

LESSON PLAN

Exploring Art Made for the Afterlife



Subjects: Visual Arts, Social Studies

Grade Level: Elementary School, Middle School/Junior High

Duration: Two 50-minute sessions

Dynasty: Tang (618–907)

Themes: Traditions and Belief Systems; Daily Life and Folkways; Power and Privilege; Cultural Interactions

Object Type: Ceramic, Sculpture

Contributed by: Pearl Lau, New York City Department of Education

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

15 9/16 x 4 5/8 x 13 3/8 in ; 16 15/16 x 5 13/16 x 14 13/16 in

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

Objective

Students will learn that objects found in tombs provide information about Chinese civilization, including beliefs about the afterlife, aspects of daily life, social hierarchies, and the importance of horses for trade. Students will be able to explain how tombs show how people lived, traveled, and ate, and what they wore in the past. Finally, they will create their own tomb figure inspired by their favorite mode of transportation.

Essential Questions

- What can objects placed in a tomb tell us about a person's daily life and social status?
- What beliefs about the afterlife were prominent in Tang dynasty China?
- What role did horses play in Tang dynasty China and in trade along the Silk Road?

Background Information

For thousands of years, foreign horses have been a subject of appreciation in China. During the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), trade and territorial expansion brought China into direct contact with many Central Asian states, such as Sogdiana, which were famous for fine breeds of horses. Chinese horses were not as strong and large as those from Central Asia, and Chinese rulers were very invested in importing horses from abroad. By the Tang dynasty (618–907), the demand for foreign horses greatly increased. The Tang Empire had to maintain large hordes of horses in order to secure its borders. The fine breeds of horses were bought from the Fergana Valley and other western regions in exchange for silk and other commodities. In addition to military use, the court and aristocracy also used horses for recreation, such as hunting and the popular game of polo. The fifth Tang emperor, Xuanzong (reigned 713–756), was especially famous for his passion for horses. It is said that the number of horses in the imperial stable reached forty thousand, including one hundred dancing horses.

The fascination with foreign horses in China is illustrated by tomb figurines dated to the Tang dynasty. The ancient Chinese believed in the existence of an afterlife. They made tomb figurines as replacements for real objects so the deceased would enjoy their company in the afterlife. Many excavated tombs of the Tang period contain figures of humans on horses such as the pair of horse-riding tomb figures, one male and one female, from the Freer Gallery. The male rider wears a heart-shaped hat, wide-sleeved green coat, and black boots. His arms are raised as if holding the rein. The female rider, with a high topknot, sits up straight on her horse. She wears a colorful short-sleeved jacket and a pair of green trousers, which allow her to sit astride the horse.

The pair is covered by glaze known as *sancai*, or “three-color glaze.” On places where it’s unglazed, such as the riders’ faces and hair, details are painted directly onto the baked clay. The basic colors of the *sancai* glaze—yellow, green, and creamy white—are achieved by mixing copper and iron to a colorless lead glaze. Copper produces green and iron results in a brownish yellow. With the addition of a clear glaze, they provide the three basic colors. Tang *sancai* wares like this pair of figures are suspected to be reserved for burial use and are seldom, if ever, used in daily life.

Vocabulary

Fergana Valley: a valley in Central Asia that spreads across parts of present-day Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

glaze: a thin, glass-like coating made of powdered rocks, minerals, ashes, and water. Applied correctly, it makes a clay body impervious after firing. The colors of glaze are determined by the mineral oxides used and various aspects of the firing conditions.

sancai: literally, “three colors”; a dripping effect of three colors of glazes favored in the Tang dynasty. Typically, it refers to yellow, green, and creamy white glaze.

Silk Road: an ancient network of land and sea trade routes established during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) that existed until the middle of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). These trade routes stretched from China across Asia to the Near East, the Mediterranean, and East Africa.

Sogdiana: an ancient Iranian civilization that existed between the sixth century BCE and eleventh century CE. Its territory included present-day Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

Procedure

1. After discussing the Tang tomb figures and the importance of horses on the Silk Road, begin an art project inspired by this object.
2. Ask students to imagine how they would get around in the afterlife if they were going to be immortalized as a tomb figure. What mode of transport is easy and accessible for them?
3. Have students discuss amongst themselves their favorite way of traveling or how they would like to get around. Ask them to be creative and think of both ordinary and unusual ways of traveling. Rocket? Parachute? Horse? Bicycle? Taxi? Scooter? Skateboard? Have each student make a sketch of themselves and their mode of transportation, and ask them to explain why they selected this particular mode.
4. Have students translate their idea into a three-dimensional sculpture. You can use any kind of clay—modeling clay, which doesn't harden, or air-dry clay if you don't have a kiln. The air-dry clay can be painted with watercolors to achieve the *sancai* effect, or you can leave it unpainted. If you have access to a kiln, you can experiment with glazes to create a *sancai*-like effect using three colors of glaze: green, orange, and brown.
5. After all the projects are complete, you can create a class display inspired by Tang dynasty tomb figures. Have students consider where and how you will display the figures together to create a dramatic effect like in a tomb. Find a special place in or around your school to display the group of sculptures.

Discussion Questions

Describe

- Look closely at this artwork. What do you see? What makes you say that? What more can you find?
- What adjectives would you use to describe the woman? The man? Their horses?
- How do these horses look to you? Big and strong or small and weak? What makes you say that?

Analyze

- What is this woman doing on the horse? The man?
- If you've seen people on horses, think about how a person sits when the horse is galloping or running. Compare the side views with the frontal views of the figures. How has the artist put realism into the piece?
- What do you think the figures are made of, and how were they made? How can you tell?

Interpret

- Who do you think the people represent? By looking at each person's clothing, can you tell if it is a man or woman? Someone rich or poor?
- Are you surprised that women wore trousers to sit on the saddle of the horse? If women ride horses just like men, what does that say about the role of women in society during the Tang dynasty?
- Do you think societies that had horses at that time had an advantage in warfare? Why or why not?

Inquire

- Do some research about horses and riding. How many different kinds of horses are there? What are horses most often used for?
- When did women in Europe stop riding side-saddle? Why did this happen?

Extensions

Social Studies

Horses on the Silk Road:

- Create a map of Asia marking the areas that were famous for fine breeds of horses.
- Imagine you are a Chinese merchant who would like to barter for a horse or another valuable item. Play a Silk Road barter game with your class such as this one: https://www.fieldmuseum.org/sites/default/files/silk_road_activity.pdf

Languages of the Silk Road:

- What kind of communication could you use when you encounter someone who doesn't speak the same language as you? For example, Chinese merchants on the Silk Road might have encountered Turkish speakers who didn't speak Chinese. Brainstorm a list of different kinds of nonverbal communications.
- Make a list of the languages spoken by people on the Silk Road during the Tang dynasty. Research these languages and learn how to write and say the words "hello" and "horse" in five languages.

Resources

Silk Road Activity (Field Museum). https://www.fieldmuseum.org/sites/default/files/silk_road_activity.pdf

The Sogdians: Influencers on the Silk Roads. <https://sogdians.si.edu/>

Imperial China: The Art of the Horse in Chinese History. Lexington, KY: Kentucky Horse Park, 2000.

View these objects 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>



