

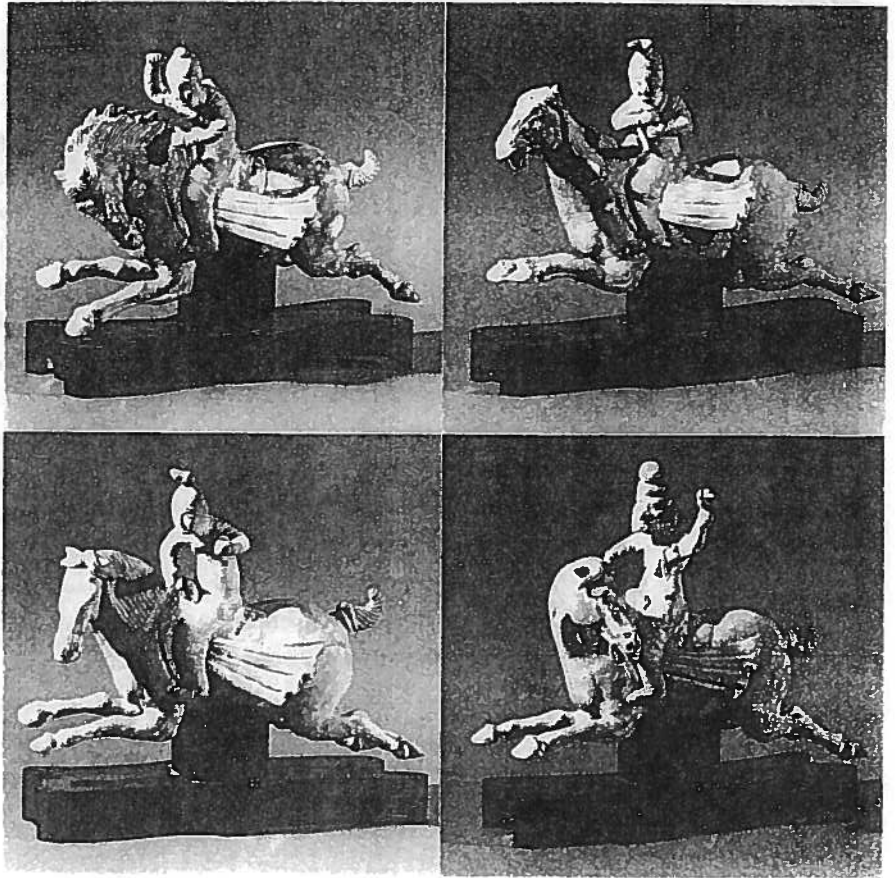
Three Female Polo Players and a Foreigner on Horseback

China, Tang Dynasty
ca. 8th century

Low-fired pottery

Each figure: 6 7/8 x 13 in.

Bequest of Renee Halbedl, 1981
(4911.1-4)



These extraordinary images show women playing polo, a game introduced into China by the Persians. The women ride large horses imported from Bactria in Asia Minor. Their hair is dressed in "butterfly" topknots, a fashion that originated in the Near East, and they wear men's fitted tunics over trousers and fashionable high boots. Palace ladies wore this type of clothing and an old Tang history, the *Treatise on Carriages and Dress*, records that "Highborn and lowborn, men and women, could not be distinguished from one another, all looked alike." The heavily bearded male figure with a prominent, beak-like nose is identified as an Armenoid, from the region west of the Caspian Sea in Central Asia.

The photo at left shows a 17th century Chinese tapestry from the Academy collection. Executed in the *k'o-suu* technique, it depicts polo players in the Liao period.



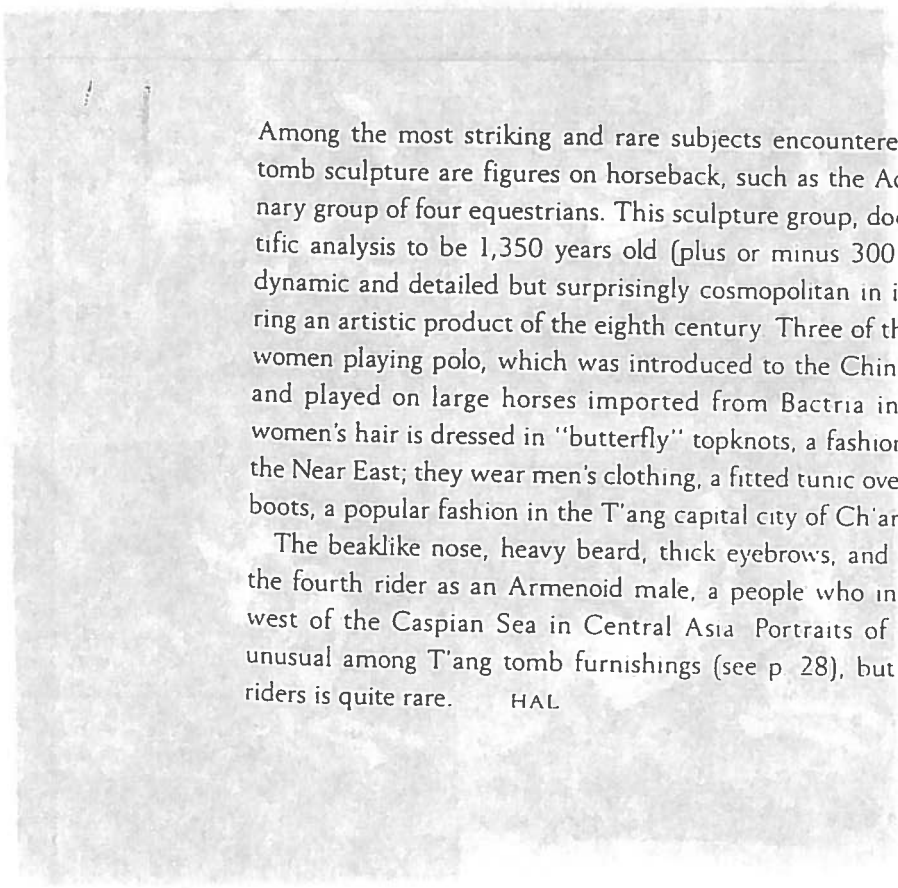
Among the most striking and rare subjects encountered in T'ang pottery tomb sculpture are figures on horseback, such as the Academy's extraordinary group of four equestrians. This sculpture group, documented by scientific analysis to be 1,350 years old (plus or minus 300 years), is not only dynamic and detailed but surprisingly cosmopolitan in its rendering, inferring an artistic product of the eighth century. Three of the figures represent women playing polo, which was introduced to the Chinese by the Persians and played on large horses imported from Bactria in Asia Minor. The women's hair is dressed in "butterfly" topknots, a fashion that originated in the Near East; they wear men's clothing, a fitted tunic over trousers and high boots, a popular fashion in the T'ang capital city of Ch'ang-an.

The beaklike nose, heavy beard, thick eyebrows, and wide eyes identify the fourth rider as an Armenoid male, a people who inhabited the region west of the Caspian Sea in Central Asia. Portraits of foreigners are not unusual among T'ang tomb furnishings (see p. 28), but their depiction as riders is quite rare. HAL

THREE FEMALE POLO PLAYERS AND A FOREIGNER ON HORSEBACK

Chinese, T'ang dynasty, ca. 8th century
Low-fired pottery; each figure 6 7/8 x 13
(17.5 x 33 cm)

Bequest of Renee Halbedt, 1981 (4911.1-)



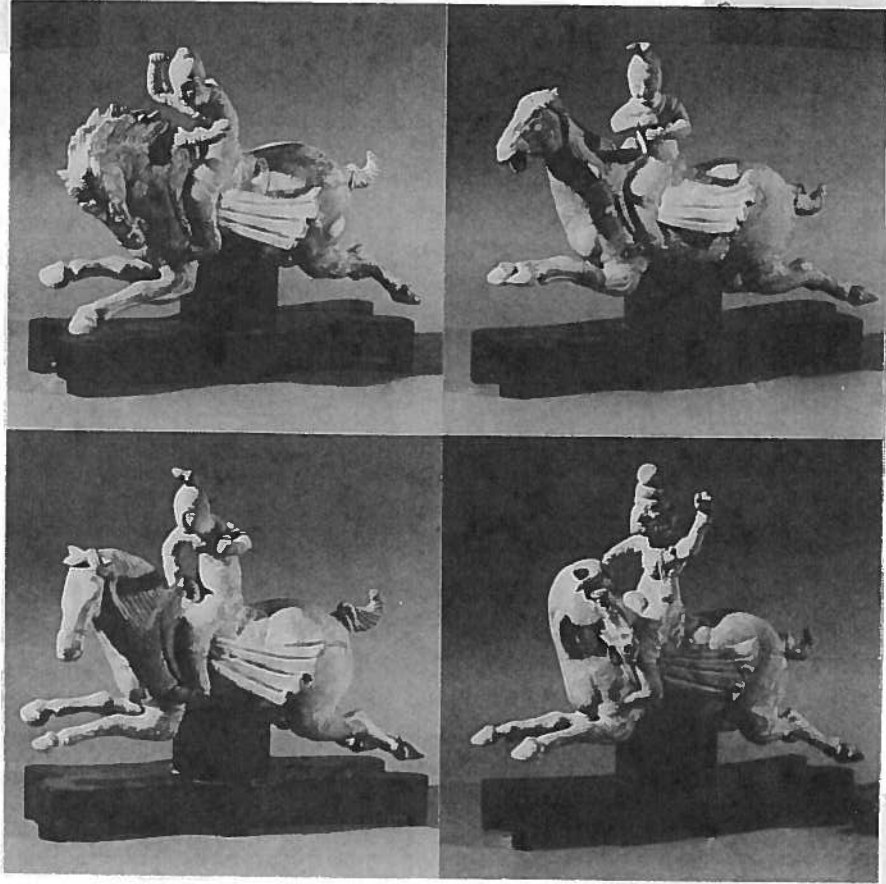
These extraordinary figures, now without having
been previously introduced into the Academy's
collection, are a fine example of the pottery
work of the T'ang dynasty. The figures are
made of low-fired pottery and are of the
type of sculpture that was used for
burial. The figures are of the type of
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The photo at left shows a full-length figure
from the Academy's collection. Excavated in
the late T'ang period, it depicts a polo player in the
T'ang period.



Four Equestrian Figures, China, T'ang dynasty
 (618–906 A.D.)
 Unglazed red earthenware with traces of polychrome
 decoration over white slip (wooden stands are
 modern); approx. height of each 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (17.5 cm.),
 approx. length 13" (33 cm.)
 Bequest of Renee Halbedel, 1981 (4911.1)
 On view in the *Revelations* exhibition September 16–
 October 24

SEP



When one thinks of the art of the T'ang dynasty (618–906 A.D.), the things that are likely to come to mind first are the magnificent pottery figurines produced in the period as *ming ch'i* (spirit objects), replicas of the elements of everyday life which were buried in tombs to accompany the spirit of the deceased in the next life and make it feel that it is among familiar surroundings. Perhaps more than any other works of art from this period, these ceramic sculptures symbolize T'ang culture, for more vividly than descriptions in surviving literary sources they help us to imagine the richness and diversity of Chinese life in the seventh and eighth centuries.

Among the most striking and rare types in the wide range of subjects encountered in T'ang pottery tomb sculpture are figures on horseback, such as the Academy's extraordinary group of four which have recently undergone scientific analysis proving their age to be 1,350 years, plus or minus 300 years, and which are being shown for the first time in the exhibition *Revelations — An Academy Celebration*. These dynamic and detailed sculptures well illustrate the cosmopolitan flavor of the culture of the times. The influence of strong and prosperous T'ang China was widespread, reaching the borders of Korea at one extreme and well into Central Asia at the

other. Extensive trade was carried on with countries far beyond the frontiers, and the Chinese drew from the artistic and cultural influences with which they came into contact, assimilating and sinicizing these exotic styles into their own unique manner.

Three of the Academy's figures represent women playing polo, a sport which was introduced to the Chinese by the Persians and played on large horses imported from Bactria in Asia Minor. The women have their hair dressed in the "butterfly" top-knot which was a fashion that originated in the Near East and wear men's clothing — a fitted tunic over trousers and high boots — which was a popular quirk of fashion in the T'ang capital city of Chang-an. A passage in the "Treatise on Carriages and Dress" of the *Chiu T'ang shu (Old T'ang History)* records that palace ladies wore men's dress and boots and that "Highborn and lowborn, men and women, could not be distinguished from one another, all looked alike" (Po-na edition, ch. 45, p.16a).

Portraits of foreigners are not unusual among T'ang tomb furnishings, but their depiction as riders, as in the Academy's fourth figure, is extremely rare. The beak-like nose, heavy beard, thick eyebrows and wide lips identify the man as an Armenoid type, from a people who inhabited the region west of the Caspian Sea in Central Asia. The exaggerated size of the head and the clearly characterized features show that these travellers must have made a great impression on the Chinese.

The four horses especially show the skill and genius of T'ang artisans in abstracting the essence of a subject. The flying gallop pose, with four legs extended, reveals an interest in dealing with movement (though this unnatural position disappears later with increasing T'ang emphasis on realism). The energetic postures of the horses, each with an individualized head and expression, and the poised readiness of the riders capture for our modern eyes the excitement of T'ang equestrian sport.

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