Luxury and the Tomb
Ca. 300 B.C.E – ca. 200. C.E.

The tomb was the abode of the soul of the deceased, who required funerary architecture and furnishings in keeping with his or her status. During the first century of the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E – 220 C.E.), new forms of tomb construction began to appear, replacing the wood-lined pits that had previously been standard. The tombs of the royal family were sometimes dug into the sides of hills, creating huge networks of chambers and passageways, but most of the tombs used fired clay bricks and stone slabs decorated with auspicious scenes. Luxuries used in real life such as gilded bronze fittings, jade, lacquered wood, glass and silk textiles were placed in tombs in order to perpetuate the lifestyle of the deceased. Unlike the austere ritual bronzes used in earlier tombs (see Gallery 232), these luxury items, with their precious metals, sensuous textures and graceful forms, were intended as much to delight as to awe their beholders. Not all possessions could be accommodated in the tomb, however, so substitutions known and mingqi or “luminous objects” were fashioned specifically for burial. Wooden figures of servants were common in the south, but elsewhere ceramic figures and models were used symbolically to represent the wealth of the deceased and to ensure their continued well-being and status in the afterworld.

Set of Tomb Bricks
China
Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E–9 C.E.)
Gray pottery with painted details

Large, hollow bricks used in the construction of tombs during the Han period were decorated with auspicious themes that brought pleasure and protection to their occupants. The tiger and bird probably represent two of the mythical Animals of the Four Directions, and the blossoming tree may evoke the mythical Fusang or Mulberry Tree. Horses, imported from Central Asia, were regarded as symbols of power and valor. The voluminously robed figures on the vertical bricks can be identified as guardians, since they carry a dagger axe with an almond-shaped blade fixed to a long haft.

Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 33-8/9, 12, 13, 14
**Casing Slab of a Tomb Chamber**
China
Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 C.E.)
Limestone

During the Eastern Han Dynasty, stone slabs often replaced brick as the favored architectural material for tombs. Reliefs carved on the stones often depict mythological scenes or the life of the elite. The upper register depicts a winged deer and a winged horse with a figure about to mount it. Above these are a running tiger and winged falling figure, possibly an acrobat. The middle scene shows a dancer and a musician playing the *qin* zither, and the lower register depicts two riders, probably officials.

Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 34-73

**Set of Tomb Models**
China
Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 C.E.)
Earthenware with lead-fluxed glaze

Ceramic tomb models known as *mingqi* or “bright objects” were a way to provide symbolically sources of economic wealth that the deceased could not take to the tomb. Wine vessels and figures of game players ensured he or she would continue to enjoy a pleasurable life in the afterworld. Lead was added to the glaze to lower the firing temperature, and small amounts of copper oxide were used to color the glaze green. Exposure to moisture in the grave has turned their surfaces iridescent.

**Grain Yard**
China
2nd century C.E.
Earthenware with lead-fluxed glaze

This model shows three stages in the processing of grain: on the right a figure works a treadle huller to husk grain; on the left is a rotary winnowing machine with handle and an attentive dog, perhaps on the lookout for rats. In the foreground is a millstone for grinding flour.

Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 34-207
Sheep Pen
China
Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 C.E.)
Earthenware with lead-fluxed glaze

Sheep were not as widely raised in China as were pigs—even today many Chinese will not eat mutton or lamb—so these sheep were probably raised for their wool. The shepherd has mounted one of his sheep to survey his herd.

Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 34-208

Pig Pen and Latrine
China
Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.)
Earthenware with lead-fluxed glaze

Pigs were probably domesticated in China as early as the 8th millennium B.C.E. and have continued to be the meat of choice for most Chinese to the present day. Pig pens and latrines were an important source of fertilizer.

Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 34-209

Gamester or Storyteller
China
Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 C.E.)
Earthenware with lead-fluxed glaze

This figure probably represents a player of liubo or “Six Rods,” a dice game which was all the rage during the Han period. Alternatively, he may be an actor or storyteller. Whichever is the case, it is clear that leisure activities were considered an indispensable aspect of the afterlife.


Wine Jar with Lid in Form of the Paradise of the Immortals
China
Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 C.E.)
Earthenware with lead-fluxed glaze

Daoism (Taoism) was a philosophy of self-cultivation that gradually developed into a cult of immortality. Daoist immortals were believed to
inhabit a mountain paradise, and this was often depicted on the lids of wine jars and incense burners. Real and imaginary figures depicted on the body and lid of the vessel enhance the sense of the supernatural.


Pair of Wine Cups
China
Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 C.E.)
Pottery

These wine cups are tomb substitutes for real cups made of lacquered wood, such as those displayed in the central case in this gallery. Although real lacquer cups were occasionally placed in tombs, the much cheaper lead-glazed earthenware versions were acceptable substitutes.

Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 34-158/1,2

Jar
China
Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 C.E.)
Pottery, with green iridescent glaze
Earthenware with lead-fluxed glaze

Lead glazes were used because, with the addition of copper oxide, they result in an attractive deep green color. Although we do not know whether the ancient Chinese were aware that lead glazes are poisonous, there is no evidence, that lead-glazed vessels had a practical use outside the tomb. The poor would have used unglazed earthenware, while the rich would have used lacquered wood or bronze vessels.

Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 34-205

Incense Burner (*boshanlu*)
China
Late 2nd century B.C.E.
Bronze

Burning incense dispersed odors, but it also produced *qi*—vital energy that promoted immortality. Incense burners were therefore often fashioned in the form of sacred mountains where Daoist immortals resided and refined their *qi*. This censer is remarkable for the semi-naked figure supporting the mountain. Since nakedness was rare in Chinese art, it is possible that this
figure was inspired by Western mythological tales of Atlas supporting the heavens, which may have reached China along the Silk Road.

Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 43-15

**Wine Vessel (zun)**

China  
Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.–9 C.E.)  
Gilt bronze  

Cylindrical jars such as this were the standard wine vessel during the Han period (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.) and are frequently depicted in tomb reliefs along with ladles and wine cups. The feet of this vessel are in the form of bears—a common Han motif that may have been an oblique reference to nomadic Xiongnu invaders whose name was similar to the Chinese word for bear—while the handles on the body and lid are in the form of monster masks and mythical birds.

Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 46-91

**Three-Storied Watchtower**

China  
Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 C.E.)  
Earthenware with lead-fluxed glaze  

During the Han period, tall wood-framed towers were used for a variety of purposes: grain storage, entertaining and defense. The defensive role of this tower is shown by the crossbow archers at the corners of the second story. The architecture of such towers was often very elaborate, including large overhanging eaves and elaborate end tiles.

Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 34-206

**Tray**

China  
2nd century C.E.  
Earthenware with unfired pigments  

We know that this tray was not meant for practical use because the pigment was painted on after it was fired and was therefore easily rubbed off. It was instead a burial object, a substitute for a real tray made of a more expensive material such as lacquer. The motifs depicted on it
symbolize hope for the continued prosperity of the deceased in the afterworld. They include four kneeling figures presenting offerings, interspersed with a ram, rooster, pig and duck, together with a cormorant and fish at the center.

Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 34-218

Dragons were symbols of divine power and, although lacking wings, could fly through the heavens. Depicted within the tomb they were not only a protective force, but perhaps also a vehicle for the soul of the occupant on celestial journeys. The attenuated forms and springy outlines brilliantly convey the dynamic energy of these mythical beasts.

Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 35-323 A,B

This escutcheon, or protective shield, would originally have been attached to the door of a tomb or a palace. The dragon has bulging eyes, furry eyebrows, scaly skin and pointed, wolf-like ears. Below each eye, his claws grasp his upper jaw as if he is fighting with himself, and his bared fangs clench the ring handle. Such dragon escutcheons clearly possessed a powerful apotropaic force, defending the space within from intruders, whether humans or spirits.


As glass beads gained popularity during the Warring States period, they began to be inlaid into other objects as decoration. Usually they decorated more expensive materials such as bronze, but this piece is a
rare example of their use to embellish humble ceramic, thereby raising its status. Originally the glass would have been a smooth and glossy dark blue, but during more than 2,000 years of burial it has degraded and turned a pale turquoise.


Beads
China
Warring States Period (475–221 B.C.E.), 4th-3rd century
Glass

Glass beads imported from Western Asia begin to appear in China around the 6th century B.C.E. They were highly prized for their translucency and color and were often placed in the coffins of the elite or threaded through silk cords attached to bronze mirrors. The Chinese soon produced their own, chemically distinct versions containing significant amounts of lead and barium. The protruding “eyes” were built up by dripping droplets of molten glass onto the surface.

Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 34-150, 34-149/1-6, 34-151, 34-152

Model of a Multi-Storied Tower
China
Eastern Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E. –220 C.E.), 1st century C.E.
Earthenware with unfired pigments

During the Han dynasty, the aristocracy lived on great estates centered on palatial mansions incorporating multi-story wooden towers. The towers were both defensive—many of the models include archers—and also

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designed to impress as prestigious architecture, with tiled roofs and overhanging eaves supported by elaborate brackets often mentioned in poems of the period. Beautifully painted designs on the doors and sides of this house suggest that perhaps real houses of this time were also similarly decorated. A figure seated on this tower probably represents the owner.

Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 33-521

Ritual Disc with Dragon Motifs (*Bi*)
China
Eastern Zhou Dynasty (771–256 B.C.E.)
Jade (nephrite)

This disc, one of the most famous Chinese jade carvings in existence, is said to have come from royal tombs in the vicinity of the Zhou capital at Luoyang. The piece is astonishingly thinly sliced, yet the dragons possess a three-dimensionality and vitality that belie the intractable material from which they were carved. Perforated discs known as *bi* were said to have been used in the worship of heaven, but it is likely that this piece was valued as much for its beauty as for any ritual role it possessed.

Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 33-81

Rim Fittings and Stand for a Cup
China
Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.–9 C.E.)
Gilt bronze with modern simulated cup of Plexiglas

These fittings originally ornamented a lacquered “eared” or “winged” cup like the ones in the adjacent case. Such cups were used for banquets, but the exceptionally large size of these fittings and stand suggest that this example may have possessed a ritual purpose. The claw-shaped feet may represent magical clouds of life-energizing breath termed *qi*.


Wine Cup (*erbei* or *yushang*)
China
Qin Dynasty (221–206 B.C.E.)
Black and red lacquer

Flanged oval wine cups, known in ancient China as “ear cups” (*erbei*) or “winged cups” (*yushang*), were an innovation of the Warring States period (475–221 B.C.E.). Unlike earlier ritual vessels that were cast in bronze, ear cups were
usually fashioned in lacquered wood or fiber and testify to the rise in prestige of this medium. The strange square, mask-like shapes and comma-like motifs on the interior are typical of lacquer styles of the short-lived Qin period.

Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 48-36/4

**Wine Cup**
China  
Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.)
Black and red lacquer

Despite its small size, this cup is outstanding for the delicacy of its painted decoration. The filament-like fineness of the drawing would have been very hard to accomplish in such a fluid medium as lacquer and probably represents an attempt to imitate embroidered textile designs.

Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 48-36/6

**Container with Lid**
China  
Warring States Period (475–221 B.C.E.)
Lacquered wood with gilt bronze mounts

Swirling dragons and birds intertwine and conjoin, their limbs on the verge of dissolving into decorative flourishes. Lacquer, the sap of the Chinese lacquer tree (*rhus verniciflua*), had been used as a waterproof coating since the sixth millennium B.C.E., but it was only in the Warring States period that it developed into an important decorative medium. Pigments were added to give it color, among which carbon for black and cinnabar for red were the most common.

Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 48-36/1 A,B

**Striding Dragon**
China  
Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.–9 C.E.)
Gilt bronze

Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 32-185/8
**Lamp in Form of a Ram**  
China  
Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.–9 C.E.)  
Bronze  

The Chinese word for ram is a near homonym for “auspicious.” Rams were therefore frequently depicted in Han Dynasty art. The back of the ram flips over his head to form a container for the lamp oil. The wick probably extended towards the rear, so that the open body of the vessel would act as an ashtray.

Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 35-218

**Chimera (bixie)**  
China  
Three Kingdoms (220–265 C.E.)  
Gilt bronze  

The ancient Chinese sat on mats, and this mythical beast probably functioned as a mat weight. He is distinct from the traditional Chinese dragon. He is squatter, feline rather than reptilian, and possesses wings—features which Chinese dragons lack. Such creatures were probably originally inspired by Western Asian winged felines and were believed by the Chinese to avert evil (bixie).

Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 32-200

**Cosmic Mirror and Stand**  
China  
Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), 1st Century C.E.  
High-tin bronze alloy and gilt bronze (lacquered wood sections are modern replacements)  

Chinese mirrors were luxury items, intimately associated with grooming and dress, but also objects of magical symbolism, averting evil and illuminating the darkness of the tomb. Their reverse was frequently decorated with auspicious and cosmic themes, such as the starburst ornament on this mirror which possibly signifies the heavens and constellations. Most mirrors were hand-held using a silk ribbon threaded through the knob, but this one, because of its exceptional size and weight, was provided with a stand.

Purchase: the Edith Ehrman Memorial Fund, F95-18/1,2
Ritual Disc of Unknown Use  
China  
Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.–9 C.E.)  
Gilt bronze, silver plate, turquoise, and glass

This openwork disc epitomizes the Han love of combining a variety of precious materials—turquoise, gilt bronze, silver and glass—to form a single luxurious, multi-colored object. The design brilliantly combines the rotating dynamism of the dragons, their claws grasping each others’ bodies around the circumference of the disc, with the heraldic formality of the central quatrefoil.

Purchase: the Lillian M. Diveley Fund, 2000.11

Pendants  
China  
Western Zhou (1046–771 B.C.E.) to Warring States (475–221 B.C.E.) periods  
Jade (nephrite)

A material that was durable and valued, jade was frequently handed down for generations, centuries or even millennia, before being buried in a tomb. Although these pendants were made at different times, it would have been quite possible for them to have been strung in the manner that they are displayed here, for use as a pectoral, or chest ornament. The top two plaques and the disc date to the 4th to 3rd century B.C.E. The third from top is less delicate and may therefore be slightly older, probably 4th century. The dragons and bird heads on the bottom pendant are typical of middle to late Western Zhou, circa the late 10th-9th century B.C.E.

From top to bottom

Gift of J. D. Chen, 52-46; Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 35-88, 34-56, 50-21, 47-33

Ring  
China  
Warring States Period (475–221 B.C.E.) 3rd century B.C.E.  
Jade (nephrite)

Rings often were hung from belts or sashes, but examples decorated with such exquisite openwork as this piece are very rare. The ornament

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comprising interlaced ribbons with bird heads is unusually fluid and seems to imitate the style of lacquerwork practiced in the southern state of Chu. The deep green color of the jade is also characteristic of that region and reinforces the likelihood that the piece is of Chu manufacture.

Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 50-43

**Pair of Fittings, possibly for a chariot**  
China  
Warring States Period (475–221 B.C.E.) Early 3rd century B.C.E.  
Gilt bronze inlaid with glass

Look closely to sort out the intertwining dragon and bird as they wrap around an upside-down deer leg. The dragons are upside down, looking upward from the base. At the top, just below the hoof, a monkey sits on the tail of a dragon while draping an arm over the tail feather of a bird. Although we do not know how these fittings functioned—possibly they were part of a chariot—such magnificent objects likely suggest royal ownership.

Purchase: the Lillian M. Dively Fund, Menefee D. Blackwell Fund, Hall Family Foundation Endowment for the Oriental Department, Asian Art Acquisition Fund in memory of Laurence Sickman and Thomas L. Beckett Fund, 2000.15.1,2

**Tomb Brick**  
China  
Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 C.E.)  
Earthenware

This large brick would have been part of the upper wall of a tomb. Its top imitates the sloping, tiled roofs of real architecture, and its front is decorated with auspicious motifs: a deer head, perhaps signifying longevity, coins denoting wealth, protective monster masks and figures riding horses and in carriages.

Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 35-287/5

**Burial Figure**  
China  
4th century B.C.E.  
Carved wood with lacquer and polychrome

Although servants were still occasionally buried with their masters to serve them in the afterlife, from the fifth century B.C.E. symbolic substitutes were increasingly preferred. In the southern state of Chu, slender figures were
carved from wood and often dressed in silk robes. In this case, the robes are painted: the angular patterns at the lower hem and neck represent woven designs, while the scrolling patterns on the body represent embroidery.

Bequest from the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Myron S. Falk Jr., 2001.21.2