

The Terracotta Army

Chinese civilization has produced an uncountable number of artifacts valued the world over and considered to be humanity's cultural heritage. For an example, one needs to look no further than the notorious ceramics of the Ming dynasty, historic paintings on silk, lacquered boxes, and many other pieces of pictorial and sculptural art. But probably one of the most well-known artifacts is the so-called Terracotta Army – a sculptural ensemble of about 10000 statues.

The collection depicts the army of the first Emperor of China known as Qin Shi Huang. The statues were found in early 1970's in a dark cavern in Xian, located in Shangxi province. Radiocarbon dating ascertains that the sculptures date back to the third century. The idea of recreating a whole army is incredible in the sense that no one remotely had thought of such an idea before. At first, the finding was kept in secret from the rest of the world, but it quickly turned out that archaeologists had run into a discovery that they claimed to be the most significant one in the history of sculpture. This find caused fascination all over the world, since it was the only exact copy of a life-sized army created by humanity.

The name of the sculptor who created the ensemble is unknown, but he or she must have been a person of immense artistic power and creativity. Most of all the sculptures are incredibly realistic, depicting the soldiers in extremely detailed form. Little can be said about the background of the sculptor as well, since almost nothing is known about his or her personality. Scientists guess that he or she must have been an individual with a military background, and who could understand the Emperor's wishes perfectly. The use of terracotta as the main material indicates that the sculptor was a master of their craft; since it is almost impossible for one person to create a masterpiece of such a large scale, it can be assumed that the sculptor passed on their skills and knowledge to other people who had also been working on the statues. In other words, there was no single craftsman working on the Terracotta Army, and the sculptor was actually a mass of ordinary people. The supposed collective of sculptors produced an incredible masterpiece which has endured for almost two thousand years.

During archaeological excavations, three large pits were found; they contained over 8000 real-size soldier figures, 130 chariots, 520 horses and a further 150 cavalry horses. The vast majority of these statues are still buried close to the Emperor's mausoleum. A large number of tools and implements were found as well. The Terracotta Army represents funerary art at its best, as a way of linking the world of the dead with the world of the living; it was known that the Emperor wished to take his army with him after his death.

The Terracotta Army is a unique artifact both by scale and its astonishing accuracy of lifelike replicas. The terracotta figures have been displayed in several different locations, but the most famous one was a recent exhibition at the British Museum in London. It was one of the most exciting demonstrations of Chinese antiquity to Western people.