



Immersed in the  
Beauty  
of Serenity

BUDDHIST SCULPTURES FROM QINGZHOU





Left: Detail from Standing figure of a Bodhisattva, Northern Qi (550-77), Right: Standing figure of a Bodhisattva, late Northern Wei (500-50)

BY DR LIU YANG  
CURATOR OF CHINESE ART  
ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

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the 50th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. To commemorate this event, a number of museums in Beijing presented their best exhibitions. It was in this month that Edmund Capon, Director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and I were in Beijing, where we paid a visit to the National Museum of History and unexpectedly saw the exhibition of Buddhist sculpture from Qingzhou. For the first time, these works were unveiled to the public since their excavation in 1996.

We were astonished by the sheer quality of these sculptures. The majority of the figures were carved from a fine-grained pale grey limestone which permits a high degree of precision and a smooth finish. Their refined and sensual naturalism gives them a unique and extraordinary beauty which distinguishes them from other works. We were also surprised to find so much of the original pigment and even gilding. They are indisputably among the most beautiful works of art made in the service of the Buddhist faith in ancient China.

With great amazement we later learnt how these sculptures were discovered. Found by accident, like the terracotta warriors of Xi'an in 1974, this extraordinary caché was brought to light when workers were levelling the sports field of a primary school. An archaeological survey suggested that this was the site where the long-ruined Longxing (Dragon Rise) Temple once stood.

**M**ostly created during a period straddling the Northern Wei to the Northern Qi dynasties (early to late 6th century), the statues also include a small number of works from the Tang and Song period (8th to 11th centuries). These remarkable sculptures were buried in a purpose built pit during the 12th century. The sculptures were deposited in careful order: roughly laid in three layers with an east-west orientation. Those made in pottery, cast iron, painted clay, and lacquered wood were found at the bottom. The better preserved stone torsos were in the centre, and stone heads were deposited alongside the walls. Fragment pieces in stone found their way underneath the larger stelae. The exact number of figures interred in the pit remains unknown, as most were already broken at the time of their interment. It is estimated that the pit must have contained fragments of at least 320 sculptures but other estimates suggest a total number of more than 400.

All the sculptures from the hoard have suffered destruction on purpose: many were beheaded, or had bodies separated from arms and legs. There were obvious traces of the ground being pummelled near the areas of the broken pieces. The burial of the sculptures was evidently planned carefully, and over 100 coins of the 12th century were found inside the pit which seem to have been scattered purposefully. So it seems that the interment was conducted accompanying a kind of ceremony.

#### INDISPUTABLE MASTERPIECES

At the first glance of these extraordinary sculptures, we were bowled over! Soon after we returned to Sydney, Edmund and I started working on a plan to bring them to the audience in Australia. I still recall our several trips to Qingzhou, and the last one was in early January 2008, which suffers some of the lowest yearly temperatures in northern China. It was going to snow, and the landscape looked desolate. The municipal museum switched off its heating to save costs during this low season. A raw iciness



Clockwise from top left: Stele with a Buddha and two Bodhisattvas, Eastern Wei (534-50), Standing figure of a Buddha, Northern Qi (550-77). Detail from Standing figure of a Buddha, Northern Qi (550-77).



THE MOST IMPRESSIVE WORKS ARE FREE-STANDING FIGURES OF BUDDHA AND BODHISATTVA. A NUMBER OF SPECTACULAR EXAMPLES ARE LIFE-SIZED AND AS NATURALISTIC AS POSSIBLE WITHIN THE CONSTRAINTS OF THE FORM AND CONTENT. THE FOREMOST FEATURE OF THESE SCULPTURES IS THEIR SENSE OF EMPHATIC SOLIDITY AND WEIGHT.

permeated the building. During hours of selection and inspection of sculptures at both the exhibition hall and the storage area, Edmund and I kept rubbing our hands together and breathing on them to make them warmer. Nevertheless it was the enormous enjoyment of being amongst these works that dispelled any chill there may have been in our immediate environment.

The result was the extraordinary assemblage of some 35 artefacts, each of them a masterpiece. Some sculptures are stelae with one central Buddha and two attendant Bodhisattvas standing against a richly ornamented leaf-shaped background. The Buddha would raise his right hand in the *abhaya mudra* (dispelling fear) gesture and the left in *varada mudra* (the gesture of munificence). The upper section of a stela (some are missing) often depict two rows of *apsaras* or celestial beings along its pointed edge. Briskly fluttering ribbons around the soaring celestial musicians combine with the pointed mandorla to create a rushing sensation as though an earthly breeze was sweeping everything towards heaven.

One of the most characteristic iconographic elements created in Qingzhou Buddhist sculpture is the dragon and the lotus pedestal. Full of lively, sinuous movement, the beasts writhe around the pedestals with their tails twisting upwards vigorously; lotus flowers issue from each dragon's mouth and form part of the pedestal for the bodhisattva. Their curves and movement counterbalance the linear

rhythm of the figures' garments and form a sharp contrast with the calm contemplation and immovable stability of the triad.

Some of such stelae are monumental: one in particular is 312 cm high and 180 cm wide, weighs over a ton and is the largest stela in existence. Despite being damaged, this fragmental sculpture emanates a pervasive sense of glory, making it one of the most powerful devotional images among all the works created during the Northern dynasties in Shandong. Compared to the bodhisattvas, the Buddha appears massive. The full faces, powerful torsos and robes with minimal linear folds suggest a new interest in the body.

The most impressive works are free-standing figures of Buddha and Bodhisattvas. A number of spectacular examples are life-sized and as naturalistic as possible within the constraints of the form and content. Freestanding figures, divorced from the great mandorla backgrounds, dominate sculpture-making in this region during the Northern Qi dynasty (550-77). The foremost feature of these sculptures is their sense of emphatic solidity and weight. Their draped garments are also unusual; thin and light, they convey an impression of great simplicity, permitting a greater awareness of the physique beneath. The garments are sometimes almost entirely pleatless; only around the U-shaped edge of the mantle is there a pleated frill. In other examples, the voluminous garments, although cling-

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ing to the body and revealing its slight curves, display a linear rhythm through the series of close folds. Such sculptures are not purely Chinese but a result of more direct contact with India. The impetus for the new styles seems to have come from the northeast Indian cities of Sarnath and Mathura, which emerged as leading Buddhist centres during the Gupta period (c 319-500).

**A**ccompanying this new sculptural aesthetic of mass or roundness is a trend in which the divine images were conceived and rendered in a shape closer to that of a human. The expression of the Buddha as both a man and a god is realised for the first time. Such a characteristic is particularly reflected in bodhisattva figures. The bodhisattvas are enlightened beings who have delayed entering paradise in order to help others attain enlightenment. They are usually depicted as less austere or inward than the Buddha, and therefore display more liveliness. Later, in the Tang dynasty, religious art flourished with a new vividness and literalness in the portrayal of the divine aspects of heavenly beauty. The bodhisattvas were cast as androgynous beauties, an ideal that was based, according to rumour, on local singing girls. However, the tendency to endow bodhisattva figures with secular beauty started earlier than the Tang, as exemplified by sculptures from Longxing Temple hoard. A number of superb portrayals of the bodhisattva from the Northern Qi period admirably reflect the divine, compassionate nature

of such beings, and is amazingly characterized by warm humanity and masterful treatment.

#### UNSOLVED MYSTERIES

As formally sensuous, spiritually profound and emotionally moving as they are, one question would haunt everyone who has viewed these remarkable sculptures: why they were destroyed and interred in the caché? Who did the profane damage to them? Chinese archaeologists have speculated that the destruction might be the result of the Northern Zhou dynasty's persecution of Buddhism under Emperor Wu (r 561-78), who believed the temples had become too rich and powerful. In 577, Northern Zhou armies conquered the territories of the Northern Qi, in the process destroying numerous temples and sculptures and defrocking hundreds of thousands of monks and nuns. Such incidences, however, do not address why the buried hoard also contained sculptures from the Tang to Northern Song dynasties.

Another supposition holds that the hoard was the result of the suppression of Buddhism during the Northern Song dynasty under Emperor Huizong (r. 1101-1125), who strongly favoured Daoism over Buddhism. However, Huizong's attacks were rather an experiment to demote Buddhism by changing terms and titles. It was not a wholesale persecution, and no severe destruction of temples and sculptures were recorded.

One theory suggests that the images were damaged in warfare in 1127-29 and





Clockwise from left: Standing figure of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, Northern Qi (550-77); Standing figure of a Buddha, Northern Qi (550-77).



were buried thereafter. In 1115, the Jurchen tribe founded the Jin dynasty in what would become northern Manchuria. After defeating the Liao Empire, the Jurchen attacked Northern Song China, turning Shandong into a relentless battlefield and subjecting Qingzhou to six sackings. Yet it is difficult to imagine that the battles could have resulted in such severe damage to the sculptures. There is little evidence of powder residue on the figures to suggest damage by explosives. The sculptures were also not destroyed in iconoclastic attacks. After establishing their dynasty, the Jurchen became increasingly sinicised. Their rulers adopted Confucian norms and patronised Chinese Buddhism with increasing devotion from 1123. It is thus hard to believe that Jurchen soldiers would desecrate and demolish Buddhist icons.

A suggestion that the sculptures were damaged in a disaster such as an earthquake or a collapsing roof, however, does not account for the clearly deliberate breakage of objects or the large quantity of such objects. Indeed, the more the mystery about the destruction of the sculptures was investigated, the more questions were raised. But perhaps, such an inquiry is no longer a priority when one is deeply immersed in the delicately sensuous forms and the sheer, serene and timeless beauty of these religious images born from extraordinary imaginations.

*Serenity in Stone: The Qingzhou Discovery, opens at the Peranakan Museum from 16 January.*