

PRESS RELEASE

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THE TANG SHIPWRECK

GOLD AND CERAMICS
FROM 9TH-CENTURY CHINA

*The Asian Civilisations Museum explores contacts between East and West through
Tang dynasty objects*

Singapore, 3 February 2012 – The Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) presents an exhibition of rare Tang dynasty (618–907) objects from the earliest and most important Arab shipwreck ever discovered in Southeast Asia. The findings have rewritten the history of trade in our region and of cultural exchange between East and West. ***The Tang Shipwreck: Gold and Ceramics from 9th-century China*** is on display at the ACM from **21 January to 24 June 2012**.

With a cargo of some 60,000 objects including gold and silver vessels, bowls, storage jars, and other ceramics, and the earliest complete Chinese blue-and-white wares ever found, the ship was on its way from China to the Abbasid Empire (with its capital in Baghdad, present-day Iraq) when it ran aground on a reef off Belitung Island in the Java Sea. The discovery of the wreck resulted in new and valuable knowledge about Chinese trade and art.

The Tang Shipwreck Treasure: Singapore's Maritime Collection was shown at the ArtScience Museum, Marina Bay Sands, from February to October 2011. The current exhibition will display the Tang Shipwreck Treasure in the context of the Asian Civilisations Museum's own collection – allowing visitors to make important connections between China and the Middle East. The ACM exhibition provides another opportunity for a wider audience, ranging from schools and grassroots organisations to families, to view over 130 of these precious objects.

“The Asian Civilisations Museum offers a fitting stage for this story of cross-cultural exchange, which was important for the development of Southeast Asia. Showcasing the *Tang Shipwreck* at the ACM against the backdrop of our own permanent collection will paint a more complete picture of the close connections between peoples and cultures from the two great powers of 9th-century Asia – Tang China and the Abbasid Empire,” says Alan Chong, director of the Asian Civilisations Museum.

Visitors to the exhibition will be the first to view a number of objects that were not displayed in the previous exhibition. These include a sumptuously decorated silver flask, notable for its size and workmanship, and a silver bowl featuring a rhinoceros motif. Both these pieces are quite rare, and similar designs have seldom been found outside China. Another object not shown previously is a large storage jar with parts of its surface still covered in coral, giving visitors a chance to see how these pieces would have looked when they were first found on the sea floor. A special handling station in the exhibition will allow visitors the rare opportunity to actually touch three genuine shards of pottery recovered from the shipwreck.

The ACM has also added three ceramic objects drawn from its permanent collection to illustrate the interaction in styles and technology between Chinese and Abbasid ceramics of the same period. These three tin-glazed ceramics from Iraq date to the 9th century, and show how the Abbasid potters tried to attain the whiteness of Chinese ceramics using tin glaze, a practice that spread across the Islamic world and eventually to Europe.

“The wrecked 9th-century Arab ship is among the earliest known to have carried Chinese ceramics for export to other countries. Many of the objects are unique or extremely rare, and therefore add to our knowledge not only about Tang China but also about Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Many of the objects reflect cross-cultural influences as traders sought to cater to different markets,” says Kan Shuyi, curator of Chinese art at the Asian Civilisations Museum, and curator of the exhibition.

Ranita Sundra, director of Attractions, Dining and Retail, Singapore Tourism Board, shares, “Through our close partnership with the Asian Civilisations Museum, the Singapore public will once again be able to view selected pieces from the Tang Shipwreck Treasure, some of which are being shown for the very first time. We hope that both Singaporeans and foreign visitors will take this opportunity to appreciate the importance and significance of the treasures on display at the Asian Civilisations Museum.”

The museum also has an exhibition of Indian textiles on show, *Patterns of Trade: Indian Textiles for Export, 1400–1900*. The two exhibitions illustrate how the region around Singapore was a focal point for trade and artistic contact for centuries. Visitors will enjoy admission to both exhibitions with the purchase of a single ticket at only \$8.

This exhibition is organised by the Asian Civilisations Museum and the Singapore Tourism Board.

Patterns of Trade: Indian Textiles for Export, 1400–1900 is on display in the Special Exhibition Gallery until 17 June 2012.

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About the exhibition

The Tang Shipwreck: Gold and Ceramics from 9th-century China

Exhibition Dates : 21 January to 24 June 2012
Venue : Asian Civilisations Museum,
1 Empress Place, Singapore 179555
Website : www.acm.org.sg
Enquiries : 6332 7798 / nhb_acm_vs@nhb.gov.sg

Admission charges : \$8 (individual) / \$4 (Friday 7 to 9pm)
– Family package at \$20 for up to 5 persons
– Free admission for children aged 6 and below
–Free admission for Singaporean and PR students, teachers, full-time National Service men, and senior citizens aged 60 and above
– 50% discount for foreign students and senior citizens aged 60 and above

Opening hours : Monday: 1 to 7pm, Tuesday to Sunday: 9am to 7pm,
Friday: 9am to 9pm

How to get there : By MRT – Raffles Place, By Bus – 75, 100, 107, 130, 131, 167

For more media information, please contact

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About the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM)

The Asian Civilisations Museum is dedicated to exploring the rich artistic heritage of Asia, especially Singapore's ancestral cultures. Through a collection of works of art and a varied exhibition programme, we hope to deepen understanding of Southeast Asia, China, South Asia, West Asia, and the Peranakan world. Rare among museums in Asia, the ACM connects audiences with many cultures.

Exhibition highlights

1. Star pieces

Image	Caption
	<p>Ewer China, probably Henan province, Gongxian kilns, ca. 830 Stoneware Height 92 cm (without dragon stopper) Tang Shipwreck Treasure: Singapore's Maritime Collection (Photograph by John Tsantes & Robb Harrell, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution)</p> <p>This tall ewer is the most spectacular of the ceramics found on the wreck. The lozenge motif with leafy fronds encircling its body is a Middle Eastern design also seen on other ceramics from the wreck. The handle terminates at the rim with a snake's head. The stopper, shaped like a dragon's head, roughly fits the mouth of this ewer.</p>
	<p>Ewer with feline-shaped handle North China, perhaps Hebei province, ca. 830 Stoneware Height 32 cm Tang Shipwreck Treasure: Singapore's Maritime Collection (Photograph by John Tsantes & Robb Harrell, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution)</p> <p>More colourful ceramics such as these white wares with green splashes found an eager overseas clientele. This delightful ewer shows the imagination of Chinese potters. The handle moulded as a curious feline and the dragon's head spout animate the simple vessel. White ewers with feline-shaped handles have been excavated at Ding kilns in North Hebei.</p>



Dish with painted floral lozenge

China, Henan province, Gongxian kilns, ca. 830
Stoneware

Diameter 23 cm

Tang Shipwreck Treasure: Singapore's Maritime Collection
(Photograph by John Tsantes & Robb Harrell, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution)

This dish is among the earliest complete Chinese blue-and-white ceramics known. The cobalt used to paint the designs may have come from the Abbasid Empire. The production of blue-and-white wares was short-lived during the Tang dynasty, however, because it did not match the prevailing Chinese taste. They were made chiefly for export, and this example may have been an experimental prototype sent for the approval of Abbasid clients.



Octagonal cup with musicians and a dancer

China, ca. 830

Gold

Width 13.5 cm (with handle)

Tang Shipwreck Treasure: Singapore's Maritime Collection
(Photograph by John Tsantes & Robb Harrell, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution)

This is the largest and heaviest example of a rare form of cup. The musicians and dancer on the outside are identifiable as Central Asian by their long curly hair and billowing clothing. During the 8th and 9th centuries, such entertainers were popular in China. The ring handle with its bearded faces also shows the influence of Central Asian metalware.



Oval bowl with flying ducks

China, ca. 830

Gold

15.5 x 10.2 cm

Tang Shipwreck Treasure: Singapore's Maritime Collection
(Photograph by John Tsantes & Robb Harrell, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution)

This finely engraved bowl is elaborately decorated with leafy sprigs around a pair of flying ducks. The paired ducks could have been an emblem of marital bliss and harmony.

	<p>Bowl with the head of Central or West Asian man ca. 830 Stoneware with underglaze decoration Diameter 15.5 cm Tang Shipwreck Treasure: Singapore's Maritime Collection (Photograph copyright Singapore Tourism Board)</p> <p>This depiction of a curly haired foreigner is unique among the motifs on Changsha bowls. It is possible that it attests to the presence of foreigners in the inland region of Changsha, or was simply an expression of the artist's imagination.</p>
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2. New highlights not displayed in previous exhibition

Image	Caption
	<p>Storage jar China, Guangdong province, ca. 830 Stoneware Height 66 cm Tang Shipwreck Treasure: Singapore's Maritime Collection (Photograph copyright Singapore Tourism Board)</p> <p>The wreck contained many storage jars. Some would have held food and water for the crew, but the majority contained goods for trade. Centuries of immersion in seawater has left this particular jar covered in coral.</p>



Flask

China, ca. 830
 Gilded silver
 Height 35.7 (with lid)
 Tang Shipwreck Treasure: Singapore's Maritime Collection
 (Photograph copyright Singapore Tourism Board)

This sumptuously decorated flask is notable for its size and workmanship. Stylised lotus petals cover the entire vessel except for the central medallions, which feature a pair of mandarin ducks, a symbol of marital bliss in Tang China. Attention was paid to every detail, as seen in the elegant handle formed as a snake.



Oblong bowl with rhinoceros motif

China, ca. 830
 Partly gilded silver
 Length 14.3 cm
 Tang Shipwreck Treasure: Singapore's Maritime Collection
 (Photograph copyright Singapore Tourism Board)

This is an unusual example of a Tang silver bowl as the rhinoceros is rarely seen on Chinese metalwork. The animal was regarded as auspicious and its horn was especially prized because it was believed to have curative properties.

3. Interactions between Tang and Abbasid ceramics: Complementary pieces from ACM's West Asia collection

Image	Caption
	<p>Dish with painted palmettes Iraq, late 8th or early 9th century Earthenware Diameter 24.6 cm Asian Civilisations Museum</p> <p>The sprigs of foliage surrounding the lozenge may have been inspired by the leaves of date palms, which have been cultivated in the Middle East and Egypt since antiquity. The popularity of this floral lozenge motif is evidenced by its occurrence on several ceramics from the wreck.</p>

	<p>Bowl with foliate rim Iraq, 9th or 10th century Earthenware Length 11.4 cm Asian Civilisations Museum</p> <p>Abbasid potters attempted to imitate Chinese ceramics but were bound by the limits of the local clay and kiln technology. In order to attain the whiteness of the Chinese imports, they added tin oxide to a lead-based glaze, which resulted in an opaque white covering for their low-fired ceramics. This tin-glaze began a tradition that spread across the Islamic world and eventually to Europe.</p> <p>The foliate rim and delicate shape of this bowl is closely related to the lobed forms seen in Tang ceramics and metalwork.</p>
	<p>Bowl Iraq, 9th century Earthenware Diameter 20.3 cm Asian Civilisations Museum</p> <p>This is a fine example of how Abbasid potters decorated their tin-glazed wares. The interior is painted with an inscription in Kufic script. This is flanked by a pair of green hands, which is believed to be a talisman against the evil eye.</p>

4. Handling station: Pieces for visitors to feel

Image	Caption
	<p>ACM invites visitors to the exhibition to touch three genuine shards of pottery recovered from the shipwreck. Visitors can get a first-hand feel of the glaze, inscriptions, and finishings on these thousand-year-old ceramics.</p>