

Historical Thinking

Object	Observations	What does this object tell you about life in the Tang dynasty?
<p>Example object:</p>	<p><i>This object is made of . . .</i></p> <p><i>This object depicts . . .</i></p> <p><i>I notice . . .</i></p>	<p><i>Since this object is made of . . .</i></p> <p><i>I infer that the Tang people . . .</i></p>
<p>Object A Tomb figures of a man and woman on horseback</p>		
<p>Object B Head of a tomb figure of a Sogdian or Central Asian traveler</p>		
<p>Object C Textile with floral medallions and lozenges</p>		
<p>Object D Tomb figure of a groom</p>		

Object A



LEFT:

Tomb figure: horse and rider

China, possibly Luoyang, Henan province, Tang dynasty, ca. 700–750

Earthenware with lead-silicate glazes and painted details

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

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

RIGHT:

Tomb figure of a woman on horseback

China, possibly Luoyang, Henan province, 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

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

Object B



Head of a tomb figure of a Sogdian or Central Asian traveler

China, Tang dynasty, 7th century
Earthenware with slip and pigment
7 1/2 x 3 9/16 x 4 3/4 in

The Dr. Paul Singer Collection of Chinese Art of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; a joint gift of the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation, Paul Singer, the AMS Foundation for the Arts, Sciences, and Humanities, and the Children of Arthur M. Sackler. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, RLS1997.48.1449

Object C



Textile with floral medallions and lozenges

China, Mid-Tang dynasty, first half of the 8th century

Brocade (jin): woven silk (weft-faced compound twill)

59 1/8 x 23 3/8 in

Gift of Charles Lang Freer. Freer Gallery of Art, F1911.597a–b

Object D



Tomb figure of a groom

China, Tang dynasty, ca. 700–750

Earthenware with lead-silicate glazes and painted details

8 1/8 x 2 5/8 in

Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment. Freer Gallery of Art, F1952.14

Object background information



Tomb figure:
horse and rider

Describe

This pair of pottery of male and female horse riders are both vividly depicted. The man wears a heart-shaped hat, wide-sleeved green coat, and black boots. His arms are raised as if holding the reins. 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.



Tomb figure
of a woman on
horseback

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 1,000 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 peoples 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 belongs 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.



Head of a tomb
figure of a
Sogdian or
Central Asian
traveler

Describe

This male head is made of light gray clay and is missing the rest of his body. Fired in a low-temperature kiln, it is unglazed and covered entirely with a white clay coating called “slip.” The facial features are sculpted and enhanced through paint. Traces of pink, red, and black pigment are still visible on the face. The head seems to represent a Caucasian or Iranian man. He wears a tall, Persian-style, cone-shaped hat. The craftsman of this head obviously enjoyed the freedom of caricaturing the figure’s foreign appearance. He has bulging eyes with large staring pupils and a prominent nose with big nostrils. It almost seems like he is making a grimace.

Analyze

Tang dynasty (618–907) China was one of the greatest empires of the world. It possessed an international atmosphere thanks to the openness of its rulers and the Silk Road trade routes that

Object background information

connected China with India, Western Asia, the Mediterranean, and East Africa. In cosmopolitan cities like Chang'an and Luoyang, non-Chinese visitors came from all over the Eastern Hemisphere. One could pass by traders, missionaries, and visitors of many different races on the streets. This male head may be based on such a traveler from the west, most likely a Sogdian (an Iranian people who resided in present-day Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and were known for their trade along the Silk Road during the fourth to eighth centuries).

Interpret

For the ancient Chinese, the afterlife was as important as one's existence in the earthly world. This means tombs were considered as homes of the deceased. Since the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE), the ancient Chinese were buried with miniature representations of everything they would need in the afterlife, including horses, entertainers, servants, and other human and animal subjects. This figure may have been made to represent a groom, one who attends to horses and stables. Horses were one of the key goods that Central Asians, especially the Sogdians, traded in. The Sogdians were also known for their horse breeding and training skills.



Textile with floral medallions and lozenges

Describe

This silk brocade is rectangular in shape. It is almost five feet long and two feet wide, which is surprisingly large. Only one of the vertical edges is a selvage, so we know the loom would have been over two feet wide. Considering that the textile was made more than one thousand years ago, its state of preservation is remarkable. It is decorated with yellow patterns on a dark purple background. Lines of round floral medallions alternate with lines of diamond designs, or lozenges. Both patterns are formed by horizontal threads (wefts). This differs from earlier Chinese brocades, whose patterns are formed by vertical threads (warps).

Analyze

In the early seventh century, weft-pattern weaves were introduced from Central Asia to China via the Silk Road. This new weaving technique transformed Chinese weaving because it made it easier to add color where it was desired. Since designs develop from the rows of weft threads, rather than from the pre-placed warp yarns, textile craftsmen had more freedom to make more colorful fabrics with complex designs. This technical innovation eventually led to the greatest era of Silk Road textile production. Chinese fabrics—typically silks—were traded widely and became one of the most popular goods on the Silk Road. Due to this popularity, they have been preserved in Christian cathedrals in western Europe as well as in Buddhist temples in Japan. Scholars suspect that this textile piece was made in China by Tang weavers who were inspired by Sogdian designs that were very popular at the time.

Interpret

American art collector Charles Lang Freer bought this textile in Nara, Japan. Similar textiles with identical patterns are found in the Shōsō-in, a mid-eighth century storehouse of Japanese imperial treasures in Nara. This makes us suppose that the textile may once have belonged to the Shōsō-in as well, or perhaps it was treasured in a nearby temple. Given the textile's current condition, it is almost impossible for us to tell its original function. Perhaps it arrived as a bolt, or roll, of cloth as a diplomatic gift from China to Japan.

Object background information



Tomb figure of a groom

Describe

This object is made of low-fired clay and depicts a standing male figure. He wears a long green coat with wide brown lapels, which is not a traditional Chinese-style garment. His high boots match the color of the lapels. The figure's right arm is uplifted and pierced to hold a horse bridle, which has not survived. We can, however, identify him as a groom, one who attends to horses and stables. The groom's "foreign" identity is obvious. He has dark skin, curly hair, heavy brows, prominent staring eyes, an exceptionally large nose, and thick lips. His facial features are so exaggerated that it seems as if he is making a face. The figure is covered by *sancai*, or "three color" glaze. His face is unglazed with painted details.

Analyze

During the Tang dynasty (618–907), people of different races came to China from around the Eastern Hemisphere over the Silk Road (a network of land and sea trade routes that connected Asia, Europe, and East Africa). Some of them came to trade, and after making some money, they returned home; others, however, chose to settle permanently in big cities like Chang'an (the capital) and Luoyang. The latter group included grooms who managed the horses of the Tang elite. This standing figure represents such a groom from South or Southeast Asia. He could also be from East Africa, brought to China by Arab traders as a slave.

Interpret

Representations of foreigners are often seen in Tang tomb figurines, demonstrating the cosmopolitan culture of the period. This *sancai* groom is especially interesting. He is dark-skinned yet dressed in Central Asian costume. Is it a fashion or an indication of profession? Regardless, the appearance of the figure is a rich reflection of cultural intermixing in the Tang dynasty. *Sancai* ceramics were restricted to the imperial and the elite. Their presence in tombs was a mark of high status. Figures of non-Chinese grooms suggest that the deceased was wealthy enough to have possessed imported horses and grooms, or at least aspired to have done so. A tomb figurine such as this standing groom not only tells us the high social status of its tomb owner but also provides an insight into the life of the deceased.