



Bodhisattva Maitreya

On display

Title/Description: Bodhisattva Maitreya

Born: 0500 - 0550

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Stone

Measurements: h. 317 x w. 190 x d. 60 mm

Accession Number: 286

Historic Period: Northern Wei dynasty (early 6th century), 6th century - early

Production Place: Asia, China, Henan Province

Cultural Group: Longmen

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

This figure has a tall hat, a scarf-like robe and elaborate drapery falling over his knees to the ground, clinging to the body so that it reveals the legs crossed at the ankles. This posture is typical of the Bodhisattva Maitreya. Buddhism describes the passage of several eras; the present era is associated with the Buddha Sakyamuni (Prince Gautama), and the age to come is represented by this figure, the Bodhisattva Maitreya. Bodhisattvas are individuals who have achieved enlightenment, but who have renounced passing into Nirvana, the state of non-being, and have decided to stay in this world to assist people to reach greater understanding and, if possible, to achieve enlightenment.

Chinese forms of Buddhism emphasised and elaborated features different from those that were predominant in India and Central Asia, the areas of the world from which China gained its understanding of the religion. Buddhism was probably introduced into China from at least as early as the second century AD, but it did not start to flourish until the start of the non-Chinese Northern Wei dynasty (386-535). The kings of the late fifth century, in particular, were ardent patrons of Buddhism and arranged for large cave temples, modelled on Central Asian and northern Indian examples, to be carved near the capital, Datong, in northern Shanxi province. In 494 the Northern Wei moved their capital southwards to the Yellow River, where they established themselves at Luoyang, in present-day Henan province. Here they espoused mainstream metropolitan ancient Chinese traditions and patronised the carving of another series of cave temples at nearby Longmen. It is likely that this sculpture came from these caves.

While the sculptures carved near Datong are solid and rounded, incorporating many features of Central Asian and Indian origin, those of Longmen show a newer Chinese style (Akiyama and Matsubara, 1969: 22-5; see also *Longmen Shiku*, 1980: nos. 18-23). The bodies of the Longmen figures are often flattened and much is made of the linear patterning of drapery. The elegant elongated face and narrow limbs of the present figure are typical of the Longmen style, as are the neatly arranged folds of the robes, which cover the legs and the seat on which the figure sits. The back is rough, and the many fractures - to neck, waist and left leg - suggest that the sculpture was removed from a larger composition of figures carved in a cave temple.

Entry taken from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection 3 volume catalogue, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997).

Provenance

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1948. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
