EARLY CHINESE POTTERY

FIRE AND EARTH

TRAVELING EXHIBITION SERVICE
FIRE AND EARTH

EARLY CHINESE POTTERY

Endowed with rich deposits of earth and clay, China claims one of the oldest and most exalted traditions of ceramic production in the world. Drawn from the renowned Chicago-based MacLean Collection, Fire and Earth: Early Chinese Pottery features 42 exquisite and transcendent examples of this illustrious cultural phenomenon. This exhibition encompasses two types of early Chinese pottery: vessels used for ritual and everyday functions, and funerary mingqi (明器, "spirit goods"), figures and models crafted to provide the dead with comfort and guardianship. Highlights include graceful dancers, musicians, horses, stamped tomb bricks, and delicately glazed stoneware. Exploring stages of technological innovation and regional nuance, Fire and Earth illuminates the astonishing naturalism and expressiveness of early Chinese pottery.

With rarely-seen wares from the Neolithic Longshan Culture (ca. 3000–1700 BCE) to the Tang Dynasty (618–906), Fire and Earth not only brings 3,000 years of vivid Chinese civilization to your community, but also a platform for exploring the sacred rituals and daily practices of non-Western cultures. This exhibition provides a wide array of programming possibilities to connect ancient practices to the daily lives of your visitors.
From the Neolithic era onward, Chinese potters showed an avid interest in decorating their work. To prepare the surface for ornamentation, potters usually used pebbles or bones to smooth the surface while it was still damp. They stamped designs on the surface and painted abstract, anthropomorphic, or zoomorphic patterns by using brush-like tools.

1. Single Handled Jar, Neolithic, Yangshao Culture (2600-2300 BCE), Painted earthenware, 6 1/2 x 6 7/8 x 6 7/8 inches, Courtesy of The MacLean Collection, Photograph by Bruce M. White, 2017
THE NEOLITHIC ORIGINS OF CHINESE POTTERY

PROGRESS IN TECHNOLOGY: EARTHENWARE TO STONEWARE

FIRE AND EARTH

NEOLITHIC PERIOD
(ca. 10,000–2000 BCE)

Yangshao Culture
(ca. 4515–2460 BCE)

Longshan Culture
(ca. 3000–1700 BCE)

SHANG PERIOD
(ca. 1600–1046 BCE)

ZHOU PERIOD
(ca. 1046–221 BCE)

QIN DYNASTY
(221–206 BCE)

Western Zhou
(770–221 BCE)

Eastern Zhou

Warring States Period
(475–221 BCE)

NEOLITHIC PERIOD

SHANG PERIOD

ZHOU PERIOD

QIN DYNASTY
MINGQI: GUARDIANS OF THE SPIRIT WORLD

- DECORATING THE TOMB
- ARCHITECTURAL MINGQI
- FIGURAL MINGQI

EARLY AND MEDIEVAL CHINA
It is difficult to pinpoint precisely when pottery was first fired in China, but it was likely during the Neolithic era, when the rise of plant cultivation and animal domestication greatly boosted the demand for various cooking and storage vessels. Some were used as containers for daily functions before being entombed with the deceased. The vast majority of these ceramics are associated with particular shape names, such as hu (壶, jar), guan (罐, jar), pen (盆, basin), and wan (碗, bowl), and each category can be further divided into several subgroups.

In the Lower Yellow River Valley in eastern China, a distinctive regional pottery culture, known as Longshan, developed in today’s Shandong Province during the second half of the third millennium BCE. Artisans crafted extremely lightweight black wares and white pottery, which were made from well-washed and fine-grained pure kaolin. The gui (鬶), a tripod jar with spout (cover), was fired and assembled in individual parts. The artisan also added incised contour lines and a raised, twisting bowstring band to visually separate the upper and lower sections. While most pottery of the Yangshao culture was created for utilitarian purposes, this elegant Longshan culture pouring vessel was reserved for ritual use.

2. Container with Cover (Lian), Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE), Glazed stoneware, 8 ⅜ x 7 x 7 inches, Courtesy of The MacLean Collection, Photograph by Bruce M. White, 2017
In general, Neolithic kilns were of small capacity, and the firing temperature normally reached about 600°C. During the Qin and Han dynasties, the capacity and temperature of kilns increased profoundly, resulting in the emergence of glazed wares, a revolutionary advance in pottery-making. As firing techniques improved in the mid-Shang period, stoneware, made with iron-rich clay and fired at 1200°C, became popular for its imperviousness to leaks.

For example, this glazed stoneware lian (奁, tripod container) (fig. 2) with domed cover would have been used to keep wine warm. Its incised sawtooth and lattice patterns are similar to those found on lian made of bronze. (The reciprocal influences between pottery-making and bronze-casting are evident in the large number of ritual bronzes with shapes closely corresponding to pottery vessels, as well as the many pottery decorative motifs imitating those of their bronze counterparts, fig. 3) In the case of this lian, the artist added numerous charming details, including three ducks swimming on top and figures with caps and gowns, possibly Daoist immortals, at the container’s feet.
3. *Bells* (*yong zhong*), Eastern Zhou (771-221 BCE), Stoneware, 12 ⅜ x 5 ½ x 5 ⅛ inches, Courtesy of The MacLean Collection, Photograph by Bruce M. White, 2017
Economic development from the Han (206 BCE–220 CE) to the Tang (618–906) dynasties set a solid foundation for a flourishing society, in which the Confucian ideal of filial piety was a prime virtue and the practice of luxurious burials permeated all social classes. There was a gradual decrease of human and animal sacrifice, as well as a shift away from burying large numbers of everyday utilitarian objects with the dead. Mingqi (明器), or “spirit goods,” became the predominant funerary objects, with a broad range of variation and figure types. Ensuring the well-being of the dead in the afterlife was a critical component of Confucian philosophy, as each person was meant to perform their prescribed social rites and roles for the cosmos to align harmoniously.
DECORATING THE TOMB

From the Western to the Eastern Han dynasties, the practice of interring pottery figures expanded to include the lower social classes, due to the popularity of brick chamber tombs and the new mass-production of mingqi from molds. Soon, in imitation of the scale of aboveground architecture, tomb chambers—often adorned with stamped or painted pottery tiles—evolved into spacious underground structures. In the Eastern Han dynasty, large numbers of pottery figures were placed in tombs, making chamber tombs of the dead resemble residential spaces of the living.

Wood and earth were the primary construction materials for early Chinese architecture—little of which has survived decay, natural disasters, and fires over the centuries. Earthenware architectural model mingqi, however, offer realistic representations of early Chinese dwellings, preserving for modern eyes the structural variety of courtyard houses, manors, and granaries, as well as the era’s rapid innovations in building technology.

5. Tomb Tile (detail), Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE), Earthenware, 39 x 14 x 4 3/4 inches, Courtesy of The MacLean Collection, Photograph by Bruce M. White, 2017
The earliest buildings in China were small in scale, with a very limited admission of light and air. With the advent of wooden framing and earth walls during the Spring and Autumn (770–476 BCE) and Warring States (475–221 BCE) periods, buildings could now be erected upon multiple-layer platforms on high foundations. The Han dynasty saw multiple-leveled structures rising even further from the ground; the stepped lou (樓), for instance, provided especially lofty vantage points, and was reserved primarily for surveillance purposes. With this mingqi, various architectural details that would have been incorporated into real lous are evident, including flat substructural supports between stories, or pingzuo (平坐) and interlocking bracket systems, dougong (斗拱).

ARCHITECTURAL MINGQI

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6. Watch Tower, Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE), Glazed earthenware, 40 1/8 x 14 1/8 x 14 1/8 inches, Courtesy of The MacLean Collection, Photograph by Bruce M. White, 2017
In addition to architectural models, figural statuettes—dancers, musicians, attendants, and warriors—were placed in tombs to guard and entertain the deceased in the afterlife. In the Tang dynasty, these pottery figures grew ever more sophisticated and animated. During this period of stability and prosperity, the early Tang capital Chang’an became the largest and most cosmopolitan city in the world. Trade flourished, while people and goods from Central Asia, the Near East, and Africa flooded the city. Foreigners arriving in China through the Silk Road ushered in new influences, materials, and technologies, greatly enriching the repertoire of Tang artisans.

The distinctive Central Asian facial features exhibited by the figure on the left—deep-set eyes, high cheekbones, and prominent nose—belong to one of the main categories of funerary Tang statuettes, namely Huji yong (胡骑佣). (The term Hu was used in China as a designation for nomadic peoples who immigrated to northern China in the Eastern Han dynasty.) Slightly pivoting his head and upper body, as if in vigilance, the seated rider wears the typical Central Asian belted coat—with V-neck and narrow sleeves—that became fashionable in Chang’an. The horse’s dilated nostrils, curving lips, docked tail, and taut musculature are rendered with exceptional naturalism. Traces of red, green, and white pigment suggest that these figures must have been quite splendid when first placed in the tomb.

This type of unglazed funerary figurine, together with the well-known glazed sancai (三彩, three-colored) ceramic figurines, constitutes most of the mingqi produced during the Tang dynasty. The mold manufacturing technique used here guaranteed that mass production of these thin-walled, hollow sculptures met the rising demand for these objects in Tang China.
The MacLean Collection comprises two collections—Asian art and historical maps—housed in two separate buildings on the north shore of Chicago. The MacLean Collection of Asian art is primarily housed in a building completed in 2004 and designed by Larry Booth of Chicago. The Asian art collection consists of perhaps 55 percent Chinese objects and 40 percent Southeast Asian objects, with the rest originating from other parts of Asia. This collection focuses primarily on three media—pottery, bronze, and stone—and each gallery’s display reflects this. The ambition behind the collection has been to seek out the finest, most unique specimens of these artifacts that can be studied and displayed, thus ultimately contributing to the knowledge of scholars and connoisseurs worldwide. The seeking of “knowledge for knowledge’s sake” is a value that the MacLean family continues through this collection.

Tongyun Yin received her MA in History from Renmin University in Beijing and an MA in Museum Studies from The George Washington University. Holding a PhD from the University of California, San Diego (2014), on the history, theory, and criticism of modern and contemporary Chinese art, she is currently the Curator of Asian Art at the Lizzadro Museum of Lapidary Art in Illinois. Yin has more than 14 years of curatorial experience in Chinese and American museums, and has published extensively on museum studies and on Chinese art history, including the upcoming collection catalogue on early Chinese pottery in the MacLean Collection. She recently curated the exhibition Re-carving the Past: The Art of Chinese Bronzes and Jades. Her new translation of Wen C. Fong’s Song and Yuan Painting (1973) won First Prize for the 21st (2017) Excellent Book Award for Ancient Books in China.
EXHIBITION SPECIFICATIONS

**Number of Works**
42

**Organized by**
The Maclean Collection

**Curator**
Richard A. Pegg, PhD; and Tongyun Yin, PhD

**Requirements**
High security;
150–200 linear feet

**Participation Fee**
Please inquire

**Shipping**
IA&A makes all arrangements; exhibitors pay outgoing shipping costs within the contiguous US

**Booking Period**
12 weeks

**Tour**
January 2022–December 2024

**Publication**
The MacLean Collection: Early to Medieval Chinese Pottery with essays by Tongyun Yin and Zheng Wei (forthcoming)

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