

LESSON PLAN

Cultural Exchange in the Tang Dynasty: The Journey of a Tomb Figure



Subjects: AP World History: Modern

Grade Level: High School

Duration: 90 minutes

Dynasty: Tang (618–907)

Object Type: Ceramic, Sculpture

Themes: Cultural Interactions; Daily Life and Folkways;
Technology and Production

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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

Objective

Students will be able to identify and analyze the Tomb Figure of a Groom and relate this work to the historical context of cultural exchange during the Tang dynasty.

Essential Questions

- How do historians use tomb figures as a source for Chinese history?
- What aspects of history are represented through tomb objects?
- What does this tomb figure reveal about China's contact with foreign cultures?

Background Information

This is a tomb figure of a horse groom dated to 700–750, the middle of the Tang dynasty (618–907). He is wearing a long green coat with wide lapels, brownish-yellow boots, and his right arm is lifted as if holding a horse bridle. According to the notes of its previous owner, famous art dealer C. T. Loo (1880–1957), the figure may represent an Ethiopian horse handler. The Tang dynasty witnessed a great flourishing of trade and an interest in goods from Western Asia and East Africa. While the notes from C. T. Loo suggest that the piece was excavated in Xi'an, former capital of the Tang dynasty's empire, its origin is unknown. The figure was determined to have been made during the Tang dynasty based on Thermoluminescence dating that took place in 1971.

Vocabulary

Indian Ocean trade network: a network of sea routes that connected Southeast Asia, India, Arabia, and East Africa.

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 Middle East, the Mediterranean, and East Africa.

Thermoluminescence dating: scientific method of determining when a piece of ceramic was made. A small sample is taken from the object and heated in a laboratory. During the heating process, the sample emits a faint blue light. The light is measured to estimate how much time has passed since the object was fired in a kiln.

Trans-Saharan caravan trade network: trade network from the eighth to the late sixteenth century between the Mediterranean region and West Africa.

Procedure

1. Ask students what they already know about Chinese tombs and tomb objects.
2. Draw connections to their prior knowledge of Ancient Egypt's tomb culture, including objects and mummified animals, or prior knowledge about tombs or the afterlife in their own culture.
3. Have students view images of various Tang dynasty-era tomb figures as found on the webpage for this lesson plan. Images will include [Tomb Figure of a Man on Horseback](#) (F1952.12), [Tomb Figure of a Woman on Horseback](#) (F1952.13), [Head of a tomb figure of a Sogdian or Central Asian traveler](#) (RLS1997.48.1499), and [Tomb Figure of a Groom](#) (F1952.14).
4. For each piece students must write one sentence for each category: **Describe, Analyze, Interpret, and Inquire.**
5. Following the set of slides, students will dive deeper into their study of the Tomb Figure of a Groom. Provide them with the following information: His hand gesture suggests that he is holding a horse bridle, and the official notes on the piece suggest he is Ethiopian.
6. Next, the students will locate Ethiopia and China on a map and identify possible trade routes between the two. They will likely identify the Silk Road and the Indian Ocean trade network. They will answer the geographic question: How did this groom arrive in China?
7. Students will write one paragraph as an exit ticket, responding to the historical question: Where did foreign people fit into Chinese society in the eighth century?

Discussion Questions

Describe

- What kind of clothing is this figure wearing?
- How is he holding his arms/hands?

Analyze

- What activities would a person representing this figure engage in? What might his occupation be?
- What do you think would have been placed in his hands?

Interpret

- Who do you think this object belonged to?
- What significance does this figure have in a Chinese tomb?

Inquire

- What does this object suggest about the interaction between people from Afro-Eurasia during the period of the Tang dynasty?

Extensions

Visual Arts

- Design a figurine for your tomb. Think about its function in your afterlife. How does your figure reflect contemporary values and society?

English Language Arts

- Write a creative short story about the journey of the horse groom from Ethiopia to China.

Social Studies

- Create a map tracing the origins of people represented by tomb figures across the trade networks of the Silk Road, Indian Ocean trade network, and Trans-Saharan caravan trade network.
- Research tomb objects from other historical periods and civilizations, specifically Pharaonic Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Mesoamerica. Compare and contrast the function of tomb objects from the three regions. For research, here are suggested websites and objects:
 - “[Shabty of Queen Henuttawy](#),” Brooklyn Museum.
 - “[Seated Ballplayer](#),” Metropolitan Museum of Art.
 - “[Lyre Fragment, Bull’s Head](#),” Penn Museum.
- How did tomb objects change over time? Which objects were consistent across time and place? What do these objects tell us about the people’s perspectives of life and death in these eras and civilizations?

Science

- Read and analyze the January 1971 laboratory results from the Thermoluminescence dating commissioned by the Freer Gallery of Art that determined when the groom figure was made. How do historians and museums use science to date objects when no written records are available?

Resources

View these objects online:

Tomb Figure of a Man on Horseback (F1952.12) <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1952.12/>

Tomb Figure of a Woman on Horseback (F1952.13) <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1952.13/>

Head of a tomb figure of a Sogdian or Central Asian traveler (RLS1997.48.1499) <https://asia.si.edu/object/RLS1997.48.1449/>

Tomb Figure of a Groom (F1952.14) <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1952.14/>

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

