the animals frolic and unifying the scene. Whereas the chase theme, especially the motif of the archer on horseback, is likely western Asian in origin, the Han emperors eagerly adopted the practice of hunting in great parks reserved for that purpose. (Sullivan, p. 45) In this frieze, however, the presence of mythological animals indicates this is no ordinary hunt, but rather an otherworldly scene. The presence of the classic *taotie* reinforces this interpretation, in addition to harkening back, once more, to ancient bronze prototypes and sources of inspiration.



SANCAI GLAZED TWIN FISH FLASK

Tang dynasty (618-907)

7 1/8 inches tall

The oval-shaped body of this flask is molded as two confronted fish, the tails of which form the spreading base while their dorsal fins create a flange below each of the pierced foliate handles while their open mouths give way to the vessel's modeled neck. Its surface is decorated with a splashed glaze in green, amber and cream tones. Flasks are often called "pilgrim flasks," aligning them with metal and leather flasks of Western origin. However, the shape can also be seen in older Chinese bronze and ceramic vessels called "bian hu." Though Tang dynasty *sancai* often had decidedly western motifs, such as foreign musicians and dancers, molded on a central roundel, the double fish design seen here is rather unusual. Fish, thought to swim in pairs, were a common symbol for marital harmony under the Tang dynasty. Similarly, their large number of eggs made them a symbol of abundance. In Chinese, the word for fish, "yu," is a homonym for wealth. Though most *sancai* glazed containers were made primarily for funerary purposes, fish flasks, like this beautiful example, were also frequently used as wedding gifts because of the afore-mentioned connotations of conjugal happiness, fecundity and abundance.

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**FRONT COVER:
FIGURE OF A STANDING COURT LADY**

(p. 10)



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