

A Minute with Antiquities | Tang Dynasty Sancai Heavenly King figurine

The Sancai (tri-colored) Heavenly King figurine is one of the most representative ceramic burial sculptures of the Tang Dynasty's golden age. Originating from the 形象 of dharma-protecting deities in Buddhism, it was sinicized and transformed into a formidable Chinese warrior figure, used as a tomb guardian to ward off evil spirits.

The Sancai Heavenly King figurine features a small bird spreading its wings as if about to take flight atop its head. The figure wears armor, with beast-head decorations on the shoulders and a protective plate on the abdomen. With glaring eyes and one foot pressing down on a reclining ox, the Heavenly King figurine deliberately creates a fierce and imposing atmosphere.

The figurine is predominantly glazed in three colors — green, brown, and white — which are bright and vivid, fully showcasing the opulent decorative arts of the High Tang period. The Sancai Heavenly King figurine reflects the highly advanced ceramic craftsmanship of the Tang Dynasty while also embodying the fusion of Buddhist culture and burial customs. It is a precious artifact that integrates art, culture, religion, and history.

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