

Bronze censers and gilt cups

Chinese show offers more than Flying Horse

By EDWARD CLEMENTS
It's not always true that good things come in small packages, but in the case of the Chinese Exhibition, at the Royal Ontario Museum until November 16, the adage is truly apt.

A lot of publicity has been given to such items as the jade funeral suit of Princess Tou Wan; the stone Kneel-

ing serving-woman; the ferocious-looking tomb guardian; and, of course, the Flying Horse. These are all worth seeing and studying — particularly for the graceful feeling of motion of the Flying Horse and the serenity of the kneeling woman.

But from both an archeological and artistic point of view, a number of the other exhibits are even more

fascinating. There is for instance a series of pottery bowls and vases, in red and white or red and black, which in design, decoration and colour would be outstanding works if executed by contemporary designer-artists, though they date back to some 3,000 years B.C.

Some of the vessels, in shape and decoration, raise interesting speculation on the cross-pollination of artistic influences between East and West. Bronze vessels from Shang

tombs in Honan province, 1,200 years B.C., could at first sight appear to be from the golden age of Greece — but pre-date that age by hundreds of years.

Was there an overland trade route between the Aegean and central China much earlier than we know? Perhaps Persia was the catalyst or intermediary? And which civilization exerted the greater influence on the other?

The Sung dynasty porcelains, pre-dating Genghis Khan and Marco Polo by a couple of hundred years, also show evidence of the same cross-currents. But in this case, the Silk Road explains the mystery.

The Flying Horse has a number of bronze Han dynasty (second century A.D.) companions, scarcely less graceful and well-modelled than he himself, which follow his lead and are followed in turn by carts and carriages.

And still smaller packages: a charging carved wooden unicorn, also a Han dynasty product and surprisingly graceful; a magnificent eight-faced silver-gilt cup, each face decorated with a figure in high relief — to my mind the outstanding single piece in the exhibition; a gold bowl

from Shensi province, intricately embossed with lotus petals, animals and birds; a small dagger from the tomb of Prince Lui Sheng, Han dynasty, with its delicately molded handle; a bronze censer or incense burner, like the jade suit a find from the tomb of Tou Wan; and a pair of parcel-gilt leopards.

The Chinese have a keen sense of humour, a side evident in such items as the 4th century Tsin dynasty celadon pot, with its handle in the form of a dragon chewing away the rim; or the bronze ewer on which the eagle's beak opens intricately as the contents are poured.

"There are so many wine vessels," one spectator observed. "I guess the water wasn't very good to drink."

Finally, there are later porcelain, pottery and lacquer pieces, ranging from the Yuan dynasty statuette of the goddess Kuan Yin ("Is that Queen Victoria, or does it just look like her?") to Tang horses and camels, and seemingly translucent Sung dynasty wares.

You can see the whole range of the exhibition in less than half a day. To absorb it fully requires more than one visit.

But it's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see a truly magnificent collection of Chinese art and artifacts. And the catalogue on sale at the museum is as good an art-book value as I've seen. Buy it if you go, by all means. And by all means go.

•Edward Clements is a student of Chinese art and a one-time resident of China.

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