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Arts & Crafts of China : Horses in Chinese History



A very sophisticated horse culture has existed in China throughout the country's history. The extremely large vocabulary connected to horses and all things equestrian found in the first Chinese dictionary, published in the Eastern Han Dynasty (25 AD - 220 AD), testifies to the popularity of the horse. There are an incredible 119 Chinese words - characters - incorporating the horse pictograph.

The dreams and desires of the leaders of the Tang and pre-Tang Dynasties for great horses were so powerful that the whole nation shared the same vision, expressing it powerfully in art, literature and even in burial art.

Reference:

Here Come the Heavenly Horses
by Oi Ling Chiang

Gallery News

Here Come The Heavenly Horses!

Our recent visit to New York was a great success and it was rewarding to see so many old friends at the International Asian Art Fair. We look forward to returning to New York for next year's "Asia Week" to be held in the middle of March 2009.

We have given the main gallery in Hong Kong a face-lift and we are delighted with the outcome. We hope you like the new look and the improved presentation and lighting. We have already received many compliments!

This month's excitement is our special exhibition of horses held in honour of the equestrian events of the summer Olympics, to be held in Hong Kong. Entitled "**Here Come the Heavenly Horses**" the exhibition promises to be a resounding success. In the exhibition we have focused on the period spanning from Neolithic times to just before the Song Dynasty (960 - 1279 AD). Watch out for the 120-page book Oi Ling has published to mark the occasion.

If you are visiting Hong Kong for the Olympics, WELCOME!



Oi Ling Chiang

Product Highlights

Terracotta



The pair is modeled after the celebrated "Dance" horse of the imperial family. The horses are fully decorated with trappings and harness. The leaf shape trappings are finely decorated with the trailing plant motifs reflecting an integration of foreign culture as well as the Tang court's appreciation of foreign art and decorative elements. The unique characteristic displayed by the pair is its portraiture. The normal portraiture of this type of performance horses is standing foursquare on a plinth; whereas this pair is portrayed as if they were treading with their heads slightly turning to the side. Such portraiture creates a graceful curve on the neck line as well as capturing the horses in a very elegant posture. The textured saddles with their ends slightly curved up suggest movements created by a gentle breeze.

A pair of very important dancing horses

Material : White Pottery
Period : Tang Dynasty (618 - 907 AD)
Dimensions : (H) 63 cm x (L) 75 cm



Furniture



The cabinet is considered "pure" as it has not been altered in shape or material. It was common practice in the 80's and 90's to alter the shape or the wood of a piece of furniture for commercial reasons. Traditionally, Chinese carpenters appreciated the incorporation of different types of wood to create a textural and tonal difference in a piece of furniture. Unfortunately, the majority of furniture dealers didn't appreciate the same aesthetics and limited their appreciation to resale value. The view at the time was that a piece of furniture which was all made of Huanghuali wood would fetch a higher price. As a result, many furniture pieces which incorporated Huanghuali wood and other materials suffered. This cabinet also embodies the legacy of the scholar tradition of their appreciation for nature. The marble insertion of the door panels are symbols of natural landscape.

A tapered cabinet

Material : Nanmu, Huanghuali wood and marble
Period : Qing Dynasty (1644 - 1911 AD)
Dimensions : (H) 184 cm x (D) 58 cm x (W) 102 cm



Bronze



This beautiful incense burner is an excellent representation of the superb foundry achievements of ancient China. The base of the burner was molded into the shape of a coiling dragon stretching its neck upward with a man riding on the back forming the stem of the burner. The dragon rider was modeled with his right arm up holding a round sphere which was used for keeping the incense. The body of the sphere is decorated with different geometric patterns done in silver and gold inlaid. The lid of the round sphere is decorated with open inlaid featuring the tiger motifs which often seen in bronze of the Warring States period and the Han period.

An inlaid bronze incense burner

Material : Bronze
Period : Early Han Dynasty (206 BC - 9 AD)
Dimensions : (H) 23 cm



Featured Product - A Buddhist Stele

A Buddhist stele which contains the carved images of Buddha, the cohort of deities in the Buddhist cosmos and the donors is called a "Zao Xiang Bei" in Chinese. The literal translation of the term Zao Xiang Bei is creating images on a stone tablet - starkly straightforward.

Buddhist steles from the Southern and Northern dynasties (386 - 581AD) are highly regarded by scholars and connoisseurs of Chinese art and antiquities as they represent an art form which synthesizes 3 different traditions - the Taoist, Confucian and the Buddhist traditions.

This particular stele was made in the sixth year of Xinghe era which corresponds to the year of 544 AD in the Western calendar indicating that the stele was made during the Eastern Wei period (534 - 550 AD) in Chinese history.

The front of the stele has a niche with carved images of the Shakyamuni Buddha with two disciples on each side. Around the niche are different votive images of deities and events as well as scenes of a desired lifestyle for the deceased and descendants are represented. On the back of the stele are images representing devotees and patrons.

Buddhist steles served many purposes: 1) as emblems of communal identity; 2) to border sacred areas for the performance of Buddhist rituals; 3) as educational adjuncts to the sermons preached by the many itinerant clergy who circulated through the countryside.

A Buddhist Stele

Materials : Limestone
Period : Eastern Wei (534 - 550 AD)
Dimensions : (H) 130 cm x (L) 42 cm



The Southern and Northern dynasties were romanticized as the period of heroes and gallantry. In reality, this was a period of extreme chaos and bloodshed. Northern China became the battlefield for the different minority tribes to try to gain power and establish their territories. A lot of the noble and powerful families of the previous Han dynasty started moving southward to avoid the chaos in the North. During this period of turbulence, Buddhist ideology of peace and life after death became very popular. The government set up in Northern China by the minority tribes also found Buddhism to be an effective way of unifying the thoughts of people. Buddhism, therefore, was awarded with imperial patronage by the government established in the north. The prevalence of Buddhism also brought great Indian artistic traditions to China. The influx of a different artistic tradition provided a new dimension for artistic expression.

On this piece of Eastern Wei stele, there are images which are characteristic of the nomadic tradition *the frontal of a mythical beast right beneath the intertwined dragons which are characteristic features of art of the central plain region. Below the dragons and the frontal of the mythical beast is the image of a Buddha flanked by the images of apsaras presented in traditional Chinese hairstyle and clothing. Apsaras are of Hindu origin and came to China as a result of the Indian influence from Buddhism.

Buddhist steles are creations inspired by a new tradition and ideology reinterpreted using local value and traditions. Stone steles of the Han dynasty are known for their fine low relief carvings which are enhanced by paintings. With the Buddhist influence, artisans started integrating low and high relief with high projection carvings making the dynamic of a piece of carving much more powerful and compact.

Special Event

We are delighted to announce a special exhibition of horses to commemorate Hong Kong's status as the 'Equine Capital' for this year's summer Olympics. The exhibition, entitled "Here Come The Heavenly Horses" will take place from 12th to 26th August, 2008 in our main gallery at 52 Hollywood Road, Central. The opening night party is on the 12th August so look out for your invitation in the post, or contact event@oilingantiques.com to be put on the mailing list. The exhibition will showcase terracotta and stone pieces and is accompanied by a 120-page book written by Oi Ling.



Ask the Expert

Why do we see so many pottery horses from the Han and Tang dynasties but so few from the Song dynasty?

Both the Han and the Tang dynasties are known to have very strong policies relating to horse husbandry. A special unit was set up to monitor the number and the breeding of horses in both the Han and the Tang dynasties. The great importance attached to horse during these two dynasties is therefore reflected in the burial art as burial art represents a lifestyle which the deceased wished to continue in the spirit world.

In the Han dynasty, Han Wudi (the seventh emperor of the Han dynasty) sent different expeditions to the west of China to source superior horses. It is recorded in The Records of the Grand Historian that Han Wudi wrote a song called the Song of the Heavenly Horses upon the receipt of a precious horse from Fergana. From this example, we have a glimpse of the horse-fever which prevailed in the Han Dynasty.

Horse fever was bought to new heights in the Tang dynasty by the Li family who founded the dynasty. The men of the Li family were known for their superb equestrian skills, especially in warfare. Horses were not only used in military strategy but also used as a prestigious form of transportation and entertainment. The Song dynasty, however, didn't have a strong horse policy as the dynasty lost all the horse pastures to the Xi-Xia dynasty which occupied the north-west of China - simply put the Song dynasty didn't have the ideal geography for horse husbandry.

Submit your questions to our expert c/o expert@oilingantiques.com. We will do our best to answer them in future issues of Gallery News.



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