

THE LOST BUDDHAS

CHINESE BUDDHIST SCULPTURE FROM QINGZHOU

佛像遺珍：青州出土佛教石刻造像

Art Gallery of New South Wales • 29 August – 23 November 2008

In 1996 one of the most significant archaeological finds of the 20th century was made by chance in the city of Qingzhou (pronounced *ching-joh*) in Shandong province, one of the cradles of ancient Chinese civilisation.

While levelling a sports field in Shefan primary school, a group of construction workers discovered a pit filled to the brim with over 400 stone Buddhist sculptures. Created in the 6th century, these remarkable sculptures had been carefully wrapped and buried during the 12th century for reasons that still remain unclear. All were broken or incomplete at the time of their burial, yet, lying undisturbed for the following 900 years, many today retain traces of paint and gilding that hint at their original splendour and set them apart from other known examples from this era.

The 35 sculptures displayed in this exhibition are among the best preserved and most exquisite of the sculptures from the Qingzhou find. The exhibition is arranged in roughly chronological order.

Ten of the pieces in the exhibition (identified by catalogue number) are discussed in this brochure.

SHANDONG'S GOLDEN AGE OF BUDDHISM

Located along the Yellow Sea coast, the province of Shandong was an important region in ancient China. Shandong also lay at the end of the Silk Road, the famous trading route that connected China with Central Asia and beyond. It was along the Silk Road that Buddhism first travelled to China from India around the 2nd century CE. During the 4th, 5th and 6th centuries, north China was ruled by a succession of non-Chinese dynasties who supported Buddhism. Firstly, there were the Northern Wei rulers who came to power in 386 CE. Originally nomadic people from Manchuria, their capital at Luoyang west from Qingzhou along the Yellow River became the greatest centre of Buddhism in eastern Asia. Following the disintegration of the Northern Wei in 534, northern China was split into the Eastern Wei (534–50) and Western Wei (535–56) dynasties which were succeeded by Northern Qi (550–77) and Northern Zhou (557–81) respectively. Most of the sculptures found in the Qingzhou hoard were made from the early 500s to the 570s, straddling the late Northern Wei and the Northern Qi dynasties.

During this golden age of Buddhism, the original doctrines were amalgamated with existing Chinese cultures and faiths. Buddhist art flourished too, with distinctly Chinese characteristics emerging. Gradually the facial features of the Buddha became sinocised, and the early garments of the Buddhist figures introduced from India changed to become more like the costumes of Chinese scholar-officials.

During the 6th century Buddhism and its art also reached Shandong from the sea via Southeast Asia, and as it thrived there, Shandong became the centre of religious activity in the eastern part of the country.

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Stele with Maitreya & two bodhisattvas
北魏永安二年韓小華造彌勒像

Northern Wei period, dated 529
limestone, 55 x 51 x 10 cm

By the 6th century, the trinity (or triad) had become the most characteristic form of representing the Buddha in the Shandong area.

On this stele (an upright stone tablet carved in relief) the three figures stand on inverted lotus pedestals. An inscription identifies the central figure as Maitreya (the Buddha of the Future). His right hand is held in *abhaya mudra* (the gesture of dispelling fear) and his left in *varada mudra* (the gesture of munificence). As is characteristic of the early Northern Wei style, he has a high *ushnisha* (bump on his head), symbolising his wisdom as an enlightened being. The elegant linear rhythms of the heavy drapery folds, which spread at the bottom, are also characteristic of this style.

On either side is a bodhisattva, a being who has taken a vow of compassion to help others attain enlightenment. Although now difficult to see, the *mandorla* (almond-shaped background) is incised with a circular aureole surrounding the Buddha's lotus halo, a body nimbus, and a seated Buddha and two bodhisattvas above the Buddha's head, as well as flickering flames around the edge, and would originally have been coloured with pigments.

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Stele with a Buddha & two bodhisattvas
貼金彩繪石雕佛三尊立像

Eastern Wei period (534–50)
limestone, 310 x 180 x 35 cm

This is the largest of the sculptures found in the Longxing Temple hoard and, although damaged, remains one of the most powerful devotional images known from the Northern dynasties in Shandong. The small domed pagoda and *apsarases* (celestial beings) at the top of the mandorla (background) suggest the central figure is the Shakyamuni (Historical) Buddha. Shakyamuni and Maitreya were probably the most popular deities of the time.

The Buddha is massive in size compared to the bodhisattvas at his side. The subtle modelling of his face conveys a sense of divine reverence; his hands, now missing, were likely to have been in *abhaya mudra* (the gesture of dispelling fear) and *varada mudra* (the gesture of munificence). Indeed, the serenity of the figures forms a sharp contrast with the writhing dragons below, a feature unique to the sculpture of the Shandong area.

Stylistically, the figures show a transitional character. The full faces, solid torsos and robes with minimal linear detailing suggest a new interest in the body, but the triad arrangement, dragon/lotus pedestals and *apsarases* edging the boundary of the mandorla still reflect the earlier Northern Wei style.

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Stele with a Buddha & two bodhisattvas
貼金彩繪石雕佛三尊立像

Northern Qi period (550–77)
limestone, 86 x 85 x 17 cm

As Buddhist sculpture in Shandong evolved from the Northern Wei to Northern Qi periods, it underwent a series of changes. A new interest in plain surfaces – often set against concentrations of busy patterns of pleats – and a sincere attempt by sculptors to indicate the body's volume beneath the clothing are evident at this time. The impetus for this new style seems to have come from Sarnath in India, one of the leading centres of Buddhism in India at this time and the place where the Historical Buddha Shakyamuni first taught.

This unusual Buddha figure clearly shows this shift: the slim form of earlier figures has given way to a bulkier mass. The central Buddha has a full face and broad shoulders; his body shape, with its rounded stomach, is conspicuous underneath his clothes. His garments too reflect this new style: unlined in the torso and pleated only around the edge of the mantle. The two bejewelled bodhisattvas – with their intricate and graceful adornments and the foliate forms of the supporting brackets – further highlight the simple austerity of the Buddha figure.

Standing figure of a Buddha

貼金彩繪石雕佛立像

Northern Qi period (550–77)
limestone, 151 x 40 x 22 cm

Another important development in Buddhist sculpture from the late Northern Wei to the Northern Qi periods was the shift from relief to freestanding form.

This figure's foremost feature is its sense of solidity and weight. The draped garments are thin and light, conveying an impression of great simplicity and allowing a greater awareness of the body beneath. The robe is almost pleatless, instead decorated with a striking vermilion patchwork pattern that is one of the distinguishing features of Buddhist sculpture from Shandong. The pattern represents the Buddhist concept of *futian*, or 'field of merit', whereby offering gifts or hospitality benefactors can bring benefits not only to themselves but to the world. The rectangles represent rice fields; the benefactor is like a farmer who ploughs and then gains a harvest.

The circular bands on the halo were originally decorated with seven seated Buddhas (only four survive today), which identify the standing Buddha as Shakyamuni. Now missing, the Buddha's left hand would have been held in *abhaya mudra* (the gesture of dispelling fear), and his right would have held the ends of his monastic robe.

Standing figure of a Buddha

貼金彩繪石雕佛立像

Northern Qi period (550–77)
limestone, 150 x 40 x 25 cm

The figure shows the influence of the two distinct geographic versions of the Indian Gupta style, which from the mid 6th century was quickly absorbed by Qingzhou artisans into their existing repertoire.

Buddha figures from Sanarth, where the Historical Buddha preached his first sermon, are characterised by their sensually realised torsos, clinging robes and plain drapery. The Sarnath Gupta style became influential throughout India and spread to Southeast and East Asia, where it was adopted by local artists. A key feature of the Mathura Gupta style is the stylised, linear patterning of string-like ridges to represent folds in the Buddha's robes. Centred in Mathura in northern India, this style also reached Shandong and greatly influenced local artisans.

Here the Buddha's broad chest and well-developed shoulders reflect the Sanarth style, while the folds of the robes clearly show the influence of classic Mathura style. Yet at the same time, they also show the enduring influence of traditional Chinese patterns and linear rhythms. While some aspects of Indian style were masterfully adapted, others were ignored. For example, in Gupta art the Buddha's *ushnisha* is depicted as a conspicuous bump on the skull, whereas here it is flat and relatively inconspicuous, as was typical in sculptures produced in Qingzhou in the Northern Qi period.

BUDDHA OR BODHISATTVA?

The Buddha figures in this exhibition can be identified by the simplicity of their robes, the robes of a humble monk. Their hands are raised in various gestures, or *mudra*. The Buddha has elongated earlobes and a bump at the crown of his head indicating his superior wisdom. In the earlier works of the Northern Wei period, his eyes look directly at the viewer, while the eyes of later Northern Qi Buddha figures are downcast as if in meditation. The Buddha can also be identified by representations of some of the '32 physical signs' listed in various Buddhist texts and scriptures. These are also listed on page 136 of the exhibition catalogue. The Buddhas represented in this exhibition are the Historical Buddha Shakyamuni, the Future Buddha Maitreya, and the Cosmic Buddha Vairocana.

Bodhisattvas are compassionate beings who have delayed their own enlightenment and remain earthbound in order to help others on their path to enlightenment. Bodhisattvas are typically portrayed as princes, with elegant robes, crowns and precious jewellery. Compared to the Buddha, their attitude is less austere and inward-focused. Bodhisattvas are often depicted alongside Buddha, their smaller size indicating their lesser status.

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Torso of a standing Cosmic Buddha

彩繪石雕佛立像

Northern Qi period (550–77)
limestone, 115 x 43 x 25 cm

The outer garment depicts scenes from the upper and lower worlds. Carved in shallow relief, the pictures are only sketchy and some are barely recognisable. In the top central frame is a Buddha flanked by two bodhisattvas, which may represent a preaching scene. In the middle are landscapes, seated and standing figures, trees and houses – a representation of the human world. Surrounding the lower frames are flames and figures with animal heads and human bodies – these may be depictions of hell.

The sutras describe Vairocana Buddha, known in China as Lushena, the Cosmic Sovereign. In Buddhism, there are ten states of existence, which are also called the Ten Dharma Realms. Each dharma realm has its own characteristics. The upper four realms are known as the Four Holy Realms, which are beyond birth and death and liberated from *samsara* (the eternal cycle of birth, suffering, death, and rebirth). The remaining six are known as the Six Realms of Rebirth, including *deva* (heavenly beings), human, *asura* (a form of low-ranking being), animal, hungry ghost, and hell. One's state of existence depends on one's karmic activities. The idea of representing the dharma realms on the Buddha's garment is to show the body of Vairocana Buddha as a receptacle of the phenomenal world.

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Seated figure of a Buddha

貼金彩繪石雕佛坐像

Northern Qi period (550–77)
limestone, 94 x 69 x 63 cm

Seated cross-legged on a lotus base, this Buddha conveys an attitude of deep meditation. His eyes are almost closed, as if concentrating on an inner vision, and his lips seem to smile. His hands, now missing, were originally fixed into the arm sockets with wooden dowels. On his head are soft, wavy locks rather than the neatly arranged circular bulges that feature on many other Buddha images from this period. The slightly raised *ushnisha* is relatively conspicuous compared to others from this time.

The broad, stair-like pleats and wavy hair are part of the legacy of the early Northern Wei style. The fleshy body and limbs, on the other hand, are indications of the impact of the classical Gupta tradition of India, which exerted a great influence on the Buddhist art of the Northern Qi.

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Buddha head

貼金彩繪石雕佛頭像

Northern Qi period (550–77)
limestone, 28 x 18 x 19 cm

This near-life-size head of a Buddha has the warmth and vitality that is characteristic of Northern Qi sculpture from Shandong. The Buddha's expression is serene, with downcast eyes indicating meditation and inward vision. The *ushnisha* is a gentle and inconspicuous bump. The three 'beauty lines' on his neck are a typical feature of Gupta style, while the curled hair is an innovative interpretation of Indian iconography.

Other known examples and historical records indicate that a fashion for curled hair seems to have arrived in Shandong through Southeast Asia and southern China. Compared with other regions in northern China, Shandong was among the earliest to adopt the new style, which appeared, with variations (such as neatly arranged small circular bulges) from the end of the Northern Wei (c530s) and the Eastern Wei (534–50) periods.

A bluish pigment known as 'peacock blue' has been applied to the head after its completion.

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A pensive figure

貼金彩繪石雕思維像

Northern Qi period (550–77)
limestone, 90 x 30 x 25 cm

This seated figure wears a richly jewelled and detailed crown and a pair of distinctive disc ornaments on the shoulders. The face is still golden and, although the figure is damaged, we can deduce, from other similar sculptures, that the two fingers of his right hand would have touched his cheek in the pose known as *banjia siwei xiang* ('pensive image'). The throne is known as *quanti*, a name borrowed from a type of fishing basket with a similar form. Supported by a lotus issuing from the mouth of a dragon, the footrest derives from stelae depicting the Buddha and bodhisattva triad.

There are two distinct interpretations of this image. The first is that it depicts the 'contemplative prince' Shakyamuni, or the Historical Buddha, before his enlightenment. The second is that it represents the 'pensive bodhisattva', Maitreya, or the Future Buddha, before his mission to achieve enlightenment. The imagery used in depicting both figures is very similar. However, given the popularity of Maitreya in Shandong it is likely that this example represents the meditating Maitreya.

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Standing figure of the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara

貼金彩繪石雕觀世音菩薩立像

Northern Qi period (550–77)
limestone, 165 x 45 x 30 cm

As deities of compassion, bodhisattvas are typically represented with graceful postures, elegant garments and precious jewellery. Like the Buddha, they also underwent a series of stylistic changes over time. The most noticeable was an increase in the amount and richness of their adornment. This bodhisattva wears a heavy harness of jewels with thick strands of linked beads and jade pendants. On the scarf which drops from the waist, motifs such as a reborn soul upon a lotus, an animal mask, a flaming *cintamani* jewel and a vase are exquisitely carved within a series of oblong grids. The headdress is equally ornate, embellished with lotus flowers, flaming *cintamani* jewels and pearls.

Specific bodhisattvas can often be identified by special markings or by the objects they hold. In this case, the small seated figure of the Buddha, with his hands raised to his chest and holding a pearl chain – still partially visible at the centre of the crown above the pearl medallion – identifies this figure as the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. Known to the Chinese as Guanshiyin (and later Guanyin), which means literally 'he who observes the sounds of the world', Avalokitesvara listens to the cries for help from those in difficulty and provides assistance. In Shandong province, Avalokitesvara was one of the most venerated Buddhist figures, second only to the Buddha Maitreya.

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A special program of talks and events is being held in conjunction with this exhibition. Pick up a brochure at the information desk for full details or visit:

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www.asianart.com.au

The fully illustrated exhibition catalogue
The lost Buddhas: Chinese Buddhist sculpture from Qingzhou
is available from the Gallery bookshop

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