Digitising Stein Collection

Helen Persson
Sir Marc Aurel Stein (1862–1943)
V&A database
Search the Collections
The Stein Collection

Object: Monkey figure
Place of origin: Xinjiang Uygar Zizhaku (autonomous region), China (made)
Date: 3rd century - 8th century (made)
Artist/Maker: Unknown (production)
Materials and Techniques: Terracotta
Credit Line: Stein Loan Collection. On loan from the Government of India and the Archaeological Survey of India. Copyright Government of India
Museum number: LO41-INDIA-77
Gallery Location: Ceramics Study Galleries, Asia & Europe, room 137, case A, shelf 2

Summary

The terracotta pair portray miniature monkeys, one male, one female. They are known in what is probably a sexual embrace. While similar terracotta with equally human-like postures (some playing instruments, manifesting or in sexual intercourse) in other collections set Sir Marc Aurel Stein (1862-1943) to believe that they relate human emotions, others believe that they may have fulfilled some amuletic purpose. The object was acquired at Veshan, the site of one of the former capitals of the Kingdom of Khotan, ca. 10 km west of today's town of Hotan in Xinjiang, China, and a major Buddhist centre. All these disparate quantities of antiques were brought to light, unfortunately generally not from scientific excavations. The most characteristic finds are small terracottas, moulded appliques in classical style and tiny animal figurations.

The Victoria and Albert Museum has more than 70 ceramic fragments and fragments of Buddhist sculptures, as well as around 800 and 2000 small terracotta figurines recovered by Sir Marc Aurel Stein during his second expedition (1938-39) into Chinese Central Asia, where he once again visited and excavated sites on the southern Silk Road, before moving eastwards to Dunhuang. At Dunhuang, he studied and excavated the Han-dynasty watchtowers to the north of the town, as well as the Mogao caves temples to the southeast, where he acquired material from the Library Cave. From there he moved on to the northern silk road, stopping briefly at Turfan sites but not carrying out any excavations. He made a perilous north-west crossing of the Tashkurgan desert in order to return to Kashmir where his excavations more ancient sites, before finishing off his expedition with surveying in the Kizil Mountains.
Storage
Landing page
Sir Aurel Stein (1862-1943)

Sir Marc Aurel Stein was born in Budapest in 1862. He studied Sanskrit, Old Persian, Indology and philology at the universities of Vienna, Leipzig and Tübingen, and map-making as part of his military service in Budapest, before settling out for a career in India. His formal positions from 1888 onwards were as registrar of Punjab University and principal of the Oriental College, Lahore and principal of the Collège Medicale. But his real passion was the exploration of Central Asia, China, India and the Middle East.

Stein carried out three expeditions (the fourth was aborted) to the western regions of China between 1903 and 1915, where he not only conducted archaeological excavations, but also geographical and ethnographical surveys and photographing. Today, he is especially famous for discovering the library cave at the Mazar-e-Attari Grottoes, Kharanagh.

Stein adopted British nationality in 1904 and he was knighted for his contribution to Central Asian studies. In 1943, when he was in his 80s, Stein embarked on his long-awaited expedition to Afghanistan, but died in Kabul a week after his arrival in the country.

Stein's Silk Road expeditions were funded by various institutions for which he promised to collect archaeological and textual artefacts. The intention was that the finds would eventually be allocated proportionally to the funders. Stein's first expedition (1903-04) was funded by the Government of India and the Government of Punjab and Bengal, and it was agreed that the finds should be studied in London and allocated to specific museums later.

The second expedition (1906-08) was funded 60% by the Government of India and 34% by the British Museum, and the finds were to be allocated accordingly. The third expedition (1913-16) was funded entirely by the Government of India. The intention was that the majority of finds from this expedition should be the foundation of a new museum in New Delhi, and that representative specimens and literary remains should be presented to the British Museum.

Being an indefatigable scholar, he published extensively on his explorations, such as own personal narratives and extensive scholarly reports. Based on his diaries, he published Sand-buried Ruins of Khotan (1915) and Ruins of the Desert Caliph (1912). Then, after extensive study and cataloguing of the finds, he would publish a more scholarly Scientific report which also included work by specialists in different disciplines. These are well-known titles: Ancient Khotan (1897), Khotan or the Tarim Basin (1901), "Khotan" (1909), "The British Museum." and "The Silk Road."
The Silk Road & the V&A Stein collection

The Silk Road was the collection of routes across Central Asia which connected China and the Far East with the Mediterranean and the Far West. Trade routes through this and Taklamakan desert in the Tarim Basin had already been utilized by the Shang and Zhou and were only one of the many commodities carried in both directions. Religions, languages, design and technology, innovations and animals, all crossed the steppes along the routes, through the Tarim Basin, one of the most hostile areas in the world.

Along the paths strange civilizations, visions of India and Persia, of China and the Hellenistic world, of Turkic, Tibetan and now-entrenched Indo-European tribes, developed. Rivers from the surrounding mountains fed the oasis settlements on the borders of the desert and provided a welcome respite for weary travelers. At least 50 kingdoms or city-states existed in the Tarim Basin during the first millennium AD.

However, the rivers began to change directions and dry up, and trade shifted from the Silk Road to the maritime routes as navigation improved. Gradually the caravans disappeared, leaving dead cities immediately preserved by the dry climate.

The re-discovery of the Silk Road is one of the triumphs of modern archaeology and Sir Aurel Stein was prominent among its re-discoverers. His three expeditions of 1900, 1906 and 1913 into the Uygur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang, the People's Republic of China, lasted seven years altogether and covered over 40,000 kilometers on foot or camel-back. Stein was a meticulous early archaeologist. When arriving at a new archaeological site, he surveyed the area and the site itself to draw a map to scale of the major remains. Stein excavated each area in turn, making sure to note the layers at which objects were uncovered and making note of every find. Every object was then marked individually with a string of unique characters which defined its exact find location in each site.

A gift in your will

You may not have thought of including a gift to a museums in your will, but the V&A is a charity and legacies and an important source of funding for our work. It is not just the great collectors and the wealthy who leave legacies to the V&A. Legacies of all sizes, large and small, make a real difference. Whatever support you can do and your support can help ensure that future generations enjoy the V&A as much as you have.

Shop online

V&A Pattern: Spitalfields Silks

Beautiful and practical, the books are visual summaries of the most sumptuous...
Buddhist pilgrimage sites: The Silk Routes

Bordered by mountain ranges, a network of trade routes (that later became known as Silk Routes) encircled the Tarim Basin in Central Asia. A northern route linked settlements such as Turfan and Kabul and then continued westwards through Merv to Palmyra and finally Antioch and Tyre on the Mediterranean coast. The southern route was connected settlements including Miran and Khotan. On the western side the northern and southern routes merged at Kashgar from where branches led southwards through the mountains to Afghanistan, Pakistan and Northern India (Gandhara and Kashmir). On the eastern side the routes met at Dunhuang from where they led to China.

From the 1st century BC onwards, these caravan routes provided a vital link between eastern and western civilisations and were used by merchants carrying commodities such as silk, fur, ceramics, jade and spices from the east and linen, ivory, gems and gold from the west. Trading goods also included foodstuffs (grains and fruits) and livestock (sheep and camel).

The Silk Routes were also used by pilgrims making travelling from China and Korea to Buddhist holy sites in India as well as missionaries travelling eastwards from India and Iran. Accounts written by Chinese monks record their visits to various settlements, Buddhist monasteries and temples along the Silk Routes, so providing evidence that Buddhism had spread throughout Central Asia and was thriving in the area during the 1st-2nd centuries AD.

Archaeological and documentary evidence indicates that both Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism were practised in the area, Mahayana predominating in sites along the northern route and Hinayana in the south.

The V&A has a collection of textiles pieces, recovered by Sir Aurel Stein in the course of his excavations at a number of sites along the Silk Routes. The International Dunhuang Project (at the British Library) also has a large collection of manuscripts and photographs.

Miran

The site of Miran, situated on the southern silk route, was discovered and excavated by the archaeologist, Sir Aurel Stein, in 1907 and comprises 15 structures including a fort, stupas and possibly viharas.

The shrines comprise a circular domed stupa standing in the centre of a mud brick building that is square on the outside, but with a curved inner wall, matching the shape of the stupa. The inner walls were plastered and painted with images of the Buddha, human figures and illustrations of stories of the Buddha's life.
Site finds

Sir Aurel Stein & the Silk Road finds - Astana, Karakhoja, Loulan, Mingoi, Ushak-tal and Yar-khoto

Astana

Astana lies south of Turfan on the northern Silk Road. It once served as a burial site for Karakhoja, an important trade centre during the Tang Dynasty (581-907 AD). Here Stein unearthed a striking array of burial objects, including clay figurines, textiles, gold and silver coins, and thousands of written tablets preserved in the dry heat of the desert. Ancient contracts for labor, land and grain purchased at Astana and Karakhoja show that carpets, rolls of silk, cotton and linen were often used as money.

The V&A holds several silk fragments dating from the third to the sixth century. These include plain and pattern-woven pieces, some of which have been restitched, painted and embroidered.

These figured silks incorporate decorative themes from Central Asia, Persia and China, reflecting the rich weaving of cultures which occurred along the Silk Road.

Karakhoja

Karakhoja lies south of Turfan, towards the eastern end of the northern Silk Road. The Chinese established a military post at Karakhoja in the fourth century AD, but it fell to successive nomadic groups until the Chinese regained it during the Tang Dynasty (581-907 AD). Later, the Turfan Uyghurs made Karakhoja their capital. Stein excavated its Buddhist shrines and cave-temples, finding for example Uyghur text fragments, some textile fragments and fragments of stucco Boddhisattva, some of them painted.
Stein Mellon Textile Project at the V&A

Helen Parmson
Curator (Collections Management), V&A Department

The Stein Mellon Textile Project was carried out between October 2003 and August 2004 when the V&A undertook a co-operative project with the Stein Foundation to create an international liaison for textile scholars from the Stein Foundation situated in New Delhi. The Stein Foundation, founded by Charles and Daphne Stein, has been dedicated to the preservation of the Stein Material from the Stein Foundation Library in New Delhi.

The Stein Foundation acts as an intermediary for nearly 300 textile fragments, retrieved from the site of abandoned racetrack settlements along the Silk Road. The entire area now falls within the boundaries of the UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Silk Route Gansu Province. The fragments were brought to the V&A for the Stein Foundation's Seminars, exhibitions, and research projects. Each textile fragment is catalogued, photographed, and catalogued, and the results are made available to the Stein Foundation and the public. This project was made possible through funding from the Stein Foundation.

Storage of the Stein Loan Collection

Thidiska Bakharaudit
Textile Conservator

A nine-month project funded by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation was set up to improve the storage of the 600 objects in the V&A Stein textile collection. The objects had been stored in six drawers (190 x 700 x 105mm) and on two shelves in the textile store. The Eastern Collection Office. A limited amount of extra space was allocated for the improvements. Some work had already been carried out as part of this project, and a large number of small flat textiles had been put in ready-made acid-free card folders. Most of the other small objects were in transparent bags labeled with adhesive stickers. Various mounting techniques and conservation treatments have been used since the collection arrived at the V&A. Textiles had been sandwiched between two sheets of glass, Perspex or glass and wood. Fragments had been adhered to cardboard or metal and fitted onto backing fabric adhered to boards. A priority for improvement was a drawer storing 40 large flat textiles in 21 years, making them very difficult to access. At this point most of the textiles had already been removed from original Stein packaging (some envelopes and fabric bags) but a few very fragmented textiles were still wrapped in the original paper parcel wrapping.

The key objectives of the storage project were to:

- preserve the archaeological textile collection, where possible, as found, although some of the objects had been treated at the Museum prior to this project;
- provide safe, protective storage and remove and replace any unsuitable and potentially harmful storage and mounting materials;
- improve access for study and safe handling within the Museum;
- clearly label all objects and other material linked to the collection, to include the museum loan number, the original Stein site number and a photograph;
- list the exact location of each textile.

Figure 1: A storage drawer housing six boxes, each containing four flat textiles. (Photograph by Thidiska Bakharaudit; own image for larger version)
Resources

The Stein Collection - resources

Books and articles
- O'Hare, M., 'An analysis of the Central Asian silks excavated by Sir Aurel Stein', Southwestern Journal of Anthropology 1, 1945, pp. 332-446.
- Robb, J., 'Some remarks on strikingly similar Han figured silks found in recent years in diverse sites', Archives of Asian Art 20, 1972-73, pp. 12-25.

Web resources
- International Dunhuang Project is an worldwide online resource on Silk Road materials and sites.
- The British Museum: Handbook to the collections of Sir Aurel Stein in the UK
- The British Museum: Sir Aurel Stein: proceedings of the British Museum study day, 23 March 2002
- British Library: Chinese Section History and Scope of the Collections
- Digital Archive of Two Burke Rare Books: digitised versions of books by Sir Aurel Stein
- Library of Hungarian Academy of Sciences online exhibition: Hidden Treasures of the Silk Road: Aurel Stein and the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas
- Library of Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the University of Hong Kong Museum & Art Gallery online exhibition: Fascinated by the Orient: Aurel Stein 1862-1943
- Wikipedia entry: Sir Marc Aurel Stein

Stein Collection material at the V&A

Related content
- Islamic textiles & dyes reading list
- South & South East Asian furniture, woodwork & armories reading list
- Chinese ivory & bronzes carving reading list
- Islamic metalwork reading list
- Knotting meeting list
- Ethical Fashion reading list
- For reading list

Related images from the collections

Become a V&A Member

V&A Members enjoy a wealth of benefits, including free entry to exhibitions, previews, exciting events and the V&A Members’ Room. In addition, you will be supporting the vital work of the V&A.
Website addresses

- [http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/s/sir-aurel-stein-1862-1943/](http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/s/sir-aurel-stein-1862-1943/)
- [http://collections.vam.ac.uk/](http://collections.vam.ac.uk/)
- [http://idp.bl.uk/](http://idp.bl.uk/)