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

Jill J. Deupi
Fairfield University, jdeupi@fairfield.edu

Mike Horyczun
Fairfield University, mhoryczun@fairfield.edu

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Media Contact: Mike Horyczun, 203.254.4000, ext. 2647
mhoryczun@fairfield.edu

New Exhibition!

Immortality of the Spirit: Chinese Funerary Art from the Han and Tang Dynasties
Bellarmino Museum of Art,
Fairfield University, Fairfield, CT
April 12, 2012, through June 6, 2012

FAIRFIELD, Conn. (March 22, 2012). For the ancient Chinese, life in the afterworld was as important as one's existence on earth. For this reason, the dead were laid to rest in tombs provisioned with *mingqi*, or "spirit articles," for the deceased's journey into the afterlife. From **April 12, 2012**, through **June 6, 2012**, Fairfield University's **Bellarmino Museum of Art** explores this fascinating world in its latest exhibition, "**Immortality of the Spirit: Chinese Funerary Art from the Han and Tang Dynasties.**" The exhibition is drawn from the **Collection of Jane and Leopold Swergold** and features thirteen examples of pottery funerary objects from the Han (206 BCE-220 CE) and Tang (618-907 CE) Imperial Dynasties. A free public opening and reception takes place from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. on **Thursday, April 12, 2012**. The Bellarmino Museum of Art is located in Bellarmino Hall on the campus of Fairfield University, at 1073 N. Benson Road in Fairfield, Connecticut. Admission is free. The museum is open Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. when the University is in session. Call (203) 254-4046, or visit www.fairfield.edu/museum.

While personal possessions and items used in daily life could be interred with the dead, *mingqi* were made specifically for funerary purposes and considered a mark of high status, hence restricted to imperial and elite tombs. Burial figures and furnishings were exhibited during lavish funerary rites before being sealed in the tombs for which they were intended. These objects, like the tombs themselves, communicated the social status of the occupant. The wealthier the family, the more elaborate the tomb, and the finer – and more numerous – the funerary objects that

accompanied the deceased on his or her journey into the next world. Tombs were also seen as gateways to everlasting life. Thus, symbols of immortality commonly appear on Han and Tang funerary objects, such as the cloud-filled mountain landscape representing the abode of the immortals on the *Hill Jar* (Han Dynasty), on view in the exhibition.

The earliest Chinese tomb figures and furnishings date back to the Neolithic period (10,000-2,000 BCE). The popularity of such objects increased during the lengthy Han Dynasty before reaching its zenith under the highly cosmopolitan Tang Dynasty. Considered one of the “golden ages” of Chinese civilization, the Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE) was an era of relative peace, prosperity, and Imperial expansion, which was marked by great advances in poetry, music, calligraphy and the visual arts. Trade also flourished in the outward-looking Han Empire, which fell in 220 CE. Centuries of disunity followed until the 7th century, when the Tang Dynasty (618 – 906 CE) ushered in another long period of stability and prosperity. Its capital, Chang’an (modern day Xi’an) was the largest and most sophisticated city in the world at that time, with a population (including immigrants from as far away as Persia and Syria) of some one million people in the mid-8th century. Art and culture flourished under the dynasty’s extensive court patronage, and a new interest in naturalism was expressed in painting and sculpture, including funerary objects.

Clay tomb figurines proliferated in the Han Dynasty, replacing an earlier tradition of human and animal sacrifice. Despite this humane shift, the basic principle 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. The pieces on display from this era include a *Seated Entertainer* and a *Figure of a Dancer*. These objects, like all *mingqi*, were deliberately made to appear distinct from their original counterparts through alterations in material, color, size, technique, or function.

The market for funerary goods was such that workshops had to rely on moulds in order to keep pace with demand. Fine details on tomb figures and vessels were sometimes shaped by hand, but often decoration was moulded, as exemplified by the exhibition’s *Green Glazed Jar or Hu* (Han Dynasty). Though the shapes of ceramic vessels in particular often echo metal prototypes, Chinese funerary art was made from a variety of media, including clay, jade, bronze, gold, silver,

wood, textile, or stone. Clay objects could be painted, unpainted, or glazed. Remarkable in this context is the stunning *Sancai Glazed Pottery Horse* (Tang Dynasty), on view in the exhibition. “Sancai” (or three color) glaze was applied to objects by dipping, pouring, and painting. Heads and extremities of figures were often left unglazed, so that details could be painted directly onto the earthenware.

The work of Tang artisans, in particular, reflects the influence of the many cultures with which they came into contact both in their capital city of Chang’an and elsewhere. It is not unusual, for example, to find exotic symbols, motifs and shapes more closely associated with the arts of India, Persia, Syria and even Greece in Tang art. The *Two Grooms* (Tang Dynasty) on view in the exhibition have Persian facial features; apt reminders of both the international flavor of this dynasty and the historical fact that Tang emperors consolidated and maintained their martial power by importing not only horses but horsemen into China.

“Artifacts like those in the Bellarmine Museum of Art’s exhibition provide great insights into daily life during the Han and Tang Dynasties,” said Dr. Jill Deupi, Director of the Bellarmine Museum Director of the Bellarmine Museum of Art and Assistant Professor of Art History at Fairfield University. “They also remind us of how carefully orchestrated the burial rites and rituals were for a society with clearly delineated class hierarchies. The poor typically were buried with little more than small coins while the wealthy were accompanied by elaborate figures.”

“Immortality of the Spirit: Chinese Funerary Art from the Han and Tang Dynasties” features an exhibition catalogue/brochure available in the galleries with essays co-authored by **Leopold Swergold** and **Dr. Ive Covaci, Fairfield University Adjunct Professor of Art History** and a specialist in Asian Art. Exhibition programming includes a Gallery Talk delivered by **Leopold Swergold at 5 p.m., on Thursday, May 3, 2012,** and a **Family Day from 1 p.m. - 4 p.m. on Saturday, April 14, 2012.** Film screenings of the 2011 PBS documentary, *China’s Terracotta Warriors*, take place at **12 noon on April 13, April 24, May 1, and May 4, 2012** in the museum’s on-site education room. All events are free of charge and open to the public.

“Immortality of the Spirit: Chinese Funerary Art from the Han and Tang Dynasties” has been made possible through the generosity of Jane and Leopold Swergold, who have lent both their objects and their expertise to this project. Further support was provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities: because democracy demands wisdom.

Caption information for attached jpeg:

Sancai Glazed Pottery Horse

Tang Dynasty (618-906)

From the Collection of Jane and Leopold Swergold

Fairfield University offers its students and the regional community a wide array of opportunities to enjoy the arts and enrich their lives through study, performance, appreciation, and thought. The annual Arts & Minds season of events at Fairfield provides an outstanding array of cultural and intellectual events that include the Regina A. Quick Center for the Arts season, the popular Open VISIONS Forum lecture series, professional and student performances, art exhibits, special lectures, and a myriad of other lifelong learning opportunities. For further information, visit www.fairfield.edu/arts.

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