

# **Travel and Transportation along the Silk Road**

## **The horse and the camel: from the trade route to the Tang tomb**

**Research project - By Magda Ketterer**

### **Chinese ceramics**

Ceramic vessels were used by the Chinese from the very dawn of civilisation. The Neolithic urns in the Burrell Collection were fashioned from the most basic of materials, and yet they formed an integral part of the tradition of ritual burial and afterlife provision. Throughout Chinese history, ceramic funerary wares were created and decorated to the highest standard, and the Tang dynasty pieces were, and remain to this day, unmatched in beauty and splendour.

The great Tang emperor, Tai T'sung (624-649), recognised the changing times through which he and his people were living. The empire's capital, Chang'an, was welcoming new faces - foreign faces - and all that they brought to China. This cosmopolitan city witnessed the expansion of trade by means of the Silk Road, and the Chinese artisans who fell upon this strange and wonderful transformation captured the very essence of life as they experienced it.

The art of the Tang dynasty inevitably reflects the adventurous and free spirit of the prosperous and largely peaceful Chinese empire. This spirit was key, and for the Tang artist, it became the vital ingredient in the production of ceramic models.

### **The Silk Road**

The Silk Road originated in the 2nd century BC when China began expanding for military reasons. Beginning in China from Chang'an, the routes continued through Gansu, Qinghai, Xizang, Kashmire, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, and on into Europe. The emergence of the Silk Road contributed greatly to Chinese art. The influx of foreign peoples, ideas, objects, and animals gave rise to kingdoms whose inhabitants reflected an amalgam of cultures from across Eurasia and India.

Imported to China were precious stones, ostrich eggs, aromatic herbs, coral, byssus, Persian textiles, 'gold-thread weave', carpets, glass, and armour.

### **The Horse**

The horse figures in the Chinese calendar, the 7 of the 12 celestial branches. Its characteristics include friendliness, and creativity, and its very presence is a symbol of speed, status, intelligence, and perseverance. In funerary art, the horse can symbolise death and it bears away the soul of the deceased. Believed to have their roots in the dragon race, the horses captured in the materials of the time are invariably sleek, graceful, muscular, and perhaps most important of all, real.

### **The Camel**

The Bactrian and Arabian camels were domesticated in the 3rd century BC. The camel was not adopted in Chinese symbolism - it simply represents trade and by extension, wealth. These two species formed the basis of transportation along the Silk Road. Their characteristic humps, thick fur, long eyelashes, and wide-padded feet enabled them to cross both the perilous grasslands and the harsh deserts.

### **Why bury objects at all?**

The Chinese believed in an afterlife. For them, death was not the end. Rather, it stood as a transitional stage, a limbo if you will, between the living world and the spirit world. By burying the

essentials for everyday life within the tomb, the well-being of the deceased was cared for, and the provision of prized items, such as the sancai horse or camel, ensured that the status of the deceased was properly displayed to the spirits of the afterlife.

### **Sancai Lead Glaze**

This is the most famous achievement of the 71 century. Ask a man in the street what he associates with the Tang dynasty and his answer would likely be - "that glaze thing with the colours and the drippy bits". That is the sancai lead glaze. Metallic oxides were added to the lead silicate glaze to produce the three colours - green, amber, and cream. Each piece required double firing - first at 1000 degrees Celsius, and second at 900 degrees Celsius after the glaze had been painted on. Dripping and spotting were just two of the colour application methods which, when fired, would produce the blurring and mixing of colours we can see today.

### **Burrell's Tang legacy**

It remains unclear as to why Sir William chose to collect these items. Why indeed did he collect anything? Perhaps he was inspired by George Salting's splendid collection of blue and white porcelain placed on loan in 1891 at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Perhaps he was following the market, recognising the popularity of Chinese objects, and didn't want to be left behind. Perhaps he simply fell in love with the beauty and simplicity of the funerary wares of this far-off land. Burrell never traveled to China, in spite of the fact that the ships of Burrell and Son regularly traded in the Far East. Instead he relied on a number of dealers and advisors. But he did not need an advisor to tell him that these Tang tricolours were outstanding in their craftsmanship and splendour. Perhaps one could say that like the Chinese themselves, burying their dead with the necessities of life for use in the afterlife, Burrell himself strove for immortality; for how is an eternal presence more readily obtained than by forming an art collection and handing it over to the people?



