

OBJECT IN FOCUS

Tomb figures of a man and woman on horseback



China, Henan province, possibly Luoyang

Tang dynasty, ca. 700–750

Earthenware with lead-silicate glazes and painted details

16 15/16 x 5 13/16 x 14 13/16 in;

15 9/16 x 4 5/8 x 13 3/8 in

Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment . Freer Gallery of Art, F1952.12 and F1952.13

Describe

The pair of pottery male and female horse riders are vividly depicted. The man wears a heart-shaped hat, wide-sleeved green coat, and black boots. His arms are raised as if holding the rein. The woman, with a high topknot, sits up straight on her horse. She wears a colorful, short-sleeved jacket and a pair of green trousers. The horses are depicted in lively poses. We can almost read their facial expressions. The pair is decorated in the *sancai*, or “three color” glaze technique. On areas where the figures are unglazed, such as the riders’ faces and hair, details are painted directly onto the fired clay.

Analyze

The Tang dynasty (618–907) is famous for its *sancai* ceramics that prominently feature the colors white, green, and amber. The basic glaze is transparent, slightly white, and contains a mixture of lead oxide, silica, and alumina. It can be fired at temperatures between 650 and 1000 degrees centigrade. The color green was achieved by mixing copper oxide into this base glaze, and amber/yellowish brown was achieved by mixing in iron oxide. On rare occasions, expensive cobalt oxide was added as a glaze to generate blue. The clay body of many *sancai* wares is creamy white (sometimes enhanced by a white clay coating called “slip”), allowing the colored glazes to stand out vibrantly and thus making *sancai* ware one of the shining treasures of Chinese ceramics. Tang *sancai* wares are thought to have been reserved for burial use and were rarely, if ever, used in daily life.



Interpret

Ancient Chinese believed in the existence of an afterlife. They made tomb figurines as replacements for real objects so that the deceased would enjoy their company or service in the afterlife. During the Tang dynasty, the use of *sancai* wares in tombs was restricted to people of a certain status. Furthermore, the number and size of the figures were determined by the rank of the deceased. As best we know, this pair of horse riders belong to a group of sixteen equestrian figures found in a tomb in northern China. They prove the high social status of the tomb owner and provide us with an intimate peek into certain aspects of the owner's life.

Inquire

- To what social class do you think the people riding the horses belonged? What makes you think that?
- In what ways are the figures and horses realistic? In what ways are the objects simplified?
- What do these objects tell us about the person they were buried with?
- Why do you think one figure is male and the other female?

Resources

View these object online at <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1952.12/> and <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1952.13>

Learn more at <https://asia.si.edu/teachingchina>



