Grave Guardian Beast (Slide #2)
Tang dynasty
“Three-color” glazed earthenware
China
c. 700
Bequest of Joseph Winterbotham
1954.412

“Bring back the glory of the Tang.” This was the dream of every ruler of China after the 300 years of great power, prosperity, and cultural brilliance of the Tang dynasty (619 - 907). Because of its many achievements, this period was known as the “Golden Age” of China. Trading routes along the “Silk Road” connected China with India, Persia, and the Mediterranean, bringing new styles and exotic goods from distant places back to China. The “Silk Road” was well traveled by caravans of people on camels carrying silk from China, and bringing goods to China from as far away as Rome. Tang China welcomed a diversity of cultures, people, and ideas.

Death is a sad occasion and through time people have honored the dead in different ways. The ancient Chinese believed that the human soul had two parts that separated at death. One ascended to the spirit world, the other stayed here on earth. To make the earthly spirit comfortable, elaborate underground tombs were created with all the furnishings that one would have in this world. In this way, a spirit would never want to leave the tomb to cause trouble for the family that remained on earth.

Tombs were created for the emperor, members of the royal court, and wealthy middle-class families. The tomb was designed like a royal household. There was an entrance passageway and an underground ramp with painted murals depicting courtly life and popular activities. Storage compartments along this ramp represented guest rooms. The front chamber referred to the entrance hall and the burial chamber to the living spaces.

In ancient China tombs were made of clay tiles or stone and buried beneath the earth. Sometimes they were built inside mountains, or under man-made earthen mounds. Because they could not be burned down or destroyed by war, they lasted longer than homes above the ground.
Most tomb furnishings were made of clay and were called *mingqi* (ming-chee) or "spirit objects." People, animals, guardians, vessels, tools, models of buildings, and replicas of objects used by the honored dead during their lifetime were among the *mingqi*. Some of the *mingqi* were located in the compartments on the ramp.

In addition to protecting and comforting the people who had died, tomb figures had another purpose: they allowed the wealthy to show off their possessions as well as demonstrate their respect for dead ancestors. Relatives and servants formed elaborate funeral processions bearing the *mingqi* from the home to the tomb. Families might spend all their money for a big funeral and have nothing left on which to live. Because of this, the Tang government made a rule limiting the size and number of *mingqi* a family could bury with a relative.

Guardian figures, like this one, were placed near the entrance of the burial chamber. A guardian figure's job was to protect and guard the tomb from evil creatures and demons.
Butterfly Mask (Slide #9)
Bwa people
Pigment on wood
Burkina Faso
Late 19th/early 20th century
Primitive Art Purchase Fund
1970.103

The Bwa people are farmers, and their life is bound to the earth and the growth cycle. Because they have a tremendous respect for the earth, the Bwa people consider farming the most noble of occupations. To them, a butterfly symbolizes growth and fertility. The Bwa Butterfly Mask is worn each spring in a festival to encourage the earth to be plentiful. Only a member of a secret society is allowed to wear the mask.

The artists who make the masks are usually blacksmiths who work in both metal and wood. The lines and black patterns in carvings are typically made by burning the wood with a hot iron. African carvers generally choose soft, young wood for masks because it is lighter for the wearer and easier to carve. They carefully choose the tree to be used and make offerings to the nature spirits that the Bwa believe inhabit trees, rocks, and water. Through these offerings they give thanks for the gifts they receive from nature.

Carvers follow traditional designs, and the masks reflect the skill and creativity of individual carvers. The sculpted wood is decorated with geometric forms. The black-and-white checkerboard pattern may represent the separation of good from evil, male from female, dark from light, or wise from foolish. According to the Bwa people, the hook shape representing the nose on this mask is meant to drive away any harmful spirits that may be present.

Because it is not the mask itself, but the spirit it calls forth that is most important, the mask does not have to last forever. This butterfly mask was carved less than 100 years ago. There are not many masks much older than this because they are made of materials that do not last. When a mask begins to rot, the village blacksmith makes a new one.
Each mask has its own special dance, music, and songs that tell about the personality and behavior of the spirit being that the mask represents. In many African cultures, when a mask is worn in performance, the mask itself becomes the ancestral spirit. It is believed that the spirit has the power to provide good things for the living, such as an abundant harvest.
GRAVE GUARDIAN BEAST and BWA BUTTERFLY MASK
(Slides #2 and #9)

SUGGESTIONS FOR CLASSROOM DISCUSSION
Both of these objects were made for different purposes in different cultures and times. They share, however, two common elements: both were made for a special ritual and were designed using animal attributes to represent the meaning of a ritual. Have students view slides of each object carefully. Ask students to describe what they see. What animal forms did the artist use to create these objects? Why do students think these forms were chosen? What about the symbolism/power associated with each animal’s attribute? Do the colors and shapes contribute to each object’s symbolism? How do these forms relate to the rituals for which they were designed?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES
Talk about what our contemporary rituals, ceremonies, rites of passage, and celebrations might be; give examples. What function do they serve? As if explaining to someone from another time and culture, have students write a description of an important celebration today. What does it represent for them? What is the story around it? Why is it important to them? Have them include a drawing of an object that is part of their celebration or ritual. How is the object important to the celebration. Is it similar or different from the Bwa Butterfly Mask and the Grave Guardian Beast? Explain.

Since the Silk Road had a significant impact on the culture of China, have students research what happened along this trade route. Have them identify it on a map. Consider the following questions: What were some of the influences of this route on the culture and people? How were goods transported? Did the route bring silk only? What other products or ideas were transported? Did you find any clues that might have influenced the artist who designed the Grave Guardian Beast?

Another trade route is part of the history of Illinois. Have students research the development of the Illinois and Michigan Canal Waterway. Have students discuss the similarities to the Silk Road. What would be some artworks that resulted from the canal’s development? Did the waterway influence the culture along its path?