



Dancing female tomb figure

On display

Title/Description: Dancing female tomb figure

Born: 0618 c. - 0906 c.

Measurements: h. 244 x d. 70 mm

Accession Number: 407c

Historic Period: Tang Dynasty (618-906), 7th Century, 10th century

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

Three similar figures of dancing girls are shown swaying to music, their long sleeves flopping over their hands. They can be differentiated by their hair styles: no. 142 has her hair arranged in a series of parallel shells from front to back, no. 143 has her hair drawn into two widely separated peaks, and no. 144 has two smaller top-knots. All three wear high-waisted dresses in an apparently lightweight material which falls in soft folds to outline a square at the base; toes of shoes peep beneath the dresses at the corners.

Entertainers, musicians, acrobats and especially dancers were popular subjects for the numerous pottery figures buried in tombs. The Tang capital at Chang'an (present-day Xi'an) was cosmopolitan in character, with merchants from most parts of Asia trading there. Dancers and musicians were brought to the capital from central and southern Asia, and especially from the city states along the Silk Route. There was probably competition among the élite as to who had the more exotic musicians and dancers at any one time performing in their households. These ladies may not, however, represent foreigners, as their hair is dressed in Chinese fashion in the mode of the early eighth century, as seen in the wall paintings of the tomb of the Princess Yongtai (Akiyama *et al.*, 1968: no. 230; *Wenwu*, 1964.1: 7-33, fig. 10).

Although red earthenware, used here, was less common than grey, it is seen in a number of tomb figure groups, as in the figures from the tomb of Cui Chen (d. 706) in Yanshi Xian in Henan province (*Wenwu cankao ziliao*, 1958.8: 64-6). Most of the pigment with which these figures were originally painted has worn away. They have been broken and repaired at the arms. Thermoluminescence tests on nos. 142-3, conducted in 1973 at the Oxford Research Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art, gave dates for the last firing of these objects at between 700 and 1360 years ago, consistent with a Tang attribution.

Entry taken from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection 3 volume catalogue, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997).

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

I am particularly struck by the Tang dancers. I wonder for whom are they performing? Created to accompany a now anonymous but certainly important official in death, they were obviously meant to entertain perpetually. But what do they tell us about the culture where they were made? Picture the period: the music, the costumes. The magic of Chang'an (now Xi'an), that wonderful imperial capital of the Tang Dynasty, so prosperous, so glorious. The city must have been buzzing with traders and artists from wide and far, and yet the Tang Dancers appear so peaceful. As dancers they would most likely have been used to performing in a buzzing dynastic room, entertaining wealthy traders accompanied by the finest musicians of the city, skilled in the use of exotic oriental musical instruments, and surrounded by fine cuisine and artists - painters and sculptors. In these diminutive works of art, the potter has captured something truly evocative of the atmosphere. The dancers were created to entertain in the afterlife, and now we can gaze and wonder over a thousand years later. Were they court dancers or central Asian entertainers? What dance and which music? What was their actual role in the burial process? That we will never know, but we can enjoy the sensations that they still evoke so vividly.

—
David Richardson, Vice-Chancellor, UEA

Provenance

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1933. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East

Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
