A Magnificent Tang dynasty limestone figure of Ekadasamukha in the Tokyo National Museum

I was in Tokyo on business in early February 2018 and had arrived a day early to allow time to visit the Tokyo National Museum again. I particularly like this museum, not only for the high quality of the exhibits, but also for the thoughtful way in which they are displayed.

The Museum is located in the picturesque Ueno Park and the *Toyokan* (Asian Gallery) is housed in a modern building designed by Yoshiro Taniguchi in 1968 and was re-opened after refurbishment in 2013.

Honkan (Main Gallery)

Toyokan (Asian Gallery)

On entering the sculpture gallery from the bright sunshine of outside, one arrives into another world of low level lighting and spectacularly lit Buddhist stone sculpture, from the monumental in size to the more smaller scale.

As I wondered around the gallery, I suddenly found myself standing in front of one of the most beautiful sculptures that I have ever set eyes on.

1. The Chinese sculpture gallery on the ground floor with a monumental Sui dynasty sculpture of Avalokitesvara 253cm high. The figure of Ekadasamukha is in the background in front of the Buddha triad sculptural niches.

It is general practice when viewing exhibits in a public space, that one generally moves from work to work reasonably quickly, especially when time is limited. However, on seeing this piece, I was transfixed and spent the next twenty minutes looking at it, at first in its entirety and then in detail.

The sculpture depicts the figure of Ekadasamukha, the Buddhist eleven-headed Avalokitesvara (Guanyin), the bodhisattva of compassion, standing on a double lotus base in an arched niche. He holds a spray of lotus in his raised right hand and a vase in his left. Above the figure, in the lower reaches of the arch are two *apsaras* or female spirits flying through the air.

It is carved from limestone and is essentially a high relief carving, rather than a sculpture in the round. Before looking at the sculpture's historical context I will briefly analyse it formally to try and explain the aesthetic/ emotional response that I had to it.

The first thing that strikes the viewer is the sense of symmetry to the work, from the placement of the *apsaras*, to the ten smaller heads, the arrangement of body jewellery to the chest and arms, the way the legs stand evenly and the rhythmic folds of the drapery, which are echoed in the lower lotus petals of the base. The face also has a strong sense of symmetry, which helps to reflect the inner sense of calm and peace that the artist has so skilfully rendered.

Despite being a relatively static figure, it does convey a certain rhythm and how one views it: from the tip of the arch to the *apsaras*, the eye travels down the oval mandorla to the strong shoulders, continuing down the rounded contours of the chest drapery to the slightly rounded belly. The narrow waist contrasts strongly with the broad shoulders and its curve accentuates the downward movement through the legs to the feet that are firmly planted on the base.

The play of light and shadow gives the figure a greater sense of three dimensionality, which tends to belie its sculptural relief format.

Limestone figure of Ekadasamukha, Tang dynasty, circa 703AD, 113.8cm high.

The stylistic treatment of this figure is characteristic of early 8th century sculpture and reflects the influence of Indian sculpture from the Gupta period (319-543 AD). The large rounded shoulders, the thin clinging drapery and the slightly stiff style of standing with the weight evenly spread on both legs, can be seen on a 5th century standing figure of Buddha from the Government Museum in Mathura, India. (Fig 1).

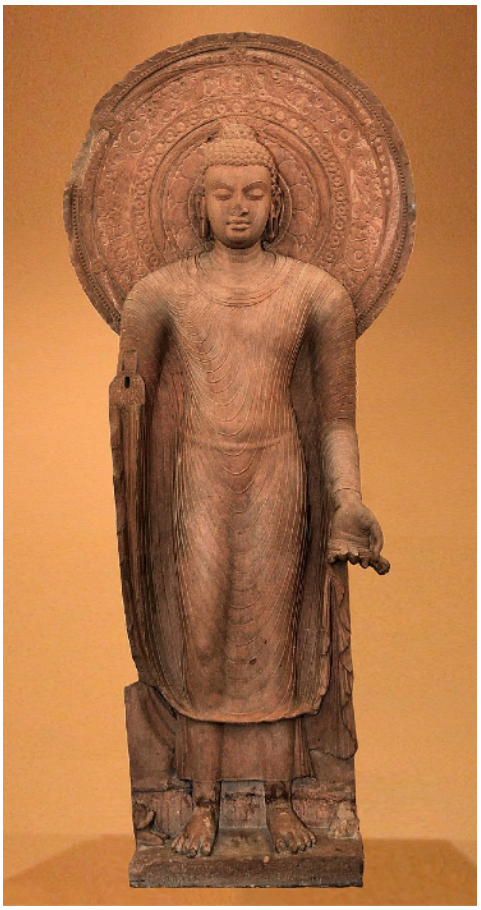

Fig 1. Standing figure of Buddha Installed by Buddhist Monk Yasadinna, Gupta Period, 5th Century, Government Museum, Mathura.

Fig 2. Empress Wu Zeitan (634-725) taken from *An 18th century album of portraits of 86 emperors of China* (British Library).

This figure of Ekadasamukha was one of eight placed along the sides of the terrace at the Qibotai Pagoda (Seven Jewel Tower) in the compound of the Guanzhaisi Temple in the capital, Chang'an (present day Xi'an). 1. More than thirty sculptures in total are thought to have decorated the terrace, the remainder depicting Buddhist triad niches and the *Toyokan* has thirteen of the twenty five that survive.

The temple was constructed in 677 AD under the direction of Empress Wu Zeitan also known as Wu Zhao (624-705 AD) (Fig 2), who was to become China's only female emperor. The construction of the Qibotai Pagoda was started in 700 AD and it was build to honour the Empress and to commemorate and house a number of relics that had been discovered in the area.

The prominence of the bodhisattva at the time may have been partly due to the monk Fazing (643-712 AD), who at the request of Empress Wu, established a ritual area devoted to the bodhisattva to invoke his help to defeat the northern nomadic Khitan tribe, who were finally defeated in 679 AD 2.

The sculpture was donated to the Tokyo National Museum by Hosokawa Moritatsu (1883-1970) (Fig 3), the 16th lord of the Hosokawa clan, who during the Edo period were one of the largest land owning *daimyō* families in Japan.

Fig 3. Hosokawa Moritatsu (1883-1970)

Moritatsu starting collecting in 1926 when he travelled extensively around Europe for eighteen months. He established the Eisei Bunko Museum (Fig 4) in 1950 to preserve and undertake research on his own collection, as well the numerous artworks and historical objects that had been handed down through the generations of the family.

The Museum, located in the Bunkyo-ku district of Tokyo is open to the public and holds around 94,000 artworks and documents and includes collections of ceramics, textiles, lacquer, sculpture, swords, armour and modern Japanese paintings.

Fig 4. Eisei Bunko Foundation, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo.

At present, only seven of the original thirty-two reliefs remain in Xi'an and the rest are in Japanese and American museums. 3. It is not clear how this dispersal took place, but in Osvald Sirén's *Chinese Sculpture form the Fifth to the Fourteenth Century,* he illustrates nine of the Buddhist triads and cites the ownership of eight to *Collection Hayasaki, Tokyo.* 4. These eight are part of the thirteen that are in the Tokyo National Museum and some of these will be discussed briefly below.

Of the eight individual figures, it has been possible to track down six others: another figure, dated to 703 AD, is also in the Tokyo National Museum (Fig 7), with two others in the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington (one figure has lost its lower section) (Figs 6 & 8), another in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (Fig 9), one in the Nara National Museum and another illustrated in Sirén (Fig 10).

Tokyo National Museum, 113cm high.

Fig 5. Nara National Museum, 85.1cm high.

Fig 6. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, 108.8cm.

Fig 7. Tokyo National Museum, dated to 703 AD.

Fig 8. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, 77.8cm high.

Fig 9. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 114.3cm high,
Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts,

Fig 10. Osvald Sirén, pl. 391B, 119.4cm high.

It is quite interesting to compare these seven figures as they are all quite different and carved to varying degrees of skill, which leads one to believe that a number of sculptors were most likely involved in the project. In terms of execution, the three that come closest to the one in this study are the Nara National Museum figure, the complete one in the Freer and the figure depicted in Sirén. Both are equally three dimensional and display a similar degree of finely detailed carving.

The dated example in the Tokyo National Museum is quite rudimentary in its style compared to its companion almost to the point where it appears to be unfinished. I have illustrated these figures to a larger scale at the end of this article so that they can be viewed more easily.

Interestingly, both the complete example in the Freer Museum, Washington (Fig 6.) and the figure in Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (Fig 9.) were both purchased in Japan in the early part of the 20th century and have a connection to Boston. Charles Lang Freer (1854-1919) purchased his figure in 1909 from the dealer and connoisseur Bunkio Matsuki (1867-1940). Matsuki had been brought to the US as a child and later owned a gallery in Boston. 5. The Museum of Fine Arts figure had been purchased in 1906 from Okakura Kakuzō (1862-1913). Kakuzō was invited to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1904 and was to become the first head of its Asian art department in 1910. 6.

In the three Buddhist triads that are illustrated (from the thirteen in the Tokyo National Museum) (Figs 11, 12 and 13), the central figure in each sits on a raised throne and is either under a jewelled canopy or an elegantly carved tree, which according to Sirén represents the bodhi tree under which the Buddha received enlightenment. 7.

The right hand flanking bodhisattva in each depicts Avalokitesvara and is carved in a similar, but slightly simplified manner (compared to the single eleven-headed figures), with the figure standing on a double lotus base, his left arm is raised and the right is lowered holding a vase. Instead of having the ten extra heads, one figure has a figure of Amitabha, (of which Avalokitesvara is the earthly manifestation), one has an ornamental head piece, and the other has damage to this area.

Different explanations have been given for the eleven heads, Falco Howard *et al* state that the extra ten heads signify the ten stages of (*bhumi)* of perfection that indicate the bodhisattva's level of spiritual development. 8. Watt states that the additional heads represent vows made by the bodhisattva to save all of humanity. 9.

Whatever the exact iconography of these figures, it does seem clear that on future trips to Tokyo, a pilgrimage will have to be made back to this museum.

Fig 11. Limestone niche carving of Sakyamuni Buddha, flanked by two Bodhisattvas, Tokyo National Museum.

Fig 12. Limestone niche carving of a Bodhisattva flanked by two further bodhisattvas, Tokyo National Museum.

Fig 13. Limestone niche carving of Buddha, possibly Maitreya, flanked by two bodhisattvas, dated 704 Tokyo National Museum.

Tokyo National Museum.

Fig 5. Nara National Museum 85.1cm high.

Fig 6. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington.

Fig 7. Tokyo National Museum, dated to 703 AD.

Fig 8. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington.

Fig 9. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Fig 10. Osvald Sirén, pl. 391B.

Bibliography

1. Watt, James C.Y. China: *Dawn of a Golden Age, 200-750 AD*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004, p. 301.

2. *Ibid*., p. 301.

3. Falco Howard, Angela; Li, Song; Wu, Hung and Yang, Hong, *Chinese Sculpture*, Yale University Press, 2006, p. 303.

4. Sirén, Osvald *Chinese Sculpture form the Fifth to the Fourteenth Century,* SDI Publications, 1998, p. 24-25.

5. Sharf, Frederic A., *A Pleasing Novelty: Bunkio Matsuki and The Japan Craze in Victorian Salem,* Peabody & Essex Museum, Salem, MA, 1993.

6. Wikipedia, Okakura Kakuzō.

7. Sirén, *op cit.,* p. 24.

8. Falco Howard, *op cit.* p. 303.

9. Watt, James, C.Y. *op cit*., p. 301.

Image Credits

Fig 1. Photograph © Government Museum, Mathura.

Fig 2. Photograph © British Library.

Fig 5. Photograph © Nara National Museum, Nara.

Fig. 6 & 8. Photograph © Freer Gallery of Art, Washington.

Fig 7 Photograph © Tokyo National Museum.

Fig 9. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Fig 10. Sirén, Osvald *Chinese Sculpture form the Fifth to the Fourteenth Century,* SDI Publications, 1998, pl. 391B.

Figs 11, 12 & 13. Photograph © Tokyo National Museum.