


Buddhas unearthed

Jan 16, 2009 ... **Buddhas unearthed.** Despite missing forearms, this **Buddha** sculpture is imposing with its gold-coloured skin and patchwork robes. ...

Models of bliss



 View more photos

Despite missing forearms, this Buddha sculpture is imposing with its gold-coloured skin and patchwork robes. The broad shoulders and well-developed chest are typical of the artistic style of the Northern Qi period. -- PHOTO: SHANDONG PROVINCIAL MUSEUM

THE iconic serene smile and downcast eyes are there, though the styles are strikingly different.

These Buddhas now on display in Singapore are something special and it is not just because of their different forms, from upright figures with the air of scholars to sensual figures in clinging drapes.

They are part of an exhibition of centuries-old stone Buddha sculptures whose discovery was hailed as the most important archaeological find of the 20th century in China.

It opens today at the Peranakan Museum here.

Singapore is the only South-east Asian stop of the touring exhibition of 35 sculptures that were among about 400 limestone sculptures buried for unknown reasons 800 years ago in Qingzhou in the eastern province of Shandong.

Dating as far back as the sixth century, these rare sculptures were found in 1996 by construction workers levelling a field for a sports ground.

The sculptures in the exhibition, called Serenity In Stone: The Qingzhou Discovery, are a must-see for other reasons, too, besides their remarkable age and the miraculous way they were discovered.

Despite being buried for so long, some of the sculptures still have dramatic splashes of colour and many of them look like they have been carved recently despite being over 1,400 years old.

Ms Tan Huism, 43, curator of the exhibition here, chose lighting in light green and salmony pink reds to highlight the pigments.

She says: 'Instead of flooding the sculptures with light, we used subdued lighting to provide a very intimate experience for the visitor.'

'In this climate of doom and gloom, I feel we can take solace in the calm and quiet provided by these sculptures that were created centuries ago.'

The Buddhas are in three distinct styles and offer an insight into the nature and tradition of Chinese Buddhist art.

'This gives us a chance to sense the splendour of Buddhist art in China in the sixth century,' says Dr Peter Friedlander, senior lecturer at the Centre for Language Studies and South Asian Studies Programme at the National University of Singapore.

The sculptures date back to the time of the Northern Wei (386-534 AD), Eastern Wei (534-550 AD) and Northern Qi (550-577) dynasties. Each had its own style of creating Buddha statues.

Some display Indian influences on Chinese art.

Ms Gauri Parimoo Krishnan, senior curator, South Asia, at the Asian Civilisations Museum, says: 'Contact between India and China goes back many centuries and there is no better evidence than the Qingzhou discovery of Buddhist sculptures.'

'The drapery, expressions, gestures and postures of serenity in some Buddhas of the Northern Wei period come so close to the Sarnath Buddhas of India.'

However, the Chinese artists added features such as dragons and engravings to create their distinctive style of sculpture, she adds.

Extraordinary beauty

When Life! first met Ms Xie Jian Ying, she looked like an excited tourist watching these Buddha statues being pulled out of the boxes.

With her digital camera in hand, she was photographing non-stop.

So imagine the surprise when the 42-year-old pulled out her namecard. It read: deputy director of the Qingzhou Municipal Museum.

These sculptures are actually from her museum's collection.

She explained: 'These sculptures are usually travelling outside of Qingzhou for long periods and when they do return, they are usually kept in storage. We don't get a chance to see them back home, which is why I am so thrilled to take these pictures.'

In fact, the site where the statues were discovered, where a temple used to stand, is close to her museum.

While the reason for the sculptures' burial remains a mystery, experts believe they were probably commissioned by Buddhist monks or members of the Buddhist community.

Dr Liu Yang, curator of Chinese Art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, where these sculptures were last on show before coming to Singapore, calls them 'images of extraordinary imagination'.

He says most are carved from a fine-grained, pale grey limestone which allows a high degree of precision and silk-smooth finish. In some of them, Buddha is portrayed wearing an almost sheer cloth.

He says: 'Their refined and sensual naturalism gives them an extraordinary beauty which distinguishes them from other works. Timeless in the simplicity of their conception, they are revelations of the human figure interpreted in both spiritual and physical form.'

The sculptures occupy 400 sq m on two levels. They may exude an image of calm, but getting them mounted was nerve-racking for the curatorial team.

The star piece of the show - the 3.1m Stele with a Buddha and Two Bodhisattvas - came in six pieces, weighing a total of 1200kg. Each piece weighed between 200kg and 300kg, and it took 11 men to pull them out of the boxes and display them.

The installation was supposed to take a day but just as they were nearing completion, the last piece did not sit perfectly. The whole thing had to be brought down and the process had to be started from scratch again.

But why pick the Peranakan Museum and not the Asian Civilisations Museum for this show?

Curator Tan says there is a strong link with Peranakan culture, which is itself a fusion of cultures and incorporates influences from Buddhism.

Both the Qingzhou sculptures and Peranakan heritage draw influences from various Asian cultures.

Associate Professor Tansen Sen, a visiting senior research fellow at the Institute of South-east Asian Studies who specialises in Asian history and religions, says the Qingzhou sculptures 'are one of the keys to understanding the Buddhist links and exchanges between ancient India and ancient China'.

Seeing how the best of Chinese and Indian art came together centuries ago makes this exhibition more than just a visual feast.

As Dr Sen says: 'The exhibition is not just an opportunity to view one of the most important archaeological discoveries regarding the history of Buddhism in China. It also shows how deep and strong the cross-cultural interactions among ancient Asian societies were.'

deepikas@sph.com.sg

- **[view it](#)**

SERENITY IN STONE: THE QINGZHOU DISCOVERY

Where: Peranakan Museum, 39 Armenian Street. Exhibition is at Dr Tan Tze Chor Gallery, Level 2, and Upper Annex Gallery, Level 3

When: Till April 26, 9.30am - 7pm (Tues-Sun, open till 9pm on Fri), 1 - 7pm (Mon)

Admission: \$8 (adult), \$4 (concession). Ticket price includes admission to the museum's permanent galleries. For details, call 6332-7591 or visit www.peranakanmuseum.sg