

Highlights of the Chinese Han Dynasty Objects at the Burrell Collection

by Emma May

Glasgow Museum's early Imperial Chinese collection represents a key period of major importance in the development of Chinese ceramics and the technological achievement of lead glazing. The collection has particularly strong pottery and jade groupings that can be subdivided into two main periods namely the Western Han dynasty 206 B.C.–9 A.D named after the location of the capital in present day Xian, Shaanxi province, North West China and the Eastern Han dynasty A.D 25- 220 A.D, Henan province, North East China.

It was in Sir William Burrell's later years of life particularly between the years 1945-1949 that he became interested in Ancient China in particular Han dynasty ceramics, jades and bronzes. Around 95% of the entire Han dynasty collection of Chinese art was purchased between 1945-1949 from individuals with whom he had been doing business with for years namely: Bluett and Sons, Frank Partridge and Sons, Sydney Moss and John Sparks.

The concept of the afterlife dominates this collection that is rich in mingqi (spirit goods, funerary items) and provides material evidence of what life, society and beliefs were like during one of the longest dynasties that ruled China for around 400 years.

The ceramics in this collection are mostly lead glazed and were produced on a large scale in moulds that created everything from pottery attendants, entertainers, houses, towers, wells, granaries, stoves, poultry, owls, horses and other implements. Burial objects such as these reflect that the activities and pleasures of everyday life were believed to continue after death during the Han dynasty.

The collection also has some very fine jade amulets, bi disks (often placed on the stomach or under the skull of the deceased)and cong (often placed in male burials) many of which are decorated with popular symbols of the cicada which represents rebirth and immortality. Jade was popularly mined throughout the Han dynasty to supply the constant demand for ceremonial and decorative carvings. With the introduction of iron tools the Han carver's task was less laborious. Jade amulets were carved and believed to have protective properties that would protect the owner.

The principal types of object associated with the collection for this period are Pottery (lead glazed, hand painted, feldspathic glazed), Bronze and Jade .

Star objects from the collection:

8-170 Lian Cylindrical box supported on three human shaped legs, Bronze Han Dynasty 206BC-220AD

38-51 Lotus shaped censer with bird finial, Earthenware with lead glaze Han Dynasty 206BC-220AD

38-60 Bo Shan Lu Jar and Cover, Earthenware with lead glaze Han Dynasty 206BC-220AD

8-83 Crossbow mechanism, dated by inscription 147 A.D, cast bronze with gold and silver inlay Han Dynasty 206BC-220AD

38-98 Model of a storehouse, Earthenware with lead glaze Han Dynasty 206BC-220AD