

# The Tang dynasty

The Tang dynasty (AD 618-906) saw a Golden Age in the long history of Chinese civilization. The literary achievements of the period in both prose and poetry are still revered more than a thousand years later, while the visual arts of the Tang reflect the cosmopolitanism, wealth, elegance and vitality of Chinese culture during these years.

The dynasty may be regarded as falling into several periods. The first period encompassing the 7th century and the early part of the 8th century was a time of expansion when, building on the foundation laid by the preceding Sui dynasty (AD 581-618), the Chinese empire grew to become the largest known up to that time. Trade with lands both to east and west brought not only wealth in material terms, but also in an exchange of cultural ideas. Within China itself this was a time of prosperity and economic stability. It became a money economy in AD731. There was a three-tier system of taxation based on silk, grain and corvée duty (ie the male members of the family were liable to be called up for a period of service to the state). Redistribution of land and a gradual migration from northern China into central and southern China combined with an examination system for government office resulted in a change of emphasis in the power structure away from the aristocracy in the north towards the gentry classes in the south.

Any complacency was shattered however by the disastrous An Lushan rebellion in AD756 which plunged the country into chaos and caused the court to flee the capital. Although this rebellion failed to bring the dynasty to an end and relative stability was regained within approximately fifteen years, the Tang was never to achieve its former splendor. The second period, in the latter part of the 8th century, saw a struggle for economic recovery, and the instigation of a new double tax system in AD 780 that required payment in cash twice a year. However, the smaller land owners could not survive and, in addition, China became prey once again to the weakness along her frontiers.

In the final period, the 9th century, although there was a literary revival with such giants as Han Yu and Bo Zhuyi, the economic and political decline continued. Chinese influence outside her frontiers diminished, while internally the control of central government weakened with disastrous results. This, combined with a series of natural calamities, brought the dynasty to a close. Throughout the dynasty, but perhaps not surprisingly it is in the period up to the mid-8th century that produced some of the most lively and exciting examples. The custom of burying ceramic models of people, animals and everyday objects with the dead had been practised since the Han dynasty (221 BC - AD 206), but these ceramic figures reached a peak of popularity and a high point of artistic achievement in the late 7th and early 8th centuries. They also provide interesting reflections of the influences coming into China from outside, for this was a time of intense commercial and political activity. The Chinese themselves travelled abroad and a tremendous number of foreigners came to China on diplomatic missions; as merchants; and in religious capacities. Persians, Turks, Sogdians, Indians, Tibetans and Japanese were among those to flock to the Tang capital of Changan (near modern Xi'an), representatives of many artistic traditions and religions: Buddhists, Mazdeans, Nestorians, Manichaeans and in time Muslims. Some travelled by sea from Japan and Korea. There were routes southwards around the Malay Peninsula and via Sri Lanka and India to the Persian and Arab ports. At this time the Chinese were not the great seafaring nation they were to become in the Song dynasty (AD 960-1279) and so tended to make use of foreign vessels - mainly with Persian crews. There were also overland routes — some less well known such as that from Szechuan to Bengal via Yunnan and Burma, or the Buddhist route to India via Tibet and Nepal, but the most famous overland route was the so-called 'Silk Route' with all its romantic associations. This led northwest from the Tang capital Changan to the edge of the Gobi desert. At Dunhuang the route divided, either running to the north via Turfan and Kuča or to the south via Loulan and Khotan to meet up again at Kashgar

from whence it was possible to proceed to Samarkand or Bactria, and on to Baghdad, to Antioch, to Alexandria and eventually Constantinople.

That these gruelling overland journeys were possible was due in no small measure to the Bactrian camel which was invaluable not only in its capacity as a beast of burden, but also for its ability to sense imminent sand storms and its instinctive 'nose' for water. Thus it is not unexpected to find handsome models of these animals among the ceramic tomb figures of Tang dynasty China. Their inclusion among the ming-qi (grave goods) does not necessarily imply that the owner of the tomb was involved in trade, but rather was a person of substance.

The Collection is fortunate in having a particularly splendid example (38-119), which stands some 84 cm high, is made of earthenware and has the polychrome glaze associated with a number of these tomb figures. This type of glaze is lead-fluxed and is known as sancai (three colour) glaze. The most frequent colours used are amber, cream and green -as on this camel-but blue and black are also used in varying combinations. This sancai glaze appears to have become popular about the turn of the century, but seems to disappear after the An Lushan rebellion in AD 756. As well as the more obvious links with the 'Silk Route', another indication of foreign influence may be seen on closer inspection of the saddle bags across the camel's back. On both of them a bearded western face has been depicted, and indeed this is by no means unusual on figures of this type although its precise relevance is obscure.

Since the funerals of the wealthy for whom these ceramic figures were made reached a peak of extravagance in the number and quality of the items in the late 7th and early 8th centuries, it is hardly surprising that this is the period from which the majority of the pieces in the Collection date. If the deceased was very wealthy, the number of ceramic figures might run to several hundred, in addition to other precious objects which would be placed in the tomb. At a lavish funeral the ceramic figures would be displayed outside the entrance to the tomb as the funeral procession made its way to the place of burial. Inside the tomb the figures were placed in the niches off the sloping passage which lead to the main burial chamber. When the mausoleum of the Princess Yong Tai (dated to AD 706) was excavated in Qianxian, Shaanxi province, in 1964, over 800 of these models were found.



Another type of figure, but one usually found in the tomb chamber itself, can be seen in the Collection's two fangxiang guardians (38-183 & 4). These ferocious, armoured figures, which are almost a metre high, would probably have stood in the chamber to frighten away evil spirits.

These guardians are derived from an old notion of a vanquisher of sickness and evil spirits combined with the Buddhist idea of the four kings who protect the four quarters of Heaven and also the state. In Tang tombs, two fangxiang figures are often joined by two qitou figures with grotesque animal bodies and human faces who kept the spirit of the dead within the tomb. These four would then be placed one at each corner of the burial chamber.

However, most of the ceramic models reflected the wealth and power of the occupant of the tomb and his or her interests and leisure pursuits. Music and dancing were very popular entertainments in the Tang dynasty, and both were affected by Western influences during this period. Not only did dancers and musicians travel east of their own volition to practice their skills, but troupes were also sent to the Tang rulers as gifts or tribute from foreign rulers. They brought with them, in addition to their music, their fashions of dress and their instruments, and many examples of both were adopted by the sophisticated and cosmopolitan Tang court. The popularity of these troupes of musicians is reflected in the frequency with which models of them appear among the funerary figures. The Collection contains several examples. The small kneeling female flautist (38-156) is unglazed, and has been painted with unfired pigments. While the brightly glazed figures were very popular they by no means have a monopoly and there are a large number of examples of the unglazed, painted type. It should be remembered that although the paint on these does not survive burial very well, when they were first made they would have been very, brightly coloured.

Another rather elegant example is the standing female figure playing a type of lute (38-162). This figure dates to the late 7th century and has a monochrome cream glaze. On occasions these cream glazed figures have coloured pigments and even gilding applied over the glaze, but in the majority of cases most of the colour has been lost during burial.

Horses and equestrian groups were certainly one of the most popular themes for both painting and the three-dimensional arts in the Tang dynasty. Riding was a popular pastime for both men and women, while both hunting and playing polo-were much in vogue. The ladies rode astride like the men and were able to take part in both the aforementioned activities. By the beginning of the 8th century they had abandoned their traditional style of head-gear with flowing scarves and had adopted the much more practical hats of Central Asia. The ladies of the court were also known to adopt men's Central Asian dress of the type seen on the standing attendant figure (38-148). This particular figure, however, is male and probably held a falcon or other hunting bird. The body of the figure is glazed, but like the faces of the fangxiang guardian and the majority of other human or semi-human figures with sancai glaze, the face and neck have been left unglazed and have been painted after firing with soft pigments.

The horses themselves are magnificent and the Collection has some particularly fine examples. The horses portrayed are those of the larger western type which were introduced into China during the Han dynasty (221 BC-- AD 206) from Ferghana. Before that time the horses used in China were of the smaller type related to the Przewalski horse from the steppe region, which was usually less than 13 hands high.

Of the two examples shown, the one standing four-square (38-133) is covered in a sancai polychrome glaze, while the one pawing the ground (38-123) is painted in unfired pigments. These models, like the camels and other figures were made in moulded sections luted together and with individual embellishments and modelling added. The elaborate harness and trappings of these horses show the influence of Sassanian Persia. They have been separately moulded and then applied to the model. It is interesting to note that while the pigmented horse carries stirrups, the glazed one does not. Both riding styles appear to have been common at the time, though neither the male nor female polo-players appear, from surviving depictions, to have used stirrups.