

# *Camel and Rider*

China; Tang dynasty (A.D. 618–907), first half of the 8th century



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THE  
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## Poster Packet

Department of Museum Education

Division of Student and Teacher Programs

The Elizabeth Stone Robson Teacher Resource Center

### *Camel and Rider*

China; Tang dynasty (A.D. 618–907), first half of the 8th century

Earthenware with three-color (*sancai*) lead glazes

Gift of Mrs. Bertha Palmer Thorne, 1969.788a-b

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One of the most fascinating periods of Chinese history is the **Tang dynasty** (A.D. 618–907), when China embraced influences from many foreign cultures, consolidated its power, and became the cultural center of Asia.

Cosmopolitan cities like **Chang'an** (modern-day Xi'an) and **Luoyang** flourished along the **Silk Road**, a network of land and sea trade routes between China and the Mediterranean. This ceramic sculpture of a camel and rider is an example of a **mingqi** (pronounced *ming-chee*), meaning “spirit object,” a figure or model made for burial in a tomb. During the Tang dynasty rich and powerful members of society were buried with clay objects depicting people, animals, and fantastic creatures.

Trying to restrain his animal, the bearded groom atop this camel wears the belted coat, leggings, and soft felt cap characteristic of Central Asian dress. Originally the groom may have held reins of leather rope, but these have been lost. The camel's mouth is open to bray, and it wears a saddle and saddlebags molded as monstrous masks with wide eyes and protruding fangs. These monster faces may have been designed to frighten evil spirits and thereby protect the deceased in the afterlife.

### *China during the Tang Dynasty*

Through most of the Tang dynasty, the capital cities of Chang'an and Luoyang were characterized by a cosmopolitan atmosphere where men and women of different races and religions lived together in relative freedom. China dramatically expanded its territory during this period, and foreign goods and ideas—materials, technologies, philosophies, and religious beliefs—were brought to the Tang capitals from other areas of Asia as well as the Near East. The streets of the Chinese capitals were often filled with traders and missionaries, and among the nearly two million residents of Chang'an one could hear many different languages being spoken. In the arts, new forms, designs, techniques, and subject matter blossomed. New and different foods, spices, and wines were imported, and exotic songs, dances, games, habits, fashions, and literary styles were adopted.

### *Life along the Silk Road*

Traveling west from the Tang capital at Chang'an, the best-known segment of the Silk Road branched into northern and southern routes in the Central Asian Taklamakan Desert, crossed the Iranian plateau, and ended on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. From China's seaports, the routes continued as far west as Egypt and Turkey and east to Korea and Japan. Both overland and sea routes served as major conduits for the transport of knowledge, information, and material goods between Europe and Asia and stimulated the exchange of artistic, literary, religious, and political traditions.

Silk composed a relatively small portion of the goods traded along the Silk Road. Eastbound caravans brought musicians, horses, gold and other precious metals and stones, woolen rugs, glass, ivory, and coral, while westbound caravans transported paper, fine ceramics, cinnamon bark, and rhubarb as well as bronze weapons. The **oasis** towns that made the overland journey possible became important trading posts, commercial centers where **caravans** would take on fresh merchants, animals, and goods. These cities prospered considerably, extracting large profits on the goods they bought and sold.

Travel along the Silk Road was very difficult and extremely dangerous. Dry deserts with no water for miles and mountain passes with avalanches, heavy snow, and spring flooding made the road perilous at all times of year. Very few traders, if any, or the animals and goods they transported completed the entire route. Instead, goods were passed along through an intricate network of middlemen. To protect themselves from thieves, traders often traveled in large groups and relied on expert Central Asian drivers and grooms to move the caravans across the desert.

Traders often used camels to travel the Silk Road and carry their goods from one place to another because these animals could travel a long distance without water. Sculptors of tomb figures depicted in clay the caravans of double-humped camels from Bactria (modern-day Afghanistan) that carried goods along the Silk Road. **Bactrian** camels can travel up to 30 miles a day, carry hundreds of pounds, and go for more than a week without water. They can endure very hot and very cold temperatures, which allowed them to travel across the forbidding deserts and the high mountain ranges that extend west from China into Central Asia. Camels are known to have a bad temper, and if you look closely at the sculpture you can see a dissatisfied expression on this camel's face as he stretches his long neck to bray.

In Tang funerary art, foreigners are shown as servants, musicians, grooms, and merchants. Persians are often depicted with full beards, and Central Asians are shown with square faces, braided hair, and long robes. The rider on this sculpture can be identified as a foreigner by his exotic dress and exaggerated facial features. He may be from Sogdiana (modern Iran) or Turkistan. This tomb sculpture of a foreign groom on a camel—a typical mode of transport for trade—is indicative of the cosmopolitan nature of the Tang dynasty, and the sculpture reveals not only evidence of the details of everyday life during the Tang but also the attitudes the Chinese held toward the world beyond their borders.

### *Tang Tomb Figures*

One way that historians have learned about everyday life during the Tang dynasty is through beautiful ceramic tomb figures known as *mingqi*. Ceramic figures like this camel made for the tombs of princes and officials vividly evoke the vibrant, multicultural court life during this period. The Tang dynasty elite built their tombs below ground and filled them with ceramic depictions of servants, animals, and even models of buildings that were designed to provide for every need of the deceased's spirit, and to protect them from evil. Tombs were considered very important because the ancient Chinese believed the human soul had two parts that separated at death; one entered into the spirit world and the other stayed here on Earth in the tomb.

Having a large number of *mingqi* figures in one's tomb signified a person's wealth and significance in society. Figures found in a single tomb often include officials, armored guardians, imaginary guardian beasts, horses, and camels. Although the Tang government attempted to limit the size and number of figures according to a person's official rank and status, discoveries in excavated tombs indicate that these laws were generally ignored.

### *Tang Ceramic Techniques*

Tomb figures are hollow ceramic sculptures, made by pressing thin sheets of **earthenware** clay into reusable, fired ceramic **molds**. Before the clay had completely dried, the sections were removed from the molds and details were incised and stamped onto them. Once the clay pieces were dry enough to support their own weight, they were joined together and (in many cases)

attached to a flat rectangular base. All the handmade details, like the features on the rider's face, were added on. The seams were trimmed, smoothed, and covered over with clay. If you were to look underneath this camel you would see a large hole in its belly, showing that the sculpture is hollow. This sculpture is about two-and-a-half feet tall, which makes it one of the larger *mingqi* surviving today.

When all the sections had been pieced together and allowed to dry completely, the figure was ready for glazing. **Glazes** are a mixture of tiny crystals and ground minerals, which are added to create different colors. Tang tomb sculptures often have multicolored glazes—referred to as *sancai*, or “three-color” glaze. The vivid caramel, straw, and olive-green colors covering this camel and rider illustrate this technique. Tang artists used lead glazes to create rich, smooth surfaces and they added coloring oxides to create pure, bright colors. Adding copper to the glaze turns it green, while adding iron turns it amber, brown, or yellow.

To apply the glaze, the ceramic was first covered with a white clay **slip** (clay thinned with water). Then the glazes were brushed, poured, or splashed over the piece and allowed to drip down before firing. When the glazed sculpture was fired, the glazes melted into a hard, glass-like finish. A wax-resist technique (applying wax where the artist wanted the clay body to show) was sometimes used to imitate patterns found on Central Asian textiles and dyed fabrics. During firing the wax melted away, leaving light areas that were not colored.

On this figure, the pouring method of glazing is most evident on the faces on the camel's saddlebags. You can see how the artist mixed the green and brown glaze by pouring it over this area. The face and hands of the rider figure are unglazed and allow us to see the white color of the clay. These areas were hand-painted before the figure was placed in the tomb, but the paint has faded away because unfired pigments are more prone to flaking than lead glaze.

During the Tang dynasty, earthenware figures were very popular and a great variety of them were made, both glazed and unglazed. This sectional molding technique allowed for hollow, thin-walled clay figures that would dry quickly and not explode in the firing process. It also ensured that sculptures could be produced relatively rapidly, and in sufficient quantity to meet commercial demand.

Knowledge of the construction methods, subjects, and burial context of these tomb sculptures deepens our appreciation of the accomplishments of Tang artists as well as our knowledge of daily life during this period in Chinese history.

## *Discussion Questions*

- Look at the camel and discuss it as a group. Does it look realistic to you? Is it in movement? If you have seen a real camel in the zoo or on television, compare and contrast it to this figure. (Possible answers: This camel is somewhat stylized, but it has many realistic details like the wavy hair on its neck and the outlines of bones and muscles on its legs. The camel's head looks like it is moving but his legs remain still. Unlike a real camel, it has spots of several different colors including brown, white, and green.)
- Look at the man riding on the camel. Based on the way the artist has depicted him, what adjectives would you use to describe him? (Possible answers: His posture is straight and erect and he is pulling hard on the camel's reins, so he seems to be a strict and severe rider. Strong, authoritative, skilled, and proud are some other possible responses.)
- Why do you think the artist chose to place monstrous faces on the sides of the camel's saddlebags? What do you notice about them? (Possible answers: There is a face on each side of the sculpture, and they have big, bulging eyes, flaring noses, and large lips. These monster faces may have been meant to scare away evil spirits from the tomb.)
- What other cultures have you studied that emphasize tomb decoration and the importance of the afterlife? How are other funerary practices similar or different from those of the Chinese during the Tang dynasty? Students can also make a list of funeral practices and traditions that are common in the United States today. (Possible answers: The tombs of some ancient Egyptian Pharaohs also included realistic depictions of servants, boats, food, and other everyday items to be used by the spirit of the deceased in the afterlife. Today many funerals include a religious service, music, food, and a gathering of family members. Some people choose to be buried with clothes and objects that were important to them during their lifetime.)
- The man depicted in this sculpture is Central Asian and was considered a foreigner by the Chinese. He is shown in a stereotypical way; many other tomb figures from this period also show Central Asian men with wide beards, square faces, large features, and wide-labeled coats. Ask your students to come up with a definition of a stereotype and to think of an example

of a stereotype about a particular group or type of person that they have seen or heard recently. Why are stereotypes a problematic way of describing people? (Possible answers: a stereotype is a conventional or oversimplified conception, opinion, or image. Some examples of American stereotypes are the way cowboys and Indians are depicted in cartoons and Western movies. Stereotypes are generalizations about a group that often do not apply to specific individuals.)

## *Classroom Applications*

### **Geography Connection: Traveling the Silk Road**

- In groups or in pairs, have students research the geography of Asia and the Middle East. On the blank map, have students outline and label the following modern countries: China, Mongolia, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Jordan, Israel, Egypt, Myanmar, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Saudi Arabia. Have them label the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea, and the Mediterranean Sea. Have students research the routes of the Silk Road and draw these routes on their maps.
- Research goods and ideas that were traded on the Silk Road. From where were those goods imported? If possible, have students draw those goods in the appropriate countries on their maps. (Possible answers: silk, gunpowder, and porcelain from China; horses and precious stones from Central Asia [Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan]; Bactrian [two-humped] camels from Afghanistan; sugar, medicine, and Buddhism from India; jade from Mongolia; gold from Rome; etc.)
- Have students research what goods and services are imported and exported between China and the United States today, and ask students to present their findings in class presentations or in a short research essay. How are goods and services traded today? How is that different from the time of the Silk Road? (Today the US imports many goods that are made in China including clothing, household goods, and electronics. China has not imported a large number of goods from the US in the past, but American clothing, cars, and luxury goods are now becoming popular in China. Today planes, trucks, and ships move goods quickly, and services can be traded



instantly over the Internet or by phone. The speed of trade and communication is incredibly fast today compared to the slow pace of travel along the Silk Road.)

### **Creative Writing: Inside a Tang Tomb**

- Have students write a monologue or an interview with the man riding the camel. Or, the point of view could be that of the aristocrat in the tomb, the artist who made the tomb figure, or the camel itself!
- Have students write a travel journal entry as though they were participating in the trade routes along the Silk Road. Are they a traveler in a caravan, a merchant at an oasis outpost, or a missionary? What do they trade? How do they travel? Where are they from and where are they going? Have students describe the sights, sounds, people, and adventures they encounter on their journey.

## ***Glossary***

### **Bactrian camel**

An Asian camel that has two humps on the back.

### **caravan**

A group of travelers, such as merchants or pilgrims, journeying together for safety in passing through deserts, hostile territory, etc.

### **ceramic**

All objects made from fired clay, including earthenware, stoneware, porcelain, and pottery.

### **Chang'an (modern-day Xi'an) and Luoyang**

The twin capital cities of the Tang dynasty in China.

Chang'an was the major capital and the eastern point of the Silk Road.

### **dynasty**

A succession of rulers of the same line of descent.

### **earthenware**

Opaque, non-vitreous ceramic ware fired at a temperature between 600 and 1100 degrees centigrade so that it produces a thudding sound when struck. Earthenware is porous unless sealed by a covering glaze. The clay body is usually red, gray, brown, or black. Most early Chinese ceramics are made of earthenware.

### **glaze**

A glassy coating on the surface of a ceramic object. Glazes serve to seal the clay body and add color or texture.

### **mingqi** (pronounced ming-chee)

“Spirit objects” or “bright objects;” ceramic sculptures made solely for burial in tombs.

### **mold**

A hollow form used to cast the shape of something.

### **oasis**

A small fertile or green area in a desert region, usually having a spring or well; oasis towns served as stopping points along the Silk Road.

### **Silk Road**

A series of trading routes that crisscrossed Eurasia from the 2nd century B.C. through the 15th century A.D. During the Tang dynasty, the major overland route began in the Chinese capital of Chang'an, branched into northern and southern routes in the Central Asian Taklamakan Desert, crossed the Iranian plateau, and ended on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean.

### **slip**

Clay mixed with water to a creamy consistency, often used to coat or decorate the surface of ceramics.

### **Tang dynasty**

A period of Chinese history lasting from A.D. 618–907. Often referred to as the “golden age” of China because of its grandeur and rich international atmosphere.

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