

In 1996 construction workers in China unearthed a burial pit containing 400 statues of Buddha. Had they been thrown away? Hidden? As they arrive in Britain, **Sarah Wise** reports on an extraordinary 12th-century treasure

# Secrets of the Buddha

**M**issing digits, chipped noses, absent feet – nothing robs the Qingzhou buddhas on display at the Royal Academy of their dignity and serenity. We, the unenlightened, tend to think of Buddha as a chubby little man sitting cross-legged, a wide grin above a pot belly or as a blank-faced colossus. But the 35 sculptures in this show give him some very different faces.

Created between AD529 and AD577, these buddhas are petite and slender, with gently curving, androgynous torsos, rosebud mouths and long, fine noses; picked out by individual spotlights in the three darkened exhibition rooms, they emanate a tranquillity and sublimity that cuts across and above the Royal Academy scum. Their exact purpose remains as mysterious as the circumstances of their disappearance more than 800 years ago.

In 1996, construction workers at a primary school in the town of Qingzhou (about 250 miles south of Beijing in the Shandong province) discovered a burial pit beneath the playing field, formerly the site of a buddhist temple. Inside were around 400 buddha images, which had been carefully interred some time between 1100 and 1150. The torsos had been laid to rest in layers separated with reed matting, while coins had been ceremonially scattered across the funeral pile. All the images had been broken, though many had also been restored and mended before being buried; some bore evidence suggesting fire or earthquake damage.

The Qingzhou fragments may be the exhausted, stylistically obsolete statuary that the monastery wished to replace with new art but could not bear to destroy completely; or the pieces may have been buried for safe-keeping during one of China's periodic anti-buddhist purges; or they may even have been swept from sight in a fit of iconoclasm. The Buddha had, after all, told his followers not to worship him in image, that adoration was not the route to enlightenment. Just as Christianity has been convulsed by schisms focused on image-worship, buddhism has had occasion to question the relevance of icons. Some of the Qingzhou discoveries have inscriptions naming their donors – indicating that, in this region at least, the notion of buying one's way closer to nirvana had taken hold.

Whatever the reason for their burial, the buddhas are back, arriving in Piccadilly after trips to Berlin and Zurich. The spirit of buddha is also back in China: the distantly related falun gong sect is growing in number, and hundreds of believers have been interned by the authorities – the same authorities so keen to tout their 6th-century treasures around the west (over the Shandong-Henan provincial border, according to Amnesty International, many believers are currently being "re-educated through labour" in the town of Luongyang; and 17 falun gong members are reported to have died in police custody in Shandong).

Buddhism reached China more than five centuries after the death of its founder, Siddhartha



Gautama (circa 563BC to circa 483BC), a wealthy prince turned ascetic, who was to be known after his enlightenment as the Buddha.

The elongated ears of buddha statues – here rendered in gilded limestone – symbolise the Buddha's original nobility and wealth, and some of the Qingzhou ears even show the holes where his opulent earrings hung when he was a rich man. The new religion probably entered China via the Silk Route from India and Nepal in the first

century AD, then spread as quickly in these eastern provinces as it had in the Indian kingdoms. It was a profoundly democratic religion, offering the means of salvation – through meditation, reflection and reasoning – to all, regardless of caste or social status.

Itinerant preachers spread the message, reaching large numbers of the illiterate; images of the Buddha came later, as did an increasingly complex (and entertaining) iconography and "back story". As

with Christianity, narratives (with heroes) accrued around the message, and a pantheon developed. Gautama had passed through many previous lives (over 500, some say) before being born as a bodhisattva – an almost-buddha, and one who can intercede for others to speed up their entry to nirvana – and then achieving enlightenment at some point in his mid-30s. His previous lives provided a rich store of prequels, which were eagerly painted, carved and sculpted by the increasingly

sophisticated craftsmen of north-eastern India. Many of the figures at the Royal Academy are in fact bodhisattvas, beloved of sculptors because, as still-worldly beings, their clothing, jewellery and head-wear can be portrayed as richly detailed, where the Buddha himself was noted for his plain monk's robe.

Some of the Qingzhou bodhisattva garments show their original red, green and black colouring. Elsewhere, on the Buddha, the original skin colour has also been well preserved:

the fabled glow of the Buddha's body is rendered by gilding, while his top-knot (symbolising his wisdom) is still a rich blue on one of the oldest exhibits. Traces have even been found on some of the faces of a little black moustache. Jarringly, for the contemporary viewer, a swastika is prominent on the golden chest of one of the later figures of Buddha, denoting his 1,000 perfections, and a symbol of good fortune until a later age appropriated it for an altogether different message.

## This way to nirvana... the Return of the Buddha at the RA

The exhibition is structured to show the shift that occurred from the linear, stylised work of the two Wei dynasties (AD386 to AD550) towards a more naturalistic, three-dimensional recreation of the human form in the succeeding Northern Qi dynasty (550AD to 577AD), possibly inspired by the sculptural innovations of Ancient Greece via the craftsmen of north-eastern India.

The earliest sculptures presented here were the work of unknown artists of the Northern Wei dynasty – Mongol/Turkmen nomads who settled in China and eagerly assimilated. Su Bai, scholar of early buddhist art, believes the Wei imported the dominant aspects of the art of their adopted country into their buddha images: the figures in the first room share a static, two-dimensional quality; figures are either attached to, or emerging from, their carved backgrounds and have stylised, generalised faces. The clothing – even of the Buddha – is similar to the robes of Confucian priests.

**E**laborately carved dragons swirl at the Buddha's feet, while heavenly beings soar above his head – protecting him and his sacred

doctrine. The Northern Qi were also foreign conquerors. However, they rejected Chinese culture in favour of all things western (Indian), according to Su Bai, and two rooms at the Royal Academy show Qi statues breaking free from their background, as the Buddha's clothing is reduced to a simple shift, intimating the flesh and muscle beneath. Faces become individualised – broader, chubbier – while eyes are downcast in thoughtfulness. Fabric is shown falling in folds over the body, and one buddha appears to be taking a step forward – the first time this had been attempted in Chinese sculpture.

The Buddha was reputed to have had 32 marks of physical perfection upon him, and 80 further marks of excellence besides. No artist was expected to show, literally, the whole 112 phenomena. Gautama's 40 white even teeth and long tongue, for example, could be taken as read by the enlightened viewer, implied though not shown.

But, paradoxically, Buddhist sculptors, attempting to depict the undepictable – the point of transfiguration, an entity on the verge of achieving nothingness – had their energies concentrated by a mundane set of rules: facts and figures and minute measurements to adhere to if the artwork was to achieve the phenomenon that the Chinese call "spirit resonance".

The Wei and Qi sculptors certainly managed it: The Return of the Buddha exhibition title is surely an echo of the Return of the Mummy, and there is this sense of latent life, compressed energy, within the objects – the feeling that perhaps, just perhaps, they move when we've all gone home.

The Return of the Buddha is at the Royal Academy, Piccadilly, London W1, until July 14. Details: 020-7300 8000.