



ECHOES OF THE PAST

The Buddhist Cave Temples of Xiangtangshan

The Exhibition Project

The Smart Museum of Art's exhibition *Echoes of the Past: The Buddhist Cave Temples of Xiangtangshan*, features Buddhist figurative sculptures from cave temples located in the southern Hebei (HUH BAY) province in northern China that were created in the sixth century for worship by followers of the Buddhist faith. The standing figures and sculptural fragments in this exhibition are from two main groups of caves and were associated with various Buddhist monasteries and donors during the Northern Qi (CHEE) Dynasty (550-577 CE). The name Xiangtangshan (SHANGTANSHAN), literally means “mountain of echoing halls”—these carved stone “halls” were scattered into three groups of caves in a mountain range including Drum Mountain.



Location of Xiangtangshan caves in China.

The University of Chicago's Center for the Art of East Asia initiated a research project in 2004 (the impetus for this exhibition) that focused on the caves at Xiangtangshan. Using three-dimensional laser scanning and high-resolution digital photography, researchers as part of this project have been able to inventory cave sites in China and individual objects residing in museum and private collections worldwide. Through pairing three-dimensional scans of cave interiors with varied fragments and sculptural figures, researchers have been able to assign the probable original location to many objects not previously determined and attribute over 100 sculptures to Xiangtangshan cave sites. These caves and their displaced sculptures can in some ways be digitally reconstructed for study and “virtual preservation.”

The Caves at Xiangtangshan

In all, there are thirty-six caves at the three sites at Xiangtangshan that make up the northern group, the southern group, and “little Xiangtangshan” site. The northern group of caves (comprised of three caves) is carved in limestone and is located halfway up Drum Mountain, near the present day town of Hecun, China. The North, Middle, and South caves that make up the northern group at this site can be accessed today (as in years' past) by walking up the mountainside to worship. Visitors begin their pilgrimage journey from the monastery at the base of the mountain (the Changle Monastery, or Monastery of Constant Joy) to each of the respective (North, Middle, or South) cave entrances.

The caves were sponsored (in creation) by royal patrons and wealthy individuals. Emperor Wenxuan (who reigned 550–559 CE) the first emperor during the Northern Qi Dynasty, is attributed with initiating the cave construction and image making associated with the northern group of caves at Xiangtangshan. Emperor Wenxuan, like many rulers of the period, believed that “the construction of cave temples and making of Buddhist images would generate merit for the benefit of the state” (*Echoes*

of the Past, exhibition catalogue, p.25). Buddhist worshippers believed that donations for temple building and Buddhist image making brought good health and good fortune for both the emperor and the people. Buddhist sculptures and temples were built to facilitate the spread of the Buddhist religion—introduced in China from India by the first century (1 CE). Buddhism became the state religion of China (397–439 CE) and by the fifth century, temple cave making throughout China was quite common. Monasteries, stupas (memorial structures often called pagodas), and cave temples proliferated in this period.

Despite their original (and current function) as a site for Buddhist worship, the caves have been used in modern times as a munitions factory, a printing office for a local worker's gazette, and for storage. Today these cave sites are protected as cultural and tourist attractions. Worshippers today make the pilgrimage up the mountain to bring offerings of incense and other gifts to pray for good health, luck, and fortune.

The Cave Sculptures

The individual artists who carved these works in limestone during the sixth century are not identified but were highly skilled craftsmen who were hired by royalty and wealthy patrons. The Northern Qi sculptors show stylistic variation within their artistic work as a whole—as the works themselves also reflect aspects of the multi-cultural Chinese society of the period in North China that was comprised of and influenced by central Asian tribal groups, foreign merchants, travelers from India, and Buddhist monks. Northern Qi “style,” however, does share one important visual characteristic, life-like three-dimensionality and rounded body contours of figural forms. The caves at Xiangtangshan, no matter what the design of the floor plan (a central pillar or an open chamber layout) have carved platform altars upon which the carved stone figures (deities) that make up a Buddhist worship group are featured. Many of the sculpted figures were removed from the cave altars (or parts of the figures were removed) at Xiangtangshan,



Changle Monastery stūpa with cave site in the distance. In India, stūpas originally housed relics or ashes of the historic Buddha Shakyamuni (b. Siddhartha Gautama) the founder of Buddhism.



Visitors at a cave site burning incense for worship.



Interior of a Xiangtangshan cave featuring a seated Buddha flanked by various Buddhist deity figures.

beginning as early as 1910. The removal of the sculpture was in part due to a spotlight on the archeology of China in 1909 and the appearance of published photographs by French researcher and art historian Edouard Chavannes (1865–1918). Due to the beauty of the objects, and an interest in these works by the foreign art market's dealers and art collectors in the early 1910s and 1920s, many sculptures were taken. These objects subsequently found their way into private and museum collections around the world. In the present day caves, figural bodies might be found intact in their original locations—the heads on many of them, however, are replacements made in clay. Originally, all the figural sculptures and much of the cave interior were painted. Today, most of the coloration is worn off or has been repainted.

The figural groups of sculptures found in the caves are arranged in altar niches—some niches possess multiple figures. Each sculpted figure has a role in Buddhist worship and is characterized by particular stylistic features or symbols. The North cave in the northern group of caves for example is a forty-by-forty foot square space that is about the same in height. Three large-scale seated Buddha figures are featured in this particular cave—each represents a different Buddha (the Buddha of the Past, Present, and Future), is housed in its own niche, is defined by his seated stance, and is flanked by two standing bodhisattva figures. There are many Buddhas; each one however is an enlightened leader of the religion. A bodhisattva is a practitioner of Buddhist faith who seeks enlightenment but stays in this world to help others—often bodhisattvas wear crowns and jewels to denote a princely status. Other figures that appear in the Buddhist group of gods, or worship group, are disciple figures and the pratyekabuddha (PRAT-CHECK-A-BUDDHA). The disciple figure is a type of monk, or Buddhist practitioner, who has taken vows to give up worldly life and join the monastic order. Pratyekabuddha follows his own spiritual path toward enlightenment and achieves it through personal efforts or through circumstantial causes. The bodhisattva,



Cave altar showing figures with heads missing.



Seated Buddha in abhaya mudra (right hand) and varadamudra (left hand). Courtesy Victoria and Albert Museum.



Standing bodhisattva figure. Courtesy University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

the pratyekabuddha, and the Buddha represent three different paths to individual enlightenment for followers of the Buddhist religion.

Other symbolic carvings found in the cave are part of the cave architecture itself—stylized depictions of lotus blossoms and radiant or flaming jewels often decorate walls of the caves. Monster figures, which often depict beings that might be part lion, part cow, part dog, or bird—featuring claws, snarling open mouths with teeth, and wings, flank altars and niches. Although ferocious, these monster figures were seen as functioning for the good—as protectors of the Buddhist religion.

Glossary of Buddhist Symbols and Gestures

Lotus—In Buddhism, the lotus represents the true nature of beings, the heart of beings is like an unopened lotus: when the virtues of the Buddha develop therein the lotus blossoms. This is why the Buddha sits on a lotus in bloom.

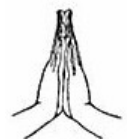
Jewel—In Mahayana Buddhism (one of the branches of Buddhist belief), precious jewels came to be a metaphor for Buddhist wisdom and beneficial powers. Jewels of the enlightened mind are described in Buddhist scripture as magical treasures that dispel mental trouble, evil fate, ignorance, and suffering. Three jewels with flames surrounding them spring from lotus blossoms on walls of the North Cave at Xiangtangshan. These three jewels symbolize the Three Treasures of Buddhist faith: The Buddha, the Dharma (teachings of the Buddha) and the monastic order (samgha).

Mudra (MOOD-RAH)—A symbolic or ritualistic hand gesture used in Buddhist practice. Deity figures are often depicted displaying various hand positions or mudras. Each mudra symbolizes something different and is used in meditation as a path to enlightenment.

Abhayamudra (AB HIYAH MOODRAH)—this hand gesture is made by the Buddha or a bodhisattva with the right hand raised to shoulder height, the arm bent, and the palm facing outward with the fingers upright. It signifies fearlessness and protection.



Anjalimudra (ON JOLLY MOODRAH)—the is a hand gesture of prayer or veneration in which the hands are held together, palm to palm and fingers upright.



Varadamudra (VAR ODD AH MOODRAH)—this is a ritual or symbolic gesture made by the Buddha or a bodhisattva with the left hand out, with the palm upper most and the fingers pointing downward. It signifies offering, welcome, charity, giving, compassion, and sincerity.



Monster figure in cave.



Flaming jewel motif.

Stūpa—Is a reliquary mound constructed above the mortal remains of the historical Buddha and later a symbolic structure of Buddhist death and enlightenment that contains image instead of holy remains. In India, where this architectural form originated, the stūpa has a domed roof, often with layers of chattras (umbrellas) in the form of plates above it.

Sūtra—Is a Buddhist scripture that instructs practitioners; sūtras are written records of the words of the historic Buddha. There are more than two thousand different sūtras—many are carved in stone outside and inside of Buddhist temples, including the cave temples at Xiangtangshan where this practice began in China.

Urna (URN AH)—A whorl of hair that was one of the special birthmarks of the Buddha, marking him as an extraordinary person. In Northern Qi Buddhist sculpture it often appears as a large circular indentation in the middle of the forehead that would probably have been filled with a bright stone or piece of glass. In later Buddhist images, this form is sometimes interpreted as a third eye of wisdom.

Ushnisha (OOSH NISH AH)—A low raised protuberance on the top of the head (cranial knob rather than top knot) and one of the signs marking the Buddha as an extraordinary being. In some Buddhist writings, the ushnisha is considered the most essential and powerful attribute of the Buddha.



Buddha head with urna on forehead. Courtesy Victoria and Albert Museum.

Sanghati (SANG GOTTI)—The traditional monastic robe of the Buddha and his followers. A single piece of cloth wrapped around the body, it could be worn in a variety of ways, covering one or both shoulders but usually leaving the right shoulder bare. The free end of the garment would be pulled around the back, under the left arm, and held in the left hand.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

Who is Buddha?

Siddhartha Gautama was an Indian prince (son of King Suddodana and Queen Maha Maya) who led an extravagant life and lived around 500 BCE). Bored with the privileges of his life and social standing, he sought out a more meaningful existence by renouncing his princely title, giving up all his worldly possessions, and becoming a monk in an effort to better understand the world around him. He meditated under a tree until he understood how to be free from human suffering and achieve spiritual enlightenment. He spent his lifetime travelling around India teaching others what he came to understand. Buddha's teachings spread throughout the world through the centuries following Buddha's death and continue to be taught today. What messages are conveyed to you by the actions of the historic Buddha? Do you think this is important today? Why or why not? Could you give up your worldly possessions? Why or why not?

What happened to the caves?

Many heads of the sculptures at Xiangtangshan and other fragments were taken from the caves in the early twentieth century. On one hand, the removal of the objects has enhanced knowledge about Northern Qi culture and the existence of these Buddhist cave temples. Because many fragments are in museum or private collections, they have been carefully preserved. On the other hand, the removal of the objects has permanently altered the cave site and important cultural material has been taken from China. In many of the caves, after objects were removed, locals pooled their money to make repairs or replacement heads or parts. Areas of the cave that were originally painted were also repainted. Discuss the pros and cons of these issues as a class. What do you think about collecting, archeology, and historic preservation? Do you think these efforts are helpful or hurtful to cultural material? Would you recommend leaving the site “as is” or recreating it using lesser materials (clay versions of heads, different colors of paint on painted areas etc.)? Why or why not?

How does technology aid research?

Provenance is the origin or source history and ownership of an object. Technology has enabled researchers at the University of Chicago and in China to locate and document previously unidentified or assign provenance of various sculptures. Not only can three-dimensional scanning help researchers pair a sculptural fragment with its source—by allowing researchers to manipulate a digital facsimile to match the rough ends of sculptures with chisel marks on walls when pieces were removed—3-D scanning can also enable researchers to print out or “cast” a three-dimensional copy of the original object (there are three samples of this technology on view in the exhibition). Using a digital photograph, a three-dimensional printer can “build” a copy using a special plastic material (the Museum of Science and Industry and the Illinois Institute of Technology own machines like this). What do you think about making copies of the original sculptures? Should this be done? Under what circumstances? Why or why not?



Digital reconstruction of Buddha head paired with location in cave. Image by Jason Salavon and Travis Saul.

Classroom Project Ideas—Monsters, Mudras, and Sūtras

Make a Monster

Buddha and bodhisattva sculptures found in the caves at Xiangtangshan are depicted as peaceful beings designed to help people think about their lives, meditate on being better people, or find spiritual meaning in existence. In contrast, there are sculptures in the caves at Xiangtangshan that aren't peaceful in appearance. Monster figures also are featured in the caves—these in contrast seem menacing and might be scary to some. Monster figures were carved into pillars



Xiangtangshan, *Kneeling Winged Monster*, mid-sixth century. Courtesy of the Cleveland Museum of Art.

and reveal aspects of many animals combined in one body—wings, claws, or fangs. Their function, despite their ferocious appearance, is one of goodness—to keep evil spirits at bay and to “protect” the other deities present. Think of three animals you like and research scientific images and physical characteristics of each animal. Make sketches and notes of the features you find remarkable. Now, combine the features of these three animals in a fantastic sketch. Refine your drawing using color if you like or stylize it to make it into an architectural feature—something you might have outside your front door, the porch of a building you live in, or your school. Think of this composite animal as a protector for you, your home, or school. What are the features that are protective? Use your imagination to write some descriptive sentences about this made up monster figure.

Mudra Masterpiece

Buddhist monks use meditation as a way to seek enlightenment (many people also use meditation as a way to stay healthy through breathing exercises to calm the mind and body and to simply relieve stress). Buddha and bodhisattva figures are often depicted in states of meditation displaying various mudras, or meditative hand positions. These mudra hand positions (also used in yoga) some say also channel energy throughout the body. Spend time studying examples of abhayamudra, anjalimudra, and varadamudra and what each signifies. Have students practice emulating each mudra—use photographic examples or videos of mudra positions on the youtube sites below.



Example of anjalimudra. Courtesy Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Azo8FMd4Xk&feature=related>

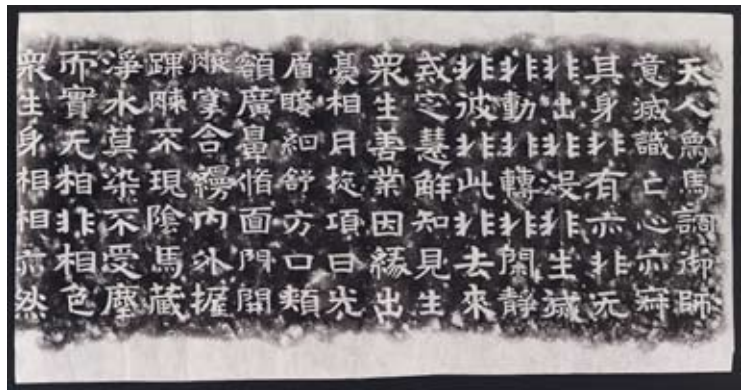
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7-iXzMdfls&feature=related>

After studying and learning about various hand positions, have students pair with a partner and photograph or sketch each other’s mudras—thinking of decorative elements (colored paper, or hand drawn patterns and color) that could be incorporated as a backdrop for each mudra drawing or photograph.

Scripting and Printing a Sūtra

Buddhist sūtras are the words (composed from sermons) of the historic Buddha later written down by his followers. There are over two thousand sūtras, written between 200 BCE and 200 CE, which is the time period in which Mahayana Buddhism (one of the two main branches of Buddhism) developed, spreading from India throughout China. Different divisions of Mahayana Buddhism emphasize different sūtras. The name “sūtra” in the Indian language of Sanskrit literally means “thread, or a line that holds things together.” Sūtras are like “rules” or a doctrine of beliefs that Buddhists follow. Sūtras are carved in stone in many of the cave temples at Xiangtangshan.

Often, copies of carved stone inscriptions were made by making ink rubbings. An inked pad was pounded over damp paper placed over the carving. This process results in a negative image—white letters and black paperground. Look at the example of an ink rubbing from the South Cave at Xiangtangshan—this excerpt describes the qualities and features of the Buddha. Read the excerpt, then using the this example of the “Sūtra of Immeasurable Meaning” have students draft some lines



Selection of the Sūtra of Immeasurable Meaning, After sixth-century original, rubbing of engraved scripture, ink on paper.

of text that describe the physical attributes and personality of someone they admire or wish to be like. This person can be an historic figure, a family member, a friend, or may simply be a person the student wishes to become someday. Have students use a written framework that begins with three physical attributes, followed by three descriptive qualities of personality or being. Have them also draft sentences that describe three actions or behaviors he/she admire. Encourage students to incorporate the use of similes and metaphors (both incorporate a comparison of two unlike things). Spend time as a class editing and revising the written text.

Next, have students practice lettering the text—using various font styles as examples (or by teaching the art of calligraphy) have students either develop their own lettering style or emulate one. Have students practice hand lettering the text, paying careful attention to spacing, scale, and consistency. Students should write their text in a soft lead pencil on thin tracing paper. Have students go over the lines several times to make clear, dark, marks. Turning the paper over, so the text appears backward. Have students press their text (using a dulled pencil) into a thin sheet of printmaking foam board. Using gentle pressure, students should “trace” the text into the board. When complete, their should be text imprinted into the foam. The final step of scripting their sūtra is printing it—using a printmaking brayer (roller) roll a thin application of printmaking ink or tempera or acrylic paint over the sutra surface. Place a clean sheet of paper over the printmaking plate—rub with a spoon or fingers to ensure the ink or paint transfers evenly to the paper. Gently lift the paper from the printmaking plate. A print (similar to an ink rubbing in appearance) will be made. Students can make multiple copies of their sūtras to share.

Written excerpt of the Sūtra of Immeasurable Meaning (sixth century) as depicted on an ink rubbing on view in *Echoes of the Past*:

Born from neither causes nor conditions, neither of the self nor others, /His body is neither existent nor nonexistent/. Neither square nor round, neither long nor short./ Neither appearing nor disappearing, birthless and deathless . . . He manifests a body ten feet and six inches tall, or deep golden hue./Resplendent, radiant, and well proportioned./The white hair between his brows is like the new moon, his halo like the sun./ His curling hair is bluish black, on top of his head is the ushnisha. His clear eyes, bright and mirrorlike gaze up and down . . . His lips and tongue are red, like a crimson

flower. /His forty teeth are white as snow./His palms and soles are soft, marked with a thousand spokes./His fingers are webbed and grasp both in and outward./ His arms are long and his fingers straight and slender . . . Externally and internally, his body is radiant and pure, / [Like] clear water untainted by mud, he is unaffected by the dust [of worldly matters]./ Thus are his thirty-two [extraordinary] physical signs, /And eighty excellent characteristics that are visible./But in reality, there is neither form nor appearance.

Additional Resources

Tsiang, Katherine R. with contributions by Richard A. Born, Jinhua Chen, Albert E. Dien, Lec Maj, Nancy S. Steinhardt, Daisy Yiyu Wang, J. Keith Wilson, and Wu Hung. *Echoes of the Past: The Buddhist Cave Temples of Xiangtangshan* (exhibition catalogue) Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 2010.

<http://xts.uchicago.edu/>

<http://www.pbs.org/edens/thailand/buddhism.htm>

<http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/5minbud.htm>

<http://www.buddhanet.net/mudras.htm>

Alignment with Illinois Learning Standards

Docent-led discussions of *Echoes of the Past: The Buddhist Cave Temples of Xiangtangshan*, related classroom activities inspired by works on view (as exemplified above), and follow-up classroom discussion, reinforce elements of the Illinois standards and goals for the visual and language art, science, and geography. Using the ideas present in this exhibition, teachers can integrate aspects of history, geography, image making, and writing into the classroom.

In support of Illinois State Goal 1: Read with understanding and fluency

Apply word analysis and vocabulary skills to comprehend selection.

Apply reading strategies to improve understanding and fluency.

Comprehend a broad range of reading materials.

In support of Illinois State Goal 3: Write to communicate for a variety of purposes

Use correct grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and structure.

Compose well-organized and coherent writing for specific purposes and audiences.

Communicate ideas in writing to accomplish a variety of purposes.

In support of Illinois State Goal 5: Use the language arts to acquire, assess, and communicate information

Locate, organize, and use information from various sources to answer questions, solve problems, and communicate ideas.

Analyze and evaluate information acquired from various sources.

In support of Illinois State Goal 13: Understand the relationships among science, technology and society in historical and contemporary contexts

Know and apply concepts that describe the interaction between science, technology, and society

In support of Illinois State Goal 16: Understand events, trends, individuals and movements shaping the history of Illinois, the United States, and other nations

Apply the skills of historical analysis and interpretation.

Understand the development of significant political events.

In support of Illinois State Goal 17: Understand world geography and the effects of geography on society, with an emphasis on the United States

Locate, describe and explain places, regions and features on the Earth.

Understand relationships between geographic factors and society.

Understand the historical significance of geography.

In support of Illinois State Goal 25: Know the language of the arts

Understand the sensory elements, organizational principles and expressive qualities of the arts.

Understand the similarities, distinctions, and connections in and among the arts

In support of Illinois State Goal 26: Through creating and performing, understand how works of art are produced

Understand processes, traditional tools, and modern technologies used in the arts.

Apply skills and knowledge necessary to create and perform in one or more of the arts.

In support of Illinois State Goal 27: Understand the role of the arts in civilizations, past and present

Analyze how the arts function in history, society, and everyday life.

Understand how the arts shape and reflect history, society, and everyday life.