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NICE ARTICLE ON TANG POTTERY

INTRODUCTION

Reprinted from the catalogue, *An Exhibition of Tang Sancai Pottery Selected from the collection of Alan and Simone Hartman*

It is not without reason that the Tang dynasty has been called "glorious" and has always been looked up to as well as back upon by the Chinese as one of the most splendid in their long and turbulent past. The art of the period, ceramics included, marks one of the great high spots of Chinese creativity in the richness and variety of its expression and in the realism of the approach to subject matter.

In the polychrome sancai pottery, seen in this exhibition the pieces reflect the wealthy and cosmopolitan society for which they were made. The robust forms and the brilliance of the colour are a delight to the eye. The people were prosperous, educated, and novelty loving, and a large proportion of those for whom the wares were made lived mainly in the two great capital cities of north China, Changan (modern Si'an) and Luoyang. Of these two Changan was by far the most important, since not only was the emperor's chief residence there, in a vast palace, but the city was the focus for the bulk of the foreign trade, lying as it did at the eastern end of the great transasiatic trade route, the Silk Route. Embassies from the regions to the northwest and far west of Tarim Basin, which was now included in the empire, as well as from the exotic south made their way to this great Chinese metropolis which, for a century and a half or more, was the cultural and mercantile centre of Asia rather as Rome had been for the south and west of Europe and the Mediterranean many centuries earlier.

The huge city of Changan, covering an area almost as great as does the modern city, with over two million inhabitants, of which a sizeable proportion were foreigners, included two very large markets. The western one was that to which the foreign merchants came to sell precious metals from Persia, Silla, and Tibet<sup>(1)</sup>, and exotic spices and birds, such as peacocks and parrots from the tropical south<sup>(2)</sup>. Not only did desirable luxury goods flow into China, but so did ideas and new techniques. Of the latter it was the techniques used in the working of precious metals that were of the greatest importance. In the great western market, where the different crafts and commodities each had their own special locations, as they do in all Asiatic markets, the metalworkers seem to have held an influential place. Many of them were probably Persian, especially after the Arab invasions of the 650s. They brought with them new skills to which the Chinese were now introduced, such as repoussé work, tracing and parcel gilding. Not only this but even alien shapes were transmitted, some of them novel and attractive.

While the foreign craftsmen could and did pass on new techniques in metalworking, in textiles, apart from designs they could teach little or nothing, while in ceramics they could pass on nothing at all. But the continual presence of foreigners, foreign clothes and foreign customs had a considerable impact on Chinese social life, and this is abundantly seen in the pottery figures. These illustrate clearly the modes of the seventh and first half of the eighth century, as well as the changing concepts of feminine beauty. At the same time the vessels reflect a remarkably faithful attempt to copy in pottery some of the more striking metal forms and decorations, though the latter tended to be modified to suit Chinese aristocratic taste.

The princes, princesses, wealthy ministers and distinguished nobles surrounded themselves with all the extravagances that money could buy, not only in life, but also in death. In fact it was just as important to do so in death. It was important to do so, because you had to announce to the spirits your high status, and in any case it was essential to be accompanied in death by all those trappings to which you were accustomed in order to help you through the underworld and on to the seat of the ancestors or to the Western Paradise of Amitabha, if you were a Buddhist. It was this need that led to the massive production of figures of all kinds for the tomb, guardian spirits, servants and the animals from the stables and the farmyard, and the precious objects used on the table for feasts; the more you could assemble, the better your chances of being recognized as a person of importance and worthy of respect. Much of one's accumulated wealth found its way into the tomb together with the more ordinary ceramic bowls, dishes, trays and cups for use after death.

What was also important was the lay-out of the tomb itself. The best example of the arrangement of the interior is probably that of the little Princess Yongtai, who was re-buried in AD 706, after the death of the Empress Wuzitian, with full imperial honors<sup>(3)</sup>. The interior was divided into four sections. The first part of the

descent into the tomb was painted on both sides with an imperial escort of horsemen and attendants on foot, with on the east side a dragon and on the west side a tiger. The second section was a slightly steeper descent with small cells off the main passage on either side in which were placed many of the grave goods, consisting of both figurines and vessels. The third section was a gallery with a level floor painted on either side with life-size figures of the princess's personal servants, each carrying some object she would have carried in life, such as a jewel box, a fan, or a vase or ewer. Between this gallery and the tomb chamber itself there was originally a door, and within the tomb chamber was the vast outer stone coffin made to resemble a small house with engraved decoration all over that included false doors, with figures either side and lavish floral ornament incorporating birds and animals. Originally there were probably more grave goods in the anteroom gallery, but the tomb was broken into and a good deal must have been stolen of what was placed there to establish her standing in the social order.



No. 1

Normally preparations for the tomb were begun before the individual died, and the preparations would have included ordering a suitable number of pottery figures of such types as would have been thought appropriate. They would probably have been made at some local kiln, but in the vicinity of Changan no such kiln has yet been located, and only one so far has been found anywhere near Luoyang, the so-called Eastern Capital of the Tang dynasty. This is at Gongxian, where Tang white wares, stonewares and polychrome earthenwares were made in considerable quantities<sup>(4)</sup>.



No. 4

The clay used for virtually all the polychrome wares was a fine-grained pale buff or almost white firing one, and if figures were made, these were usually made from moulds, with small details worked by hand. Large pieces were constructed of several parts luted together, and the heads of figures were always made separately and slotted into a cavity left between the shoulders. It is this which accounts for the great number of identical faces, though expression could be given to a figure, and often was, by adjusting the angle at which the head was inserted. Once a figure had been put together, the hands and any other details would be added and the piece then allowed to dry. At Gongxian the practice seems to have been to biscuit fire the pieces before applying the glaze and firing a second time.

Evidence indicates that when vessels were made a slip was not added until after the biscuit firing<sup>(5)</sup>, which would mean a further period of drying before the brightly coloured glazes were dipped, splashed or painted on. The advantages of using a slip are twofold; first it helps the adhesion of the glaze to the body, and second it brightens the colour, and generally if the slip is really white this makes an appreciable difference. It does not seem as though the figures were always slipped and this would account for the sometimes softer tones of the glaze colours.



No. 3

The manufacture of clay figures for the tomb has a history reaching back into pre-Han times, before the third century BC. Those of the Han period itself were usually made from a red clay covered with a green lead glaze that tended to become iridescent, or with a brown glaze. The latter was much less common, since the aim was to conceal the colour of the body, which the brownish one did less successfully, because it leached out some of the iron content of the body itself into the glaze. In only a very small number of pieces were the two colours combined on a single piece, and then this phenomenon is generally seen on hill jars or more rarely vases, and not on figures. After Han times the figures were rarely glazed, unfired pigments being used

instead to cover the dark grey body which was then usual. It is not until we come to the tomb of Sima Jinglong at Datong in the province of Shanxi, dated AD 485 that lead-glazed figures are again encountered. This group was unusual because not only were some of them glazed, but some were even polychrome glazed.

Again following this there is a considerable lapse of time until the finds in the tomb of General Jang Sheng at Anyang in Henan dated AD 595. The figures found here are very different from anything that went before. These are whitish stoneware figures with a creamy white glaze, the smaller figures comprised a group of seated women musicians, and the larger ones a series of guardians measuring over 60 cm in height, also creamy glazed, but including on some of them the use of a very dark brownish glaze in some parts. The use of a creamy or neutral glaze continued into the following century, but generally on a whitish earthenware body, of which the two mounted drummers (No 1) are excellent examples. The blackish brown bands and other touches are not glaze, but overglaze unfired pigments with added touches of gilding. Such a practice was not unusual in the early part of the seventh century at the very beginning of the Tang dynasty, and there are several very striking figures of this kind, all guardians, painted in polychrome and gilt of which a splendid example is in the Royal Ontario Museum<sup>[6]</sup>.

The practice of painting in unfired overglaze pigments died out towards the end of the seventh century, and the elegant sleeve dancer, No 3, probably dates to the last quarter of the century. The striped skirt seems to have been rather popular at about this time and seems to have spread into the Central Asian empire, as a fully dressed little articulated wooden figure of this kind was found in the cemetery of Astana between Turfan and the ancient capital of Gaochang<sup>[7]</sup>. This delightful figure had a plaster head which had been delicately painted, showing the style of make-up much favoured by young ladies in the early part of the dynasty. On the pottery figure the make-up has largely vanished as a result of the conditions of burial.

The practice of leaving the head unglazed on Tang pottery figures was very common, and most of those shown here are executed in this way. Unfortunately the colours tend to crack off as time passes, and few of them have survived in their original state. The figures of women tend to have rather stereo-typed faces, but the men are more varied and reflect the racial types to be seen in the capital cities and their environs, on which the potters could model their figures. The extraordinary realism was part and parcel of the Tang interest in the outside world, and an expression of the excitement in the exploration of a whole new universe. The ability of the potter to define the differences in individuals is a tribute to his powers of observation, as is also his skill in conveying the actual personality of his subjects. One of the most beautiful examples is the standing figure, No 7, the gentleness with which the falconer strokes his bird is particularly touching. The love of pet birds is something characteristically Chinese, and is seen again and again in the tomb figures, a particularly amusing example being the young adolescent girl with her bird perched on her shoulder, evidently a parakeet from the exotic lands to the far south (No 8). Another interesting example is the young woman in foreign dress, No 9, who is about to feed her bird.

Foreign dress was very commonly worn in the early part of the Tang period, and at one point became so popular that the emperor was moved to issue an edict in an attempt to stop people in the capital wearing outlandish dress, when he regarded Chinese dress as much more fitting. The effect was ephemeral, people soon reverting to what was evidently a much admired fashion. The wide lapelled coats of Persian origin were very popular as may be noted on a number of the figures, as were also the trousers and high boots. Not only this but the wealthy household regarded it as de rigeur to have foreign servants about them, especially grooms such as No 5, though the more semitic featured type was probably more popular.

While most of the figures seem to have been mass produced, there were always others which must have been made, either in very limited numbers or to special order. To the first of these



No. 5



No. 8



No. 9

No. 1

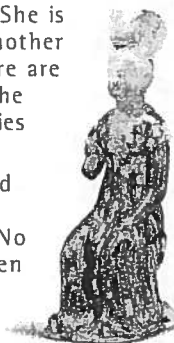
No. 4

No. 7



probably belongs the woman seated on a drum stool holding her pet bird. (No 10). She is seated in a fairly standard pose of which there are a number of other examples, another being the one in the Hoyt collection in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts<sup>(9)</sup>, and there are others, some in a fragmentary state from excavations. What gives individuality is the bird and the phoenix headdress. This type of headdress occurs quite often and varies from one figure to another whether the figure is seated or standing.

An example of a specially made figure must be the young lady, No 11, who is seated considering her face in the mirror she holds in her left hand. The pose here is particularly unusual with the right foot raised to the left thigh. Later in date than No 10, she wears the looser robe that became fashionable shortly before 756 AD when the An Lushan rebellion broke out and largely put a stop to the production of such tomb figures. Her shoes, too, are more like the later ones, being rounder and fuller, yet they are still turned up at the toe, but have lost the thin rather elegant lobing at the edge, which is a feature of those worn by the other young lady. She does, however retain something of the elegance of pose and the modelling of the head associated with a slightly earlier date. There seems, then, to be every reason on the basis of these qualities to place the figure in the earlier part of the second quarter of the eighth century. The graceful figure in the Victoria and Albert Museum, which came from the Eumorfopoulos Collection<sup>(9)</sup> also holding a mirror, but this time a square one, seems to date to the first quarter of the century and has much in common with the figure No 11.



No. 10



No. 11

Animal figures tend to be less variable altogether than human and guardian figures. There are for instance many examples of horses and riders of the kind represented by No 4, and almost innumerable identical ones of horses alone. In fact moulds have been taken from horses recovered from dated tombs and then used to reproduce such figures. A prime example is that made from a small horse found in the tomb of Prince Zhanghuai, dating from the years 706 to 710, and illustrated by Helmut Brinker and Roger Goepper in *Kunstschatze aus China*, a catalogue of an exhibition of finds from China that travelled in Europe during 1980 and 1981<sup>(10)</sup>.

Much more unusual is the splendid quality of the potter's observation that has gone into the making of the water buffalo, No 15, with the dreaming boy on its back. All the weight and solidity of the beast has been interpreted and there is just a suggestion of wariness in the treatment of the eye that warns the passer-by that the buffalo is not always as docile as he appears. Such sympathetic handling of animal sculpture is particularly noticeable in the Tang period and it makes this piece and its companion in the Freer Gallery of Art almost unique<sup>(11)</sup>. The same assured handling is seen again in the reclining bullock, No 16, even within the severe limitations of the form in which this piece has been conceived.



No. 16



No. 15

When it comes to vessels, it is apparent that they fall into two easily distinguishable groups, one is purely ceramic in origin and stems from the Chinese tradition, while the other stems either from another culture or from another material, or both. Those pieces of purely Chinese origin display the full roundness that expresses a complete mastery of the clay material, with simple robust shapes that grow naturally from throwing on the wheel. Examples such as No 19, 21 and 23, demonstrate this wholesome directness of approach to the plastic qualities of the material, using it well within its natural limits. Other pieces like the two round boxes, Nos 25 and 26, copy, in the careful turning of the edges of the lids and bases, the contemporary silver cosmetic boxes or small boxes for medicines that seem to have been popular among the wealthy at the time<sup>(12)</sup>. On the latter, however, there is no attempt to imitate the decoration of the silver examples, the pieces either being left quite plain or simply splashed with coloured glazes.



No. 25

In the decoration of Tang earthenwares the limitations of lead glazing immediately

become apparent. Lead glazes have a tendency of fluidity that is difficult to control, and on the vase shapes with vertical or near vertical walls almost impossible, as the two jars, Nos 19 and 21, show. The difficulty in controlling the glazes is particularly obvious in No 21, where in some places they have run down almost to the base. It is on account of this fluidity that these pieces are rarely glazed right to the foot. If the glaze ran down over the foot onto the base it would probably result in breakage when unloading the kiln, since the piece would have fused to the floor or to another piece on which it may have been stacked for firing, a fairly common practice at this period. Despite this problem, attempts were made at decoration, often quite successfully. On very small objects dappled effects were good and often exceptionally attractive. The delightful little ewer, No 36, shows what can be done. The very white siliceous slip, with a thin coating of a neutral glaze provides the white spots, this was then dabbed with spots of wax resist before the green was applied followed by the blue. In the firing the wax has been dissipated and the very thin neutral glaze on the white slip shows up white.



No. 19



No. 34

More ambitious is the jar, No 34, with its chevron designs, which have unfortunately run rather badly. Here again using wax resist an attempt at patterning has been made, evidently aiming to imitate tie-and-die decorated textiles, which were very common across Central Asia and northwest China. There are other more successful examples like the large tray in the British Museum and two lidded jars, also in the museum<sup>(13)</sup>. On flat surfaces the results are much more satisfactory as the British Museum tray shows, but when the design is actually impressed into the flat surface the result can be fairly spectacular. The gullies formed, as on No 44, act as barriers against the glazes flooding into one another producing a well



No. 23

regulated decoration.

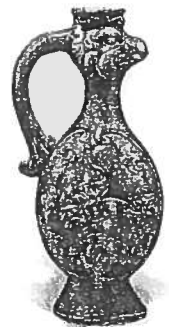
If one turns to the pieces that are wholly alien to the Chinese tradition, the most striking feature is often the fact that the pieces nearly always seem to have rather large handles. It was pointed out many years ago by Arthur Lane in a much neglected little volume called *Style in Pottery*<sup>(14)</sup>, that handles of this kind have no connection with the Chinese tradition in which small loops are preferred. There are three examples shown with large handles, Nos 22, 32 and 33. Of these it is Nos 32 and 33 that are the most revealing. The only really Chinese feature is the prancing phoenix on one side of each. Where then does this form come from? And what was the original material?



No. 36

The form can be traced directly to Sasanian and Post-Sasanian silver prototypes of a kind made in the far northeast of Persia, and made with exactly the same high foot, relief decoration and often also with a slightly flattened body<sup>(15)</sup>. The silver examples were of beaten metal with repoussé decoration, sometimes with traced or engraved detail and parcel gilding. In the Chinese ceramic form the decorative technique is reproduced using moulds. As these are flattened pieces there had to be two moulds anyway, but they are more complex than that. The high foot has been added separately and the handle has been added after the whole piece has been assembled. While on one side the decoration is Chinese in origin, on the other the dominant element is the mounted archer firing the 'Parthian shot', a typical Persian motif and one enthusiastically adopted by the Chinese for a wide variety of media, of which woven silks and silverwares are those on which the theme most commonly occurs.

This particular pattern of ewer is known in about a dozen examples from the same moulds, and all but one are sancai, the exception being the plain white one in the Gemeentemuseum in the Hague<sup>(16)</sup>. The rest are in the Idemitsu Museum<sup>(17)</sup>, two in the Tokyo National Museum<sup>(18)</sup>, one in the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco<sup>(19)</sup>, one formerly in the collection of Mrs Ivy Clark<sup>(20)</sup>, a recently discovered one now in the Shanghai Municipal Museum<sup>(21)</sup>, and another one was sold at



No. 33

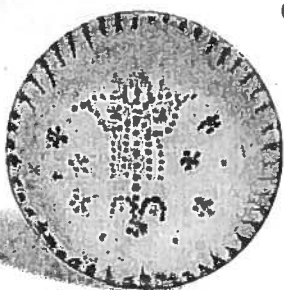
Sotheby's, London on 10th June 1986, lot 28<sup>(22)</sup>. On some of these there are minor variations such as additional incised details, extra lines round the head of the phoenix at the top, which have been put in by hand, or the actual finish of the handle where it joins the body, particularly noticeable in the example from Sotheby's. According to the Chinese these pieces were made at the Huangye kiln at Gongxian not far from Luoyang<sup>(23)</sup>.

Finally there are two late Tang pieces which should not be passed without comment. The first is the little stoneware waterpot in the shape of a fabulous beast, No 46, half bird and half toad, with a small child clinging to its rather unlikely ears. This is the only stoneware piece in the exhibition as well as the only one from a southern kiln. It originates from the kilns that lie north of Changsha in Hunan in the vicinity of Tongguan. The southern region for long displayed a distinct cultural flavour of its own, having little in common with that of the harsher north. While bowls, perhaps of necessity, are similar in shape to those of other regions, the ewers and other small objects are uniquely different frequently being painted in underglaze iron and/or copper. The animal here has been painted with both colours, the iron giving brown and the copper in this case giving an attractive bluish colour, instead of the more usual green or red in this type of glaze, which is free of lead. When such pieces with a slightly bluish colour were first found it was thought that cobalt was the colouring agent, but analysis has made it clear that it was nothing of the sort, but rather the notoriously unpredictable copper oxide.



No. 32

Cobalt blue, however, was used in the lead glazes, as is seen in many of the eighth century pieces, sometimes alone and sometimes splashed or for painted effects. The bowl, No 45, is a rather different example of the use of the oxide and here has been used quite deliberately to produce a pleasing design combined with touches of a yellow iron oxide. It is surprising perhaps that no attempt seems to have been made at the time to continue its use and develop it as a decorating pigment. It seems likely that the collapse of the Tang dynasty and the disorders during its closing decades made this impossible. So China and the world had to wait four hundred years or so for the use of the true pigment on the porcelains of the Yuan period, after which the direction of Chinese ceramics art underwent a revolution the impact of which was to have world wide effects.



No. 45

Margaret Medley  
London, 1988

#### Postscript:

With the sad death of Margaret Medley in June 2000 the international Chinese art community lost one of the most respected and influential figures of the last forty years. Her tremendous scholarship lives on in her immense corpus of publications, while her brilliant teaching inspired a generation of students.

Miss Medley was Curator of the Percival David Foundation from 1959 to 1983 and during that time was one of the first to bridge the gap between academia and 'the trade', believing that each could learn from the other. Her loss is felt by all those with whom she shared her abiding fascination with Chinese art.