

China (Asia)

***Group of Court Musicians***, early 8<sup>th</sup> century

Painted earthenware with white slip

H. 12 inches (tallest figure)

Bequest of Alfred F. Pillsbury, 50.46.180-82,191-93,218

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## **Theme**

These graceful figures, which once served as companions to the dead, speak not only of a belief in the afterlife but also of delight in the pleasures of earthly life—music, dancing, and fancy costumes.

## **Background**

Following three hundred years of civil wars, China, under the leadership of the Sui (pron. sway) (A.D. 581-618) and T'ang (pron. tahng) (A.D. 618-906) dynasties, enjoyed peace and prosperity. During this golden age, the capital city of Chang'an was populated by approximately two million residents and visited by travelers from as far away as Arabia and Japan. Trade goods from every region of China and the Western world were marketed in Chang'an. In this cosmopolitan atmosphere, a highly artistic culture emerged, rich in painting, calligraphy, poetry, music, and sculpture.

The T'ang emperors lived in splendor in a great palace the size of a city. The royal court, often numbering 400 to 500, found many ways to occupy their leisure time: music making, poetry writing, sports, parlor games, and entertainment by musicians, dancers, and acrobats. Music and dance were so valued by the emperors that an academy was established in the royal palace to train youth to become court entertainers. Foreigners—especially Indo-Chinese, Koreans, and Indians—came to Chang'an to pursue such careers. Guests of the court were often entertained by musicians and dancers, many of whom were women from Cambodia, Burma, or central Asia. Their costumes and instruments delighted the T'ang court circle.

All was not frivolous in the emperor's court, however, for each day was filled with rigorous and elaborate ceremony and ritual. The entire royal household rose with the emperor at dawn to witness his daily celebration of the rising of the sun. Women led an especially formal, structured existence in the emperor's court. They were expected to be models of propriety, virtue, and subservient devotion. For a court lady, every action was dictated by a code of etiquette that she had learned in childhood.

Royalty and wealthy nobles built large, cavernous tombs and furnished them with burial articles in hopes of extending their good life beyond death into the afterlife. During T'ang funeral processions, mourners carried the grave furnishings to the tomb in full view of the public as a gesture of their respect for the deceased. This practice became so extravagant that a government office had to be created to supervise it and regulate the number and type of grave objects used. Some families were faced with financial disaster in their attempts to keep up with their neighbors. An imperial decree in A.D. 742 established limits on the size and number of tomb pieces allowed, according to the rank

of the deceased.

Burial articles often included vessels containing food and drink for the afterlife and some of the favorite possessions of the deceased such as silk garments, gold and jade jewelry, and bronze mirrors. Chief among the burial articles were *ming ch'i*, or spirit articles. These wood or clay miniatures, representing all aspects of T'ang society and court life, were commissioned by family members of the deceased and placed in the tomb. *Ming ch'i*, which have survived in great numbers, were intended to serve as companions for the deceased.<sup>1</sup> For the Chinese, they were reminders of a pleasure-filled earthly existence; for us, they provide a vivid picture of the courtly life of the T'ang period in China.

### ***Group of Court Musicians***

This grouping of *ming ch'i* includes a court lady (the largest figure), two musicians, a dancer, and a dog. The sweet, smiling faces of the women tell us of their pleasure in making music while the dancer executes graceful arm movements to the accompaniment of musical instruments—here, a Chinese lute and a flute. The court lady “sets the beat” with the wooden blocks.

In addition to reflecting the T'ang love of music and dance, the grouping also documents the style of clothing of early 8th-century China. Although traditional clothing styles had changed little for centuries, during this period hundreds of foreign women were brought into the court to serve as dancers, musicians, and entertainers. The foreign costumes and hairstyles stimulated great interest in changing fashion. The gowns of the figurines show the influence of these foreign styles. For example, the low necklines, the long, looped sleeves, the tight bodice, and the exaggerated shoulder pieces of the court lady's dress are all derived from contemporary central Asian costume. Although the seated attendants wear the more conventional type of colored silk robe with flowing scarves, the standing attendants wear a new tight-fitting long sleeve adopted from the dress of the people of Kucha in eastern Turkestan (now Xinjiang). In fact, the recorder player and harpist probably represent Kuchan women, who were admired for their musical talent and often became residents at the emperor's court.

The hairstyles of the Chinese women also imitated the styles of the foreigners. Their hair was heavily oiled and perfumed and arranged in the elaborate twists and buns seen on these figurines. Great quantities of hair were desirable, so false hair was sometimes added. Lacquer was used to hold the upswept hair in place, and gold jewelry was often placed in the hairdos. T'ang women were equally devoted to the application of their cosmetics. Traces of paint can still be seen on the faces of the figures. These miniature figures with their fashionable garments and hairstyles represent an ideal of beauty. The larger size and more ornate costume of the court lady indicate that she was more important in T'ang society than her attendants. All of these women exhibit the proper etiquette and refinement required of a “lady” in a male-dominated culture. Further, their full, round proportions were considered to be the standard of beauty in the later T'ang dynasty.

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<sup>1</sup> This custom dates back to the Shang dynasty (1523-1028 B.C.), when whole households were killed and buried with high-ranking officials of the court.

The dog may have been placed in the tomb to ward off evil spirits. Centuries ago, the Chinese used dogs as sacrificial offerings to ensure health and safety. Later, straw dogs were carried in funeral processions to “snap up” bad influences and then ceremonially burned to become “spirit dogs.” These straw dogs were most likely the forerunner of the ceramic dog tomb figure.<sup>2</sup>

It is obvious from these charming figures that the colorful environment of Chang’an provided stimulating subject matter for sculptors. The artists observed life in minute detail and captured with their clay and tools the physical appearance of these women and the dog. But they did not just concentrate on the external description of their subject. They also stressed the inner spirit, which gave to the works a vitality that is best seen here in the flowing, graceful movements of the dancer.

## Technique

These *ming ch’i* figurines were made from molds and mass-produced to meet the heavy demands of the period. White earthenware, a type of clay, was placed in the mold. It was removed, finishing touches were done by hand, and then it was allowed to dry. A glaze was applied before firing (heating to high temperatures) in a kiln (oven). Painted details were applied after the initial firing, particularly the details of the face.

## Artists

We do not know the names of the artists responsible for these sculptures. It is probable that artists who were so closely connected to these funerary rites held a place of considerable importance in society.

## Suggested Questions

1. These figures were not found in the United States. Can anyone guess where they are from?
2. How many different dress styles can you find? How many different hairstyles? Which dress or hairstyle do you like best?
3. What do their hairstyles, fashions, makeup, and posture tell us about Chinese women of that time? Do their clothes and hairstyles look comfortable? Are they formal or informal?
4. Pretend that you’re one of these figures. Play or dance as you think the figure would. How do you feel as you move? Is your body stiff or relaxed? Are your movements quick or slow? If you are one of the musicians, show me how you would play and tell me what kind of sound your instrument would make. If you are the dancer, move your arms and head to the music and explain what kind of music you hear: is it loud, soft, slow, fast, high, low?

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<sup>2</sup> Hentze, *Chinese Tomb Figures*, p. 61.

5. These figures are called tomb figures. What do you think a tomb figure is? Did the people of any other country (civilization) have objects buried with them? Why would they want objects buried with them? Why would they pick certain objects and not others? What do these figures tell us about the person from whose tomb they came? Why would someone want to bring musicians into the afterlife? Why bring a dog?
6. Who do you think these figures might be entertaining? Where do you think they are performing?
7. These figures are made of clay. What is the basic ingredient in clay? Is it readily available? How do we sculpt with clay—do we cut away from a block of it (subtractive), or do we build it up by molding and adding things on (additive)? Is clay soft or hard when the artist works with it? How does it get hard? **Bring in a ceramic piece and discuss kilns, etc.**
8. Do you think these figures were painted once? How do you know? What colors might they have been painted? Why did so much of the color disappear? **Discuss their age and their location underground.**
9. **Compare these figures with those in the falconer's tapestry.** Do these 8th-century Chinese women seem close in spirit to the 15th-century French women? In what ways are they similar? How are they different?
10. Do you think most Chinese people dress this way today? Why or why not? **Students (depending on their age) might enjoy:** (a) finding China on the map; (b) discussing China's former and current forms of government; (c) talking about foods, clothing styles, etc. we have borrowed from the Chinese; (d) discussing differences in our two cultures.
11. The Chinese always included artists as an important part of their court life. Why do you think this was so? (*Appreciation for art, to record historical events, to show status, to provide artistic propaganda for rules, love of beauty, etc.*)

## Bibliography

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