

March OOM
Celestial Horse, 1st Century
China, Eastern Han Dynasty
2002.465

Historical Context: The Eastern Han, 25-2002 CE, is considered one of four great Chinese dynasties. It was preceded by the Qin Dynasty and succeeded by a period known as the Three Kingdoms. It was founded by the rebel leader, Liu Bang, known posthumously as Emperor Gaozu of Han. The Han Dynasty is considered one of the Golden Ages of Chinese History. To this day the ethnic majority of Chinese refer to themselves as “Han People”. The dynasty was a period of military expansion, political centralization, a quest for alliances, and cultural achievements. Innovations included: the invention of paper, the use of leaded-glass, mathematical negative numbers, use of the nautical steering rudder and improved silk making techniques.

Han society was founded on the Confucian principles of benevolence (ren) and righteousness (yi). Confucius philosophy advocates a structured society in which people are morally tied to each other by five familial relationships: parent-child, ruler-subject-brother-brother, husband-wife, friend-friend. Daoism and Buddhism were also commonly practiced. Daoist philosophy encouraged following one’s intuition and living in accordance with the Dao (The Way). Buddhism promises enlightenment to those who seek it through deeds and devotion.

Military expansion and the quest for alliances saw the expansion of the trading route known as the Silk Road. The Silk Road were land and sea trade routes that crisscrossed Eurasia from the first millennium BCE to the second millennium CE. Trade diminished overland as advancements in navigation made shipping by sea more widely used. At its height the Silk Road stretched from Kyoto to Venice and on to Rome. The Silk Road provided a route for the exchange of technologies, religions and diseases as well as trade goods. Horses became one of the most sought after trade items during the Han Dynasty.

The Horse: The Celestial Horse or Heavenly Horse came from the Fergahana Valley in central Asia. The breed known as Ferghana is the oldest pure breed in the world. It was highly sought after by the Emperor Guang Wu. The Ferghana horses were larger, stronger, and had more stamina than the domestic Chinese breeds. They could carry fully armed soldiers. Chinese literature is quoted to say, “the horses were able to gallop 1,000km a day and another 800km at night.” The Chinese began importing the horses to such an extent that the Ferghana ruler closed the borders to such trade. The Emperor Wu sent a military expedition to the Ferghana Valley to bring back horses. The defeated Ferghanas were required to provide 3,000 good horses, 10 of the best horses for breeding, and 2 breeding horses every year after that. Alexander the Great’s horse, Bucephalus, is thought to be a breed similar to the Ferghana.

The Ferghana horse is known as the “sweat blood horse” as they sweat red blood-like liquid as they gallop. Several modern theories have been proposed for the ancient references to blood sweat. One idea is that small subcutaneous blood vessels burst during exertion. Other theories propose that a small blood-sucking parasite lives under the skin

and is then mixed with sweat when the horse is galloping. Or perhaps the blood sweat is just an illusion.

The Object: This “Celestial Horse” was cast from nine different molds due to the technical difficulty of casting a piece of this size and weight in its entirety. The pieces were assembled and polished to a brilliant copper color. The copper has been corroded by water and acid producing the present blue-green patina. Red, black and white pigments were then added. Traces of the pigment are evident around the eyes, ears, mane and tail. The statue was a funerary object to be buried with a high-ranking official to ride and/or pull his chariot in the afterlife.

Possible questions:

What would it be like to ride this horse?

Does it look like he would be easy to control?

How does the sculptor show the power and strength of this horse?

Would you want a horse like this?

What are some things we use to show power and status?

Four possibilities:

A Taste of Asia

Off the Wall: Sculpture of the MIA

Absolutely Fabulous: Highlights of the Collection

Highlights of World Art to 1600

VTS

Mysteries of the Ancient World

Safari Through Art

Steeped in Tradition: Arts of China and Japan





References:

- Handbook of the MIA Collection
- DK Eyewitness Travel: Beijing and Shanghai
- Wikipedia: Ferghana Horses
- “Heavenly Horses” website
- Silk Road website
- Google Images: Silk Road
- artsconnected

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