



Two bronze mirrors. Han dynasty. c£150 each.



A bronze halberd. Han dynasty. £125.



Black and brown glazed pot and tea bowl. c12thC AD. c£50 each.

Ancient Chinese Artefacts by Vincent McCarthy



An offering table with foods. Ming dynasty. £195.



Two glazed vessels. Sung dynasty. Ewer £150. Lidded corn store £195.



A terracotta horse and rider. Tang dynasty. £595.

Chronology

Neolithic Period	c6000-1550BC
Shang Dynasty	c1550-1027BC
Chou Dynasty	c1027-221BC
Han Dynasty	c221BC-220AD
Six Dynasties Period	c220-580AD
Tang Dynasty	618-906AD
Sung Dynasty	960-1279AD
Ming Dynasty	1368-1644AD

Chinese artefacts have always been highly prized. Scholars of the Tang period were avid collectors of the wonderful bronze vessels of the earlier Shang and Chou eras describing and listing their finds in detail. Throughout the centuries bronzes and ceramics have found their way into Royal and noble collections all over the civilized world, often given as gifts by the Chinese rulers. So these objects have always been highly regarded and highly priced. However things have changed in recent years and a great many antiquities have found their way on to the market. Fine early ceramic vessels and figures are now very affordable to collectors and students of quite modest means.

Chinese history goes back a long way and at least half a million years to Peking Man. However the real story begins around the third millennium BC. This was towards the end of the Neolithic period and the Chinese people gave up the restless, wandering existence of the hunter gatherer and began to settle in the fertile river valleys and grow their own crops. Amongst the earliest artefacts that collectors will find are stone tools. Some pieces are very well made but these do not often appear on the market although they may be seen in museums. What collectors will find are flat axes of grey or black polished stone of simple or even crude manufacture. These are not very attractive and can be bought for around £40 or £50. A better than usual example may be rather more, say £75 or so.

The Neolithic period saw the production of some very fine pottery. The Kansu region has yielded some beautiful vases, bowls and urns in red clay with wonderfully free

flowing decoration in red, white and black pigments. Some of these are considered to be the finest early pottery in the world, surpassing the middle Eastern wares in form and finish. Prices will of course depend on style and condition but collectors will find many pieces in the £300 to £500 range, not bad when you consider that not many years ago you would have had to be a Paul Getty to own such treasures.

With the beginning of the Shang dynasty the emphasis changes from pottery to bronze working and we find weapons and tools. Socketed spearheads, tanged arrowheads and halberds appear on the market occasionally, as do tools such as sickles and knives. Prices are difficult to gauge but arrowheads can be bought from £25, halberds and sickles from £100. Spear heads are a little more scarce and will be more, say about £150 minimum.

The range of bronze vessels for domestic and ritual use is too wide to begin to describe fully but collectors will find libation cups, tripod vessels for food and larger ones for mixing or serving wine. Many of these are decorated with dragons or monsters or geometric patterns and are often found with an attractive green or blue patination. Prices range from around £400 up to several thousands, but you may find pieces with a thick crusty patination and minor damage for much less.

The Han dynasty sees the mass production of tomb goods, made to provide comfort for the person in the other world. We may find food vessels, figures of servants or musicians and dancers, even favourite animals. Models of buildings begin to appear; houses, watchtowers, pig pens, cattle sheds, granaries and more. These are useful to historians as practically nothing survives of the real thing. Most of these tomb offerings are simply made in grey or red clay, but many have colourful decoration painted in water-colours on the surface after firing although this is sometimes lost. Collectors will certainly find a huge range of items at modest prices. £25 will buy a farmyard animal, £100 a small servant figure, £150 to £200 a farm building and £400 or so for a horse. The choice is wide.

The Han potters mastered the art of glazing pottery and we find a wide range of sturdy, heavily potted vessels in rich green, brown or yellow. There are wine jars, grain storage pots and tripod legged cooking vessels with lids. Such pieces are large and impressive but can still be bought for around £200 to £300 and are popular with home decorators. Bronze mirrors make an appearance now and continue to be produced for more than 1500 years. They are very popular with collectors as prices are quite reasonable at £100 to £200 for many examples. Most mirrors are circular discs with the front polished for reflection whilst the back has a pierced central boss, for suspension, surrounded by various decorative patterns.

The Tang dynasty proves to be more settled and there is something of a cultural revival. Silk painting, sculpture and fine ceramics appear with many middle eastern influences due to the growth in trade between the regions. Many more tomb figures are produced and collectors will find large glazed and painted spirit guardians, warriors, and scary mythological beasts. Prices will be around £200 to £300 for a decent piece. Horses, sometimes with a rider, and camels, can be found but generally with repairs to the legs as they are fragile and easily broken. A twelve inch beast can be bought for about £400 to £500 these days. Not many years ago when they appeared in the sale rooms they could fetch several thousand pounds. In Tang times horses were very important and the finest came from the steppes of central Asia. They were fine spirited creatures and some of the terracotta models reflect their lively natures.

The Sung dynasty is renowned for wonderful porcelain and especially for the pale grey-green celadon glazes. All manner of ceremonial and table wares can be found including plates and bowls, ewers and jugs, often with incised floral motifs. These are always popular with collectors but can be bought for as little as £60 for a simple dish to £200 for a spouted ewer. A distinctive black oil speckled glaze was produced for a time and an example of a simple tea bowl or lidded pot can be had for around £50 to £75.

From the medieval period and beyond in Europe, and equating to the Ming dynasty in China, porcelain is beginning to be exported. Blue underglaze plates, bowls and jars, simple domestic wares, can still be bought today for less than £100. The truly superb vessels from the Royal factories are scarce and they are much more expensive and outside the scope of this article. There was also an increase in the production of tomb figures but now in a more stiff and formal style than previously. Items of domestic furniture such as chests, divans, chairs, ovens, as well as complete buildings are found. Best of all is the widespread use of thick coloured glazes, in particular the bright emerald green which is seen everywhere.

Terracotta figures of officials, musicians or servants come in all sizes and collectors can expect to pay anything from £100 up to around £350 for them. Horses can also be found, rather more stilted and dumpy than their earlier Tang counterparts but in various coloured glazes. £300 to £500 should secure a good specimen. China is a big country with a long history and the pieces I describe above are only a fraction of what is available. The choice is subjective and reflects my own love of ceramics and bronzes, but I am sure collectors with other interests will find something to suit their own taste.



Red painted horse's head. Han dynasty. £150.



A ritual bronze cauldron. Shang dynasty. £495.



A glazed vase. c6thC AD. £225.



Terracotta soldier with black and red painted decoration. Han dynasty. £195.



A stern looking official. Ming dynasty. £395.



A bronze sword. Han dynasty. c£600.



A terracotta earth spirit tomb guardian. Tang. £295.



A black burnished vessel. c2ndC BC. £195.



A small neolithic storage pot. c2000BC. £125.



A terracotta horse. Tang dynasty. The legs repaired. £495.



A large neolithic pottery urn. c2200BC, £495.



A tall glazed funerary vessel. Sung dynasty. £395.