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Immortality of the Spirit: Chinese Funerary Art
from the Han and Tang Dynasties

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Immortality of the Spirit: Chinese Funerary Art from the Han and Tang Dynasties Didactic Panels

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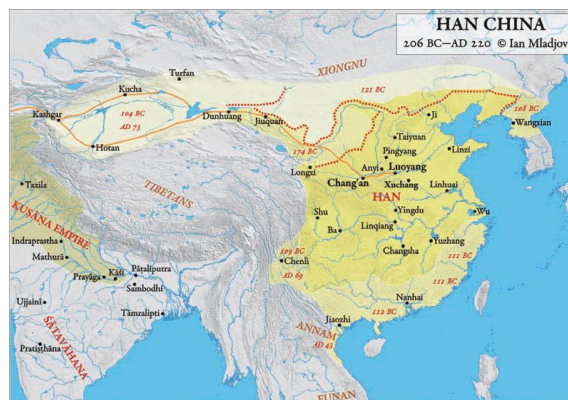
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Immortality of the Spirit

For the ancient Chinese, life in the afterworld was as important as one's existence on earth. This belief structure led to the creation of elaborate – often lavish – burial rituals in which the dead were laid to rest in tombs intended to replicate splendid earthly dwellings in all of their particulars. These final resting places were, therefore, well-provisioned by surviving family members with *mingqi*, or “spirit articles,” for the deceased's journey into the afterlife; an essential component of such rites, since those not properly prepared for the next world could return to visit misfortune upon the living.



This exhibition, *Immortality of the Spirit: Chinese Funerary Art from the Han and Tang Dynasties*, features thirteen pottery objects from the **Han (206 BCE-220 CE)** and **Tang (618-907 CE)** dynasties. Four of these works were generously donated to the Bellarmine Museum of Art by **Jane and Leopold Swergold**, who kindly lent the nine other pieces in this exhibition from their word-class collection of ancient Chinese sculpture. Such artifacts provide us with great insights into daily life during these critical periods in Chinese history and are pointed reminders of these societies' clearly delineated class hierarchies and carefully orchestrated societal rituals.

China's "Golden Ages"

The Han Dynasty was an era of relative peace, prosperity, and imperial expansion. Under the Han emperors, government apparatus and imperial bureaucracies were strengthened according to Confucian tenets. This led to the creation of a powerful centralized state, headed by the emperor and his family together with an elite, educated class of officials and aristocrats. The dynasty also fostered great developments in the performing and visual arts, including music, poetry and calligraphy. Trade flourished as well: the progressive Han rulers established control of trade routes to Central Asia in 101 BCE, ensuring the flow of goods between East and West. Indeed, Chinese silk was present in Rome by the death of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE. In turn, the Chinese imported horses, foodstuffs, gold and other luxury items from the West. Nomadic tribes on the empire's borders, however, posed a constant threat, forcing the dynasty to launch numerous, expensive campaigns against such “barbarians.”

Centuries of disunity followed the fall of the Han until the late 7th century, when the Tang Dynasty (618-907) ushered in another long period of stability and prosperity. Like the Han before them, they made their capital in Chang'an (modern Xi'an), transforming it into the largest, most cosmopolitan city in the world at that time. Foreigners – including merchants, entertainers, monks, diplomatic envoys, and horse grooms from as far away as Persia (modern Iran) and Syria – flooded the city. Meanwhile, the imperial family and aristocrats living in the area around the capital created a steady demand for exotic luxury goods from the West, in addition to adopting foreign fashions and leisure pursuits.

Beliefs in the Afterlife

While personal possessions and items used in daily life could be interred with the dead, the majority of grave goods were created specifically for funerary purposes. These replicas, the so-called *mingqi*, were distinguished from their real counterparts by deliberate changes in material, color, size, technique, or function, in accordance with the teachings of Confucius (traditional dates, 551-479 BCE). Not surprisingly, tombs, and the objects that populated them, were used to broadcast the wealth and status not only of the dead but also of their living ancestors. In fact, goods intended for burial were exhibited during lavish funerary rites before being sealed in tombs. Burial chambers were also seen as gateways to immortality, envisioned as a state achievable only after death rather than the eternal preservation of an earthly body. It is no surprise, then, that symbols of ever-lasting life – such as mysterious mountains, mythic animals, winged immortal beings, cranes flying through clouds, and images of Daoist deities – pervade tombs from the Han and Tang dynasties. These depictions were included, no doubt, in the hope that the dead would attain this status and ascend to paradise.



Materials and Techniques

Many funerary objects, like those showcased in here, are made of earthenware pottery. Unlike porcelain, which has a different clay body, earthenware has a porous, opaque surface. This is due to the relatively lower temperature at which such objects are fired (1000°C as opposed to 1300°C for porcelain, which gives the latter its typically vitreous finish). Like porcelain (which, not incidentally, was developed in 6th-century China), earthenware can be painted or glazed. It can also be fired without any further surface decoration.

The popularity of funerary goods under the Han and Tang dynasties meant that workshops had to use molds in order to keep pace with demand. Fine details could be shaped by hand but often decorations were molded as well. The shapes of vessels, in particular, often echo metal prototypes, whether ancient Chinese or foreign in origin.