

The Luohan that Came from Afar

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AMONG THE MYRIAD OBJECTS of world art, there are always some that continue to captivate the viewer and haunt the researcher. The tri-color glazed clay Luohan statue from Yi County (Yizhou), about 50 km southwest of the

city limits of Beijing, is such an object in the Penn Museum. The mysteries that engulf this Luohan—a portrayal of a monk who was a disciple of the Buddha Sakyamuni—begin with a Chinese inscription reported to have been written in a cave in which the statue may have been hidden. In translation, it reads “All the Buddhas come from afar.”

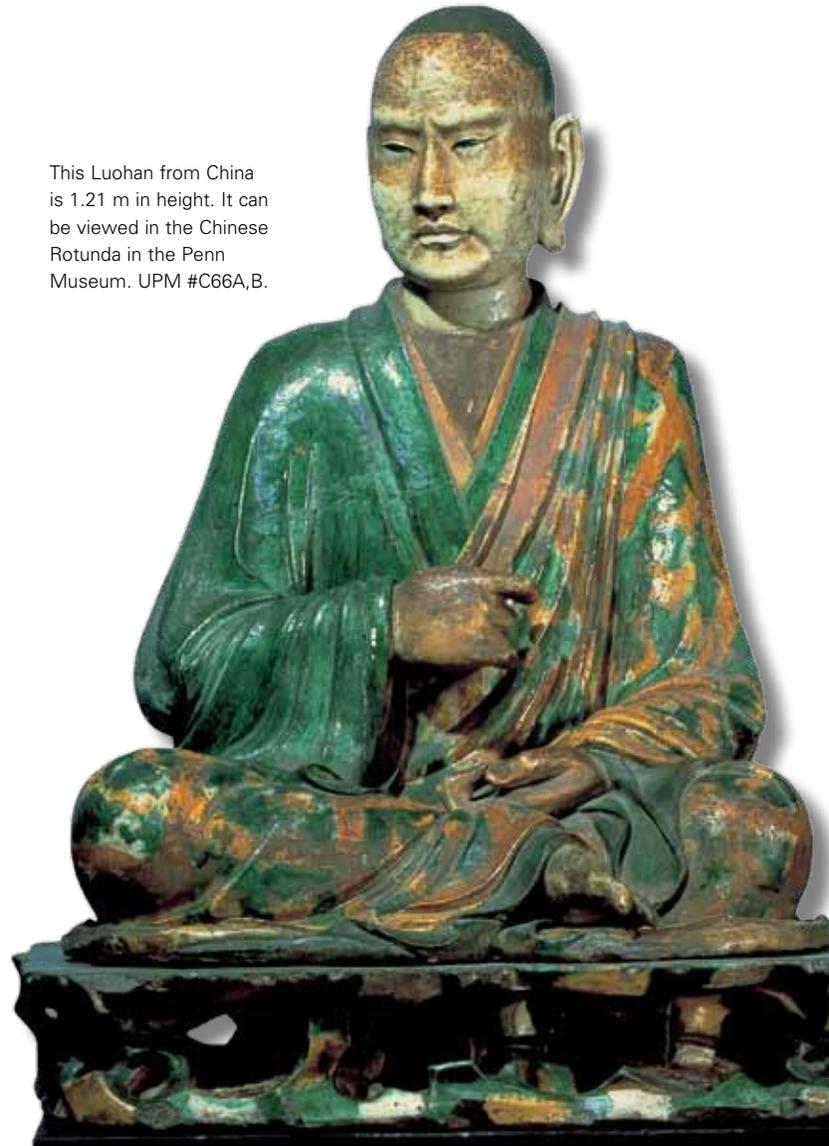
The story of the cave with this enigmatic inscription is recounted by German expeditionary Friedrich Perzynski in an essay from 1920. In 1912, Perzynski had been shown a similar Luohan statue by two Beijing art dealers. He then traveled to Yi County in search of the cave where a group of Luohan sculptures, according to the dealers, had previously been hidden. When he entered the cave, Perzynski found the inscription and concluded from this text that the statues had originally come from elsewhere and had later been deposited in the cave, perhaps for safekeeping.

The Penn statue left China in 1913 through an arrangement made by German art dealer Edgar Worch. In June of 1914, the Museum purchased the statue from Worch. Perzynski meanwhile brought two other Luohan statues with him to Germany in November of 1913. One was bought by the German collector Harry Fuld and given to the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin, where it is believed to have been lost in the bombings of 1945. The other was purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Between 1914 and 1921, five similar Luohan statues were bought or acquired by museums, including the Metropolitan, the British Museum, the Royal Ontario Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and

the Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum in Kansas City. Two more Luohan statues are believed to be part of this group. One was sold into a private collection in Japan as early as 1921, and the other is possibly in the Musée Guimet.

Although the group of statues are similar in size, glaze, and form, the individual quality of each Luohan

This Luohan from China is 1.21 m in height. It can be viewed in the Chinese Rotunda in the Penn Museum. UPM #C66A,B.





Associated with the Liao Dynasty (947–1125 CE), this death mask (H. 21 cm) was made by beating a heavy sheet of silver. UPM #44-16-1A,B.

challenges a viewer to connect with the person behind the face. The depth of portraiture seen here is almost unparalleled in Chinese art. This kind of portraiture is possible because a Luohan was considered mortal. Chinese for the Sanskrit word *arhat*, Luohan can be translated as “enlightened man” or as the adjective “venerable.” Yet there is no promise that an Arhat will attain the otherworldly status of Buddhahood.

It is unknown if the Yizhou Luohan were portraits of specific individuals, although a goal of each sculpture clearly is an individual, human portrayal. It is also unclear how many statues were in the original group associated with the Yizhou cave, and when and where they were originally made. Legends from Buddhist literature tell of Luohan that appear in groups of 16, 18, and 500. Today, the Luohan statues that survive in their original temple settings, particularly in Japan, are often found in groups of these numbers. At least 8, and probably 10, of the tri-color glazed Luohan statues left China during a ten-year period, so the group might have originally numbered 16 or 18. The date of manufacture also is not certain. Although the statues were sold as objects from the Liao Dynasty (*ca.* 947–1125), chemical tests on the Penn Museum statue yielded

a date as late as the 12th century, meaning that it could have been made during the non-Chinese dynasty Jin (1115–1234) that succeeded Liao in northern China.

Two other extraordinary Liao objects are on display in the Rotunda. One is a silver death mask, beaten to a thickness of no more than one cm. Not an individualized portrayal, the burial mask is instead evidence of a Liao funerary practice believed to have originated with North Asian nomads of the 1st millennium BCE. Another Liao object is the gilt bronze statue of the bodhisattva Guanyin, acquired by the Penn Museum in 1922. The bodhisattva is an enlightened being en route to Buddhahood who aids others in the attainment of their own Buddhist salvation. Guanyin is known for loving kindness and compassion, and is identified by the seated Buddha in its crown.

The three pieces attest to the strength and boldness of Liao sculpture. The Luohan, however, supersedes the other two in its superlative, descriptive face, a visage that engages anyone who sees it, even though its provenance remains a mystery to this day. 🏠

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The gilt bronze statue of Guanyin holds a lotus bud in its left hand. It measures 71 cm in height. UPM #C400.