

ARTS OF THE TANG DYNASTY (618-906 AD)

Historical Background

221-206 BC - Qin Dynasty (i.e. terracotta army). This dynasty unified the country and was extremely dynamic, yet short lived. Paved the way for Han which was strong/ prosperous and lasted a long time - 205 BC - 220 AD. Almost 4 centuries of disunity and chaos followed the collapse of Han, but the country was united again in 589 under the Sui Dynasty. The first emperor of Sui was able, strong and did much for China, but was succeeded by a wastrel son. Thus the Sui fell in 618 having paved the way for the Tang just as Qin had for Han. Early Tang history is one long round of assassinations and political intrigue culminating in 756 with the disastrous rebellion of An Lu Shan. This was followed in 763 by a Tibetan revolt and in those 10 years China's population fell from 53 million to about 17½. The Tang Dynasty did survive, until 906, but was never to regain its glory. The most important reign is that of Ming Huang 713-756 AD and the vast majority of Tang art comes from the first ½ of the 8th century.

The Capital

Capital of Tang was Chang An - modern day Xi'an. Laid out in a grid system which in part survives, with walled wards and curfews. Population approx. 196,000, the most cosmopolitan city in the world at that time. Islam, Buddhism and Christianity all flourished there.

Frontiers

The most important frontier was the city of Dunhuang (N.W. China) at the eastern end of the Silk Road, There are many cave temples there with sculpture and paintings showing the earliest Chinese landscapes. Scrolls found in the caves contain some of the earliest Chinese fiction, Terrifically important place for both trade and culture.

Metalwork

Gold and silver were popular. Nearly all precious metals came from the Tibetans and the Vikings who had been won over by a 7th century Tang Emperor. Sumptuary laws in 706 restricted the use of gold and silver and after the rebellion of 756 these metals were not used at all.

The mining of ore was under strict government control. Bronze was not a common medium but when it does occur bears close relation to ceramic shapes.

CERAMICS

I. Technology

The Tang Dynasty sees the first association of particular wares with particular kilns. The fundamental change is that from earthenware to stoneware. Earthenware goes out of use from the middle of the dynasty though it continues in the North East to the end of Tang and later still for tiles. The latter part of Tang also witnesses the first porcelains.

Lead glazes are used but are fritted first unlike the raw lead used in Han.

All the glazed pieces are slipped before glaze is applied, giving better glaze, adhesion and greater brilliancy of colour.

II. Vessels

Vessels shapes are either indigenous (jars, bowls) or of Middle Eastern origin (globular vases, ewers) but all share the dynamic contours and swelling curves typical of Tang art. Applied moulded decoration occurs only on vases, ewers and jars. All the vessels have flat, unglazed bases. Handles are added rather than moulded into the pots. Monochrome ceramics are usually glazed by dipping.

III. Figures

All figures (Ming qi = grave goods) are made for tombs, they are made from moulds and are mass-produced. Animal figures include 2 types: horses and camels, usually quite large and decorated with "three-colour" glazes or unfired pigments. The second type is the domestic animals, usually smaller and with a white glaze. The clothes, hairstyles and facial features of the human figures provide interesting social comments. Amongst the female figures a development can be traced from the straight, elegant lines of the 7th century through the fuller early 8th century one to the quite plump figures of the mid 8th century onwards.

Male figures often portray foreigners. The faces and stances tend to be more realistic and active than those of the females.