



Tang Dynasty Changsha Ceramics

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In the field of Chinese ceramics, the Belitung shipwreck is remarkable for greatly expanding our knowledge of a specific type of work: the Changsha ware produced during the late Tang period (left). The works astound both in their stunning quality and sheer quantity, comprising approximately 57,500 pieces, nearly 95 percent of which were made at kilns in the Changsha vicinity. While Changsha bowls dominated the cargo (some 55,000 pieces), there were many other Changsha ceramics in various forms (some 2,500 pieces). These works not only shed light on the manufacture and workmanship of Changsha ceramics, they also provide invaluable new data relevant to the art and literary history, religious beliefs, and customs of the times.

The Flourishing and Decline of the Changsha Ceramic Industry

Until field surveys were carried out in the twentieth century, Yuezhou, at the northeast corner of Dongting Lake, was considered the main center of ceramic production in Hunan during the Tang dynasty. This may have been true in the eighth century, but by the early ninth century Yuezhou kilns had begun to decline. Kilns in the Changsha vicinity, at the southern side of Dongting Lake, were developing fast, and ultimately superseded Yuezhou as the most advanced and prolific group of kilns in the area.

Field surveys and typological analysis suggest that, in certain respects, Changsha ware evolved from Yuezhou ware. The Changsha kilns began production by imitating Yuezhou green-tinged glazed wares, for which the city had been known since long before the Tang dynasty. Yuezhou's products, however, could not vie with the Yue ware made in Zhejiang province during the Tang era, such as the highly esteemed Yue bowls for tea-drinking. In his book *Chajing* (The Classic of Tea), Lu Yu (730s–circa 804) commented, “The wares of Yue are green and so increase the greenness of the tea,” and therefore they set the standard for other wares.¹ In Hunan, newly manufactured wares, designed to meet competition from the eastern and northern kilns, were therefore most timely. Changsha ware was also strongly influenced by techniques of *sancai* (“tri-color ware”), contemporary tricolor lead-glazed pottery developed in the northern metropolitan areas of Chang’an and Luoyang. An uprising led by the rebel General An Lushan from 755 to 763 forced many northerners to flee to the south, possibly bringing with them northern ceramic techniques that then were assimilated by Changsha potters. Changsha kilns flourished at a time when the Chinese were actively trading with other countries via the maritime route. Evidence from archaeological excavations throughout China and abroad proves that Changsha wares for the most part were made for export²; kilns mushroomed in the Changsha vicinity largely in response to the demands of foreign markets.

Fig. 100 The thousands of painted Changsha bowls from the ship carry only a few set patterns, but these were copied by many different hands, giving the sense of a huge variety. Cats. 56–193.

The sites of ceramic production within Changsha have been well investigated since the 1950s. Major centers of manufacture were in an area spread over 10 kilometers around Machang and Shizhu Lakes (now all turned into rice fields), some 25 to 30 kilometers north of Changsha, on the east bank of the Xiang River, which links Dongting Lake and Yangzi River to the north. Chinese archaeologists divided the area into three major sites: Tongguan, Gucheng (or Wazhaping), and Shizhu.³ Archaeological excavations have revealed that there must have been a long period of activity and a large amount of production in the area. Among the kilns, Lan'an zui, at Shizhu, was likely one of the most prolific of the time. In a 1986 excavation, more than 80 percent of the finds featuring color underglaze decoration were from this site. The thickest ceramic heap in the dilapidated ruins was 3.5 meters deep.⁴ Significantly, the name Shizhu was inscribed on one of the bowls from the Belitung wreck (cat. 180 and p. 57, second row, center)—tangible evidence that some of the bowls on board were manufactured at this site.

Evidence from the field surveys has also allowed archaeologists to outline the history of ceramic manufacture in Changsha. They created a four-part periodization from the kilns' early development to their heyday—dating from the High Tang (mid-eighth century) to the Five Dynasties periods (907–60)⁵—based primarily on typological examination, stratigraphic analysis, and inscriptions found on the excavated ceramic works. This periodization shows a continuity of development at the Changsha kilns over approximately 200 years.

Period 1 dates from the late High Tang to mid-Tang (760s–780s). Monochrome, green-tinged glazed wares dominated this period. Underglaze colored decoration and molded appliqué on objects such as ewers were found only occasionally; no wares with white glaze and green color decoration were found whatsoever. Period 2 is equivalent to the end of the mid-Tang and beginning of the late Tang, corresponding to the first half of the ninth century. The characteristic Changsha products with colored underglaze gradually became prolific during this period. Large numbers of ewers with a spout and handle and decorated with appliquéd dark-brown patches appeared. Period 3 is equated with the late Tang, in the second half of the ninth century. This period marked the height of Changsha's productive prosperity and prestige, when wares with color underglaze decoration predominated. In addition, many works marked with inscriptions have been found from this period.

In Period 4, contemporary with the very end of the Tang and beginning of the Five Dynasties period, Changsha ware remained one of the three major ceramic exports, along with Yue ware and Ding white-glazed ware. But though colored underglaze decoration was still mainstream and its manufacture continued to thrive, there were signs that the quality of Changsha wares' body, glaze, and decoration had slipped.⁶

After nearly two centuries of prosperity, Changsha kilns began to wane in the early Song era (mid-tenth century). Rather than purely owing to a shift in taste, the cause of the decline also lay in changing economic and marketing conditions. Overseas trade was still active, yet the main center of production for export wares was moved from inland to the coastal areas, in order to reduce labor costs and the risk of damage during shipping. Kilns mushroomed in Guangdong and Fujian but rapidly decreased in Changsha. Yue ware, together with newly developed Longquan celadon-glaze ware and the Jingdezhen *qingbai* (bluish reduction-glaze) ware, now were the major products supplied to foreign markets. Changsha ware and Ding white ware disappeared from the arena of export trading. While Ding ware continued to develop after readjusting its market focus to the domestic scene, Changsha kilns died out.

Forms and Workmanship

FORMS

Ceramic ware manufactured in Changsha kilns during the Tang dynasty varied greatly in form. Based on the nearly 7,000 ceramic pieces excavated at kiln sites in Changsha in 1983, Chinese archaeologists have distinguished about seventy different product forms (fig. 101). They can be divided into ten core groups, including ewers and vases (2,514 pieces); bowls and saucer dishes (1,596 pieces); jars (939 pieces); basins and washers (580 pieces); boxes (474 pieces); lamps (188 pieces); tools such as milling stones and milling blocks (81 pieces); objects for the scholar's desk (63 pieces); pillows (48 pieces); and others.⁷

Many of these forms were found in the Belitung wreck. The majority of works recovered from the cargo are utensil wares, such as bowls, ewers, jars, cups and cup stands, vases, basins, circular boxes, candlesticks, spittoons, lamps, incense burners (fig. 102), milling stones, etc. Although potters at Changsha kilns produced a delightful array of cultural implements and entertainment pieces, such works were evidently not favored by the exporters. Only limited ceramics in these categories were found in the Belitung wreck.

Bowls with underglaze decoration are one of the most elaborately represented categories of all Changsha wares and form the largest group of Changsha ceramics recovered from the ship. Based on the 1,383 intact or fragmentary bowls found in the 1983 kiln-site excavation, Changsha bowls of the Tang period can be categorized into three forms: bowls of a normal round shape; bowls with four-, five-, or six-lobed rims; and bowls with a four-lobed rim in a semisquare shape. The majority of bowls found in the Belitung wreck belong to the first category. In a few examples the sides are everted to a multilobed or foliated rim, and only a single specimen has a four-lobed rim in a semisquare shape. The footrings of bowls from the Belitung wreck generally fall into three types: a low, wider, and flat foot; a thin, slightly spread foot; and a high-spreading foot.

Of the group of bowls featuring simple rounded sides, the most common type is of a standard size with curving walls, an everted mouth with a rolled rim, and a slightly spread, narrow footring. A large number of deep bowls have a flaring rim and almost vertical walls, which give the impression that they are cups. A small number of bowls are potted in almost conical shapes.

The second largest group of Changsha ceramics found in the Belitung wreck (1,536 pieces) comprises a variety of ewers with spouts, handles, and, at times, lugs. This discovery reaffirms what Chinese archaeologists found during the excavations carried out in 1978 and 1983, which proved the ewer to be one of the predominant products of the Changsha kilns during the late Tang.⁸ Changsha kilns produced not only large quantities of ewers but also a variety of forms. Based on the 1,980 pieces of ewers unearthed in the 1983 excavation, Chinese archaeologists distinguished eight categories with twenty-one subpatterns.⁹ The following five types are the most noticeable: those with low necks, small mouths, almost cylindrical bodies, and larger in size; those with tall necks and ovoid bodies, mostly lobed with vertical flutings; those with concave necks, sloping shoulders, and ovoid bodies; those with small mouths and depressed, bulbous bodies; and those with dished mouths. Except for the third category, all of these types of ewers were found in the Belitung wreck, with the majority of ewers similar to the first type. In addition, a few rare ewers were also collected from the cargo, including a specimen with a slender and elongated proportion.

Jars, or *guan*, belong to a small category among the ceramics found on the Belitung wreck. Although limited in number, they are among the most striking Changsha ceramics found so far. They are normally potted with straight-sided necks. They can be globular, ovoid, or barrel-shaped, and sometimes lobed. All have between two and four lugs placed vertically or horizontally on their shoulders, and ranging from simple looped ears to trapezoidal and molded studs. The foot is slightly everted, enclosing the flat base. Molded medallions are applied on the sharply angled shoulders of the jars with low necks, almost cylindrical lobed bodies, and trapezoid lugs.



ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT

Fig. 101 About seventy different product forms were produced at the Changsha kilns, including the examples presented here: slop jar (cat. 239), covered box (cat. 204), four-lobed bowl (cat. 205), lobed jar with lugs (cat. 199), water pot (cat. 202), miniature vase (cat. 201).

Fig. 102 Like many of the Changsha wares on the Belitung shipwreck, this three-legged incense burner had a utilitarian purpose. Cat. 208.



Changsha potters manufactured not only utensil wares for daily use, such as covered boxes, but also cultural implements for scholars' desks, such as *shuizhu*, or water droppers used for grinding ink; *shuiyu*, or water pots; and paperweights. Although some *shuizhus* resemble the dished-mouth ewers, they in general are much smaller. As demonstrated by the works from the Belitung wreck, it was among the *shuizhus* that the most exquisite and imaginative designs in Changsha ceramics were found.

In addition, Changsha kilns also produced a delightful array of entertaining pieces, such as toys in the forms of dogs, pigs, human figures, lions and lion riders, horsemen, bulls' heads, birds, and so forth. Only two such pieces were found on the shipwreck (see cat. 211).

WORKMANSHIP

Like all other southern ceramics, Changsha ceramics from the Belitung wreck were made of siliceous stoneware and were rich in fine quartz. Their bodies were slightly coarse; gray, grayish-white, or slightly reddish-white; and contained sand particles. To reduce the need for excessive glazing—as well as to brighten the color—white or off-white slip was applied to the body of a vessel before any decoration and glaze was applied, thereby making the glaze more adhesive. This process was used with almost all shapes and types of ceramics with various glazes and colored underglaze decorations.

The Changsha ceramics were wood-fired in saggars in the southern style of *longyao*, or “dragon kilns,” which were built on hill slopes, at a temperature range of 1,150–1,200 degrees Celsius in a reducing atmosphere.¹⁰ This was lower than the firing temperature for contemporary Yue ware (1,240 degrees C) from Zhejiang, as well as Yaozhou ware (1,230 degrees C) and Ding ware (1,300 degrees C) from northern China.

Examinations of ceramics found in the Changsha vicinity allow us to distinguish between three types of glaze techniques in Changsha ware. In the first method, colored underglaze decoration, the biscuit of the ceramic was slipped before the application of the glaze. A colorful decorative element then was added using copper green and manganese iron purple-brown stoneware glazes. Finally, a transparent green-tinged glaze was applied to the paste. According to archaeological surveys, two-thirds of Changsha products belong to this category.

In the second method, in-glaze or overglaze decoration, a thick milky glaze was applied to the plain body before the addition of a colored glaze decoration and then a transparent outer glaze. The color decoration dissolved into the background glaze and the outer glaze during the firing, resulting in colorful effects in the furnace transmutation. In the third method, colored glaze decoration (primarily in a brownish glaze) on a plain slip-covered surface, no outer glaze was applied.¹¹

Changsha potters developed a number of important technical processes in the ninth century, including the use of iron-manganese rocks as high-temperature glaze colorants, underglaze decoration in oxide-rich pigments and glazes, the use of copper oxides as a green and blue-green coloring agent in high-fired glazes, and the apparent discovery and first use in China of copper-red effects.¹² There were ample examples from the Belitung wreck showing underglaze red and red and green occurring together. The fact that decoration on some bowls was alternately green and red indicates that the red color was intentional rather than accidental.

Decoration

BOWLS

Most of the bowls are decorated on the interior with copper-green and iron-brown painting under a transparent glaze with a greenish tinge. Light or dark brown underglaze patches are further created on the rims constituting a square frame decorating the interior, a major

characteristic of the décor of the Changsha bowl. Sometimes, particularly on the bowls with four-lobed sides, dots are used instead of patches. The underglaze decorations comprise a wide range of freely painted designs, including vapor or cloud scrolling, foliage and flowers, animistic ornaments, landscapes, Buddhist motifs, poems and phrases, and foreign figures.

Vapor or Cloud Scrolling

The motif of vapor or cloud scrolling is ubiquitous in the decoration of Changsha bowls and suffused with poetic overtones. There are two basic designs: a lobed or mushroomlike head, and a spiral of different forms with a curving tail. Using these two principal designs, Changsha craftsmen created numerous witty variations. The following are the most noticeable: a combination of the two principal patterns, i.e., a lobed head atop a spiral, with the design further embellished in many cases by abstract strokes and forms (fig. 49, last row, left); variations of this design, with the change of forms determined by the addition of the two principal elements; a pair of lobed heads rendered symmetrically, almost mirroring each other; a tripartite form with a spiral compressed between a pair of lobed heads or with two spirals squeezed between a lobed head and an abstract form; and several lobed heads superimposed one upon another, forming a design resembling a fungus.

Whatever the variations, all are organic forms charged with animistic energy, reminiscent of the pervasive *yunqi*, meaning vapor or cloud scrolling, a motif seen on such pieces as the lacquer vessels of the late Warring States Period and the early Han dynasty (fourth–first century BCE). This represents one of the most distinctive characteristics of early art from the Chu state.

Several key characteristics of this motif are observable: an emphasis on spontaneity, extreme formal simplicity, a concern for the expressive potential of paint and a sense of immediacy in execution, and an interest in the harmony and integration of one element with another. In executing these pictures, one can immediately visualize the rapid arm and brush movements of the artisans. Speed of execution certainly relies on individual artisans' skill and personality, but in this case the fluency was also inspired by the motifs and probably was influenced by contemporary calligraphy, especially the wild cursive script.

A combination of circumstances helped lead the decoration of Changsha ware toward the abstract. Kilns in Changsha were thriving during the late Tang dynasty, mainly in response to the demands of foreign markets, encouraging potters to free themselves from conventional, tradition-bound methods of representation. Calligraphy was also flourishing as never before. The introduction of *kuangcao*, or “wild cursive” script, was the most exciting calligraphic development of these times. The irregular lines and the fluid relationships between the words allowed the calligrapher considerable compositional freedom.

Among the masters who had an impact on later calligraphers, Huaisu (737–after 798), known as the Wild Monk, was one of the most famous. His brushwork, composed under the influence of wine, is spontaneous, constituting a break from former methods. The fact that Changsha was home to Huaisu suggests that his style would be popular in the region. Indeed, calligraphy on the rediscovered Changsha bowls share the same style and spirit as Huaisu's wild cursive script.

The pervasiveness and resonance of the vapor and cloud motif arise not only from its natural quality but also from its cultural associations. From at least the third century BCE, the Changsha region was a destination for political exiles—losers in factional struggles or those guilty of *lèse-majesté*—sent from the court as a punishment.¹³ During the Tang, poets often spoke of the region as a place of melancholy, where the pervasive vapor appeared dense and poisonous; it became a metaphor for the miserable future of displaced men and spoke of the feelings of loss and rejection.

Foliage

On Changsha bowls, botanical motifs, particularly foliage and floral designs, take up by far the largest part of the decorative repertoire. In some examples the craftsmen retained their commitment to the form of the subject matter, while in others they took the liberty of working to a greater level of abstraction. The distillation of natural forms into abstract expression is particularly reflected in the specific foliage motif.

Although many variations appear, ranging from simple patterns to more complex designs, the repertoire of compositional elements is not large. The basic motif is a cluster of foliage resembling radiating beams (fig. 103). These could well be stylized illustrations of shrubs or trees. In some cases, however, the tips of the middle plants curl to form a hooklike feature resembling the crosier of a young fern. The motif therefore looked more like the foliage of herbaceous plants.

A vaporlike design is sometimes depicted as if hovering on top of this cluster of foliage, while several freely scribbled strokes appear underneath the principal motif, suggesting the earth. These vapor designs, together with spirals on the sides, provide the foliage motif with a vivid, vibrant setting.

Variations include a design showing two clusters of foliage separated in the middle by a spiral. In some examples, the vapor motif set on top of the foliage is painted so that the whole design looks like a sequence of flowering shrubs. Each foliage pattern is unique. Complex groupings consisting of three or more clusters of foliage developed out of the original simple design. Irrespective of variations in composition, a lively rhythmic design conformed to the rules of proportion, harmony, and balance. The artisans reconciled two conflicting elements of design—chaotic force and the desire for order—within a single unity of field.

There is no doubt that the Changsha craftsmen derived their designs from actual plants. They drew on various types of shrubs and trees in the decoration, as is evident in the extant examples from the Belitung wreck (fig. 100). However, most of the designs are so stylized that they have been converted into fictitious foliage. The motifs are essentially organic but are executed with free brushwork, as if the artist were unconcerned with imitating nature. In extreme examples, the Changsha craftsmen abstracted natural motifs to the point of unrecognizability.

Again, the influence of contemporary calligraphy is apparent in these designs. The conflict between wild, spontaneous expression and the need to impose an overall sense of order was neutralized by principles of calligraphic expression. The foliage was painted with the quick decisive touches of a well-soaked brush, leading to varied tones of color. The fluidity of brushwork reached a high standard rivaled only by the cursive style of the contemporary calligraphers.

It is generally recognized that, whether a work is ornamental or representational, its essential value lies in its expressive quality. Despite being highly stylized, the rendering of the foliage motifs on Changsha bowls is vivid and expressive. Such depictions bear little resemblance to the more conventional rendering of botanical motifs in other Tang decorative art. The originality here is in striking contrast to the uniformity of pattern in contemporary decorative art during the Tang period (figs. 68–70).



ABOVE

Fig. 103 The basic motif on bowls with foliage decoration is a cluster of stylized shrubs or trees.

AT RIGHT

Fig. 104 Bowl with mountain range and cloud design.

Fig. 105 Bowl with a *makara*, a hybrid sea-monster from Indian myth. Cat. 90.



Floral Patterns

On Changsha bowls, a few designs are naturalistic depictions of real flowers, but the majority of the floral patterns are highly stylized, recalling decorative patterns that prevailed for thousands of years in China (fig. 100). The most common floral design is a discoidal form with four, five, six, or more petals arranged as if looking down on a flower in full bloom (see fig. 48, second row, far left). The pointed petals appear in various designs, ranging from simple outlines to multiple-stroked depictions suggesting veins, numerous petals, or purely decorative configurations. Stamens are generally depicted in each pattern around a central dot, as if radiating beams. Variations include a cloudlike form or a pair of cloudlike designs arranged symmetrically (see fig. 48, third row, far left). Sometimes the stamen is a windmill-like form with the tips resembling the crosier of a young fern. In such examples, the whole design appears to be winding continuously around a fixed point.

The craftsmen manufacturing the Changsha bowls seemed to start with the simple pattern of four petals, but soon they fancifully added more petals and further embellished the whole design with all sorts of adornments. The areas between petals were supplemented with spirals, tendrils, or small petals; this is particularly seen on the large bowls, which provide a broader area for decorations. Starting with the simple rosette, more complicated designs were derived from the grouping of more petals. In the most elaborate example, a four-petal rosette (or a rosette with only a stamen) was embellished with spirals, clouds, petals, and other abstract elements, forming a design that looks like a rosette placed within a square. (See fig. 48, top row, center.)

Although exhibiting all sorts of variations, these floral patterns in general consist of a basic form that is repeated, emphasizing symmetry and rhythm. The different parts are always arranged in harmony within the limitations of the space defined by the four brownish patches on a bowl's rim. A characteristic geometric quality dominates these compositions. This stylized

pattern is decorative rather than expressive. It appears as another facet of metropolitan fashion more than any other motif on Changsha bowls.

There is, however, another floral pattern in the repertoire of decoration on Changsha bowls, which obviously derived from the stylized floral form but became highly abstract. Although the movement of lines and arrangement of elements are still reminiscent of the treatment originally accorded to the organic motif, they have lost every visible connection with vegetal form. Here, abstract and geometric characteristics play the major part.

This pattern of rosettes also appears in a wide variety of forms. One common type shows spirals in a circle surrounding the normal radiating beamlike stamen (see p. 46 and p. 57, top row, right). Sometimes the stamens are represented by spirals or the cloud design. In one other pattern, the spirals around a stamen are replaced by foliage or cloudlike forms, or by an alternative arrangement of all three elements. In a unique example, the rosette seen in downward perspective is turned into what appears to be a coiled snakelike form.

The abstract floral pattern seems to recall a composite form of plant, cloud, and geometric elements. The imagination can play free rein with highly abstract forms: They could be geometric designs, or because they are composed in the proportions of a rosette with repeated units around a fixed point, they could be floral patterns. The spiral or other units arranged around the stamen in this way serve as petals.

Although the stylized floral rosette was one of the most popular patterns in Tang decorative art—a form that had its origin at least in the Warring States Period (475–221 BCE)—the abstracted floral rosettes are unique. They appear to have been first introduced by the artisans of the Changsha bowls.

Many of the symbolic meanings of floral motifs on Changsha bowls are lost in the stylized or abstracted patterns. There are, however, some motifs that do retain allusions. The lotus is one important motif that carries explicit symbolism, as does the *lingzhi*, or fungus. The lotus motif was redolent with religious implications and was known as the sacred flower of Buddhism. The fungus motif combined the Daoist ideas of prophecy and immortality.¹⁴

Landscape

Before the Tang dynasty, man was the main subject matter for art, and landscape constituted no more than an incidental background. In the Tang, artists began to depict landscape for its own sake. Landscape painting also attained a new level of technical sophistication.¹⁵ The flourishing of landscape painting at this time was reflected in the decoration of Changsha bowls.

Like the rendering of motifs in other categories, the styles of landscape compositions on Changsha bowls vary. Some are comparatively faithful to nature and preserve elements of the archaic. The mountains sometimes are painted as separate clods of earth set up straight beside one another and bring to mind the schematized versions of landscape that can be traced to the fourth century. Other compositions are free configurations of natural forms; the rest are purely fanciful creations, which constitute by far the largest part of the landscape repertoire.

Changsha artisans were not the first to be inspired by the mountain motif, but they seem to have been more interested in abstract mountains than their predecessors (fig. 104). In these stylized landscape compositions, the mountain contours were brushed in quick, decisive touches. The artisans worked only in outline: no texture strokes, graded ink washes, or recessions into depth were depicted. The principal pattern was a mountain range rising and falling in the distance, featuring a central towering peak flanked by smaller ones (see fig. 48, last row, right). Vapor or clouds gathered around the mountain peaks, half camouflaged below by mists in the form of stylized scrolls (see fig. 48, last row, center).

Such imagery not only depicts natural phenomena but also is an echo of earlier traditions: Chinese painters have always looked at mountains as the visible embodiment of natural forces. One of the most important powers attributed to the great mountains in China was their ability

to produce mysterious clouds, in the way mist would arise above the marshes and lakes. From a very early time, the people of Chu were inclined toward a particular pattern of mountain imagery that combined the *yunqi*, or clouds—as described in *Chuci* (Songs of the South), an anthology of Chu poems from the Warring States Period, and seen in contemporary and Han dynasty Chu art. The *yunqi* element, with its rhythmic movement, often served as a mountain setting for animals in full motion. The rhythmic *yunqi* motif was thought to interact with the movements of the animals, creating a powerful image that emitted mysterious energy.

Once again, although this form of landscape imagery had a naturalistic inspiration, in many examples the nature motifs were abstracted in such a way that suggestion and evocation replaced direct description and explicit analogy; some Chinese scholars have hence mistakenly interpreted them as Arabic inscriptions.¹⁶ At first glance, there seems to be no link between a realistic rendering and the abstract depictions of the mountains. Nevertheless, when comparing the range of compositions and assessing them in order of stylistic evolution, their development from the naturalistic to the abstract becomes apparent.

Through these paintings, the Changsha craftsmen created personal idiosyncratic styles. They explored new forms of natural motifs that were witty in conception and followed the wild, spontaneous nature of calligraphy.

Animistic Ornaments

A rare group of Changsha bowls from the Belitung wreck is of particular significance because it features a certain sea monster known as *makara*, a motif introduced from India (figs. 14, 105). In Indian myth, the *makara* is the vehicle of Varuṇa, the deity of the oceans. In Chinese Buddhist texts dating from the fifth–ninth century, the *makara* often was referred to as a fierce creature that destroyed ships, harmed voyagers, and engulfed everything in its path.¹⁷ One of the earliest extant examples of the *makara* in decorative art dates to the late fifth century. It appears on an oblong silver polylobed dish excavated in 1970 in a hoard from the Northern Wei ruins, near Datong in Shanxi province.¹⁸

During the Tang dynasty, the *makara* image spread with Buddhist doctrines and became a popular decorative motif.¹⁹ In Changsha bowls embellished with the motif, a flaming *cintamani* jewel sometimes is depicted as if the monster is chasing after it. This jewel, symbolizing Buddha and his doctrine, was one of the most ubiquitous motifs in Chinese Buddhist art.²⁰

The popularity of Buddhist belief in the region is attested by the frequent use of certain decorative motifs on Changsha ceramics that are associated with Buddhism.²¹ One unique bowl is decorated on the inside with the painting of a stupa (or part of a stupa), flanked by a pair of flags that appear to feature two *bingzi* characters likely representing the tenth year of the Dazhong reign, equivalent to 856.²² Two swastika symbols appear on the base of the pagoda. The same symbol, brushed with black ink by potters, is found also on the bases of many Changsha bowls along with inscriptions by the potters.

Among the animistic motifs on the Changsha bowls, the bird occupies a predominant position. Although shown in a variety of postures, the majority of birds on bowls from the Belitung wreck are seen flying. In some examples, the bodies of the birds are shown as bowl-like shapes, as if changing direction midflight. One unique example shows an airborne bird holding a spray of tree leaves in its mouth. Although some bowls feature only bird motifs, patterns of clouds, spirals, and foliage were added in many examples as background, suggesting that the birds were in midair. One of the most charming is a depiction of a bird in profile standing on one foot, while the other is raised and stretched forward. (See cat. 191, p. 246.)

The species of these birds remains unclear. Their forms are so stylized that an active imagination could connect them with a number of different species. To further exacerbate the problem, the image of the bird carries a great many cultural and emotional connotations, which are not limited to Buddhist and Daoist associations. Nevertheless, on two bowls, a pair of birds—



*How far is the southern sky in the eyes of a lone wild swan?
The chilly wind strikes terror into one's heart.
I miss my beloved who is traveling afar, beyond the Great River,
and my heart flies to the frontier morning and night.*

Fig. 106 This poem, written on one of the Changsha bowls recovered from the Belitung wreck, reflects the high status of poetry during the Tang period, when scholars celebrated the "Three Perfections" (*sanjue*) of poetry, calligraphy, and painting. Cat. 182.

pictured with a spray of flowers between them—probably represents the *xiangsi'niao*, or the red-billed *leiothrix*. This lovely bird always flies in pairs and takes only one mate, symbolizing marital happiness or fidelity. The same motif frequently occurs on other Changsha ceramics, such as ceramic pillows, candle stands,²³ and, more often, applied molded decoration on the sides of spouted ewers.

Another bird depicted on a bowl appears to be a peacock. Unlike other depictions that are inspired by pure fantasy, this image is a vivid combination of realism and imagination; the small bag with long tassels held in the bird's beak further enforces the lively quality of the picture. Although not native to China, the peacock was an emblem of beauty and dignity in the country long before the Tang era. Folklore had it that in 562 the pretty daughter of General Dou Yi painted a peacock on a screen. She offered to marry the man who was able to kill the bird with two shots of an arrow. Li Yuan, later the first emperor of the Tang dynasty (reigned 618–907), shot out both of the bird's eyes.²⁴ The phrase “selection by shooting the peacock screen” became synonymous with choosing a husband.

Poetry

The Tang dynasty marked a golden age of Chinese poetry. During this time, poetry became more than a literary form, loved not only for its intrinsic enchantment but also because it was a path to wealth and success. The established civil service examination system made the ability to compose verse an absolute requirement for those seeking a high office. The flourishing of poetry inspired Changsha craftsmen to turn it into a decorative medium. The excavation carried out in the vicinity of Changsha in 1983 yielded some 248 pieces of either intact or fragmentary Changsha ceramic works that bore inscriptions, 193 of which were inscribed with poems.²⁵

It is very rare to find works bearing such inscriptions in the major port cities of the Tang era. In Yangzhou, on the east coast, for instance, only 0.5 percent of unearthed Changsha ceramics had inscribed poems. Furthermore, no inscribed Changsha ceramics have been found in western and Central Asia.²⁶ Although such wares were produced mainly for the domestic market, examples with inscribed poems found in the Belitung wreck suggest that such works also attracted exporters of the time. In addition, Chinese archaeologists have reported that almost all the poems were found on ewers, except for two on pillows and two others on saucer dishes.²⁷ It is therefore significant that a number of Changsha bowls from the Belitung wreck bear poems.

The sorrow of parting is expressed in one poem written on an intact bowl from the ship (fig. 106), that reads: “How far is the southern sky in the eyes of a lone wild swan? / The chilly wind strikes terror into one's heart. / I miss my beloved who is traveling afar, beyond the Great River, / and my heart flies to the frontier morning and night.” This poem is rather significant because it has never been seen before, although some eighty distinct poems have been found to date.

Many Tang poets also excelled in calligraphy and painting. These three arts later on became known as the *sanjue*, or the “Three Perfections.” On some of the Changsha bowls, the poems are beautifully rendered in calligraphy, heralding the later development of the Three Perfections.

EWERS

Although during the late Tang period Yue and Ou kilns in the modern Zhejiang province also manufactured spouted ewers, the addition of molded appliqué on the vessels' bodies (fig. 49) was an idea first created at the Changsha kilns. A striking new technique also involved dark brown patches applied upon the greenish-yellow glaze background to embellish the molded reliefs. The medallion first was pressed out from the mold using a sheet of clay and then applied to the designated areas on a vessel before it dried. After that the vessel was glazed and fired.

The technique of adding molded appliqué to ceramics first appeared in the Han dynasty, was popular during the Jin (265–420), and reached its apogee during the Tang dynasty,

as demonstrated by the lead-glazed northern *sancai* ware and by Changsha ceramics. The archaeological excavations carried out in the vicinity demonstrate that the Changsha ceramics with applied-relief decoration first appeared in tombs during the mid-Tang period (756–840) and thereafter.²⁸

The numerous motifs employed by Changsha potters in designing molded medallions can be classified into three primary groups: foliage, animals, and human figures. The foliage motifs take up by far the largest part of the decorative repertoire. They often are composed together with birds, heraldic-looking emblems, and architectural frameworks to form charming images. They include the following groups:

1. A pair of knots in the form of a bow (“bowknots”) arranged in the shape of a cross atop a central leaf encircled by two hanging tassels. These motifs are surrounded by a cluster of leaves on the sides and below, and accompanied by a pair of face-to-face birds arranged symmetrically on the left and right edges (fig. 49, second from right). In some cases the center leaf is replaced by a heraldic-looking emblem. Variations of the design show that a pineapple-like motif replaced the “bowknots” on the top, or that a cluster of grape- or pineapple-like fruits replaced tassel pendants encircling the central leaf.

Complex groupings consisting of more clusters of leaves developed out of the simpler design. Although exhibiting all sorts of variations, these designs in general consist of a basic form that is repeated, emphasizing symmetry and rhythm. The archaeological finds from the kiln sites at Changsha prove that this type of medallion was the most frequently represented in Changsha ceramics; thirty-three of fifty-three examples unearthed in 1983 belong to this pattern.²⁹ Ewers from the Belitung wreck also support this assertion.

2. A single cluster of grapelike fruits with leaves arranged symmetrically on two sides (fig. 49, far right). Chinese archaeologists assumed that the fruits were from the date palm. In some cases, a single bird is added to one side, breaking the balance.
3. A large date palm or pineapple tree with large, upturned leaves enclosed by a railing fence. The scene is animated by a pair of birds perching face to face on both sides of the tree just above the fence (fig. 49, center).
4. The front view of what appears to be the main gate to the compound of a temple or another grand building. A flight of flower-embellished stairs leads the viewer’s eyes to the closing doors that are furnished with rows of small circular bulges. Towering trees emerge behind the schematic roof.

Obviously, the predominance of the date palm or other tropical plants is an important feature of Changsha ceramic decoration, which reflects the local response to the foreign market.

The most frequently represented animistic motif in molded appliqué shows a lion in profile, usually facing left, seated on a fringed mat. It wears a collar with a bell-like pendant, and has a heavy mane and two medallionlike ornaments on its body. Its large tail swells upward like a sail in the wind. In some examples, the seated lion contains the character *he*, which may stand for the name of the kilns’ owner (fig. 49, second from left). The same character also was found on applied medallions on ewers unearthed in 1978 at Changsha kiln sites.³⁰ Chinese archaeologists have reported one other character, *zhang*, found in medallions with lion, fish, or foliage designs.³¹

Representations of human figures seen on molded medallions on ceramics from the Belitung wreck are limited to the following two formulas: a man wearing an elaborate crown and a robe with long sleeves, dancing on an exquisitely decorated mat in either a round or square shape; or a warrior clad in full armor and a helmet with a shield in his left hand and a curved blade in his right hand, raised above his head (fig. 49, far left). His posture, running forward while looking back, vividly represents a soldier straining every muscle to keep his enemies at bay.

Although depictions of dancing scenes and warrior figures striking dynamic poses are commonly seen during the Tang—as Central Asian music and dance were extremely popular, and Buddhist elements played an important role in daily life—the figurative designs of the

dancers and warriors here seem to have more to do with Chinese indigenous culture than with exotic inspirations. They more likely represent entertainers seen in local theaters, which under imperial encouragement became popular during the Tang.

JARS

In Changsha kilns, molded appliqués were also applied on vessels of other forms. They are seen, for instance, on bulky jars with short vertical necks and a pair of trapezoidal lugs.³² The designs are basically the simplified version of those seen on ewers. Often the small medallion shows a pineapple-like motif accompanied by a pair of birds face to face among palm leaves. Other designs include a pair of fish with heads joined together, forming a medallion. On this type of jar, frequently the trapezoidal lugs were incorporated into the medallions. The most common design shows a pendant hanging down from the perforation of a trapezoidal lug in the form of a diamond or a leaf, which is further embellished in relief with motifs such as fruit, foliage, and other geometric patterns.

Conclusion

Without a doubt, as our understanding of the manufacture, technology, and aesthetics of Changsha ceramics of the Tang dynasty grows, the evidence of the ceramic wares from the Belitung wreck will come to be seen as invaluable. Above all, the use of copper-green and manganese-iron purple-brown stoneware glazes was one of the most important techniques developed by Changsha potters. Apart from the colorful glazes, the Tang potteries from the north are usually not richly decorated. It was Changsha potters who first introduced underglaze painting, launching perhaps the most creative ornamental device in Chinese ceramics.

As demonstrated by bowls from the Belitung wreck, the Changsha ware marked a significant break with the long tradition of monochrome glazes. Freely arranging compositions within the available range of limited elements, the Changsha craftsmen created a fantastic visual world of beauty. These compositions are suffused with poetic overtones or imbued with social and political allusions, and only an understanding of the social, political, and religious background can illuminate their artistic statement.

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Twelve centuries ago, a merchant ship—an Arab dhow—foundered on a reef just off the coast of Belitung, a small island in the Java Sea. The cargo was a remarkable assemblage of lead ingots, bronze mirrors, spice-filled jars, intricately worked vessels of silver and gold, and more than 60,000 glazed bowls, ewers, and other ceramics. The ship remained buried at sea for more than a millennium, its contents protected from erosion by their packing and the conditions of the silty sea floor. *Shipwrecked: Tang Treasures and Monsoon Winds* explores the story of both the sailors and the ship's precious cargo through more than 400 gorgeous photographs and essays by international experts in Arab ship-building methods, pan-Asian maritime trade, ceramics, precious metalwork, and more.

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