

Historical Buddha on a Lion Throne from China's Northern Wei Dynasty

Elliott Hung

Art Appreciation

Prof. Farr

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Preface

As the subject of this research paper, I chose the *Historical Buddha on a Lion Throne* on permanent exhibition at the Sackler Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. I have always been interested in Buddhism from past history classes that I have taken. I have also visited a monastery on an island near Hong Kong where there was a giant sitting Buddha statue. It was pretty interesting. Before that trip, I had never seen a Buddha statue up close. That statue could be seen from a remote distance like a landmark. There were also many steps that led up to it; symbolic steps leading to enlightenment, which the Buddha had attained. It was an unforgettable experience to see the large statue in person. When I was standing near the statue, I could look down and see the scenery below, and the ocean. It was an amazing sight. The *Historical Buddha on a Lion Throne* at the Sackler Gallery caught my eye when I was browsing around in the museum because it somewhat resembled the seated Buddha that I saw in Hong Kong.

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks goes to my friend and classmate Chris for helping to give me ideas about the art object that I have chosen. I could not have done this without his help. I really did not believe there was anything on view at the Smithsonian museums that I could write about. He also went with me on the field trip to the Freer and Sackler museums so that I could find this specific object to write about. I would not have been able to travel around without him accompanying me. He helped guide me around so that I would not feel lost.

I also thank my parents for giving me the inspiration for this project. I may have never seen a monumental Buddha in person if I had not gone to Asia with them. I would

have never appreciated the Buddha, nor seen what it really is about. I would have never thought about the Buddha as something I could reflect on. I may have not found anything to appreciate if my parents had not brought me to Asia. This was a lifetime experience that was very hard to come by. I am fortunate and thankful that I was able to visit such a spectacular place. The monastery near the statue was burning lots of incense offerings that reminded me of my childhood when it was used for good luck and in ceremonies.

Introduction

The *Historical Buddha on a Lion Throne* is a small and somewhat tarnished golden bronze figure. It is old, from the Northern Wei Dynasty in Northern China from 480 C.E. The golden bronze finish looks like it darkened over time. The Buddha wears an exquisite robe and a pointed-like mandala headpiece. He is seated in a cross-legged position. His robe has a triangle pattern as well as stripes. He has his right hand extended showing his palm. The Buddha's face is hard to discern due to the tarnish that is almost completely black.

The four-legged throne looks sturdy. There is a wavy, meandering pattern on its surface. Two little animals sit on each side of the throne. I cannot identify exactly what they are, but they appear to be dogs. The creatures seem to be looking up, perhaps looking at the enlightened Buddha. The animals are very small as well. From a distance, I would not have been able to see them. I have to look at the object closely and more carefully. The Buddha is sitting on some sort of platform on top of the throne. It too has a pattern on it, in this case circles. The parts of the figure that are not too tarnished are the Buddha's robe and the platform on which he sits. The Buddha looks enlightened sitting

up straight, firmly, with his palm out. He looks confident and happy. The little creatures could also be guarding the Buddha.

Presentation of Findings and Analysis

This figure is from the Northern Wei Dynasty. The Northern Wei Dynasty lasted from 386 to 584 A.D. It became well known because Northern China was unified during this period, in the year 440 (“China Culture”). China had been divided between the north and the south before then. Buddhism also began to spread as well as arts and ideas from outside of China. The Northern Wei Dynasty was supposedly started by the Tuoba clan. The Tuoba were tribal Xianbei people who lived near the northeastern part of China, known as Manchuria at the time, now as Mongolia. These were changing times in that region of China. I had never really heard of this dynasty until I noticed this specific item dating back to that time period. Nor did I know that this was the time when Buddhism became very widespread.

The Buddha’s holding up of his palm like a shield stands for reassurance (Abhaya Mudra) (Knierim). By this position, the Buddha gives the impression that he is here to protect and help. He is not afraid. Perhaps the little creatures under him want to be protected by him. The bronze finish of the figure resembles gold, and as such, according to Buddhist iconography, gold represents fire or the sun. Gold could be to further interpreted to symbolize brightness, guidance, and leadership. These are vital characteristics of Buddha. This Buddha figure could be guiding the little dogs and whoever follows him to enlightenment. The Buddha is very bright and distinctive. He is the guiding light of enlightenment.

Conclusion

This Buddha figure is far more significant in the Buddhist art history of China than I could have ever imagined. There was a lot that I did not know about this item until I did some research. I did not realize that there could be so much to such a little object. Every aspect of this object is symbolic and meaningful. I can see why this object was probably made: to show the Buddha concentrating on attaining enlightenment and at the same time teaching by example whoever wants to follow him in his footsteps. Whenever I have seen a Buddha represented in art, whether it was a picture or a figure, I never really thought about what the Buddha is trying to convey to people like me, looking at it. I now know some of the body language of the Buddha, such as his hand gestures, and Buddhist color symbolism. I never knew that visual elements had such deep meaning. I also did not know also that this figure was made during a period in Northern China when Buddhism was prevalent. This must be one of the many Buddhist artworks created during at time in China. Today, it is an important record of what Buddhism was like in the past. Thus, this Buddha figure is recounting history to viewers, telling them stories in the life of the Buddha, and perhaps trying to guide them as well.



Historical Bronze Buddha

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