



Timeless beauty ...
a sculpture from
The Lost Buddhas.

My, how you have changed

On the way to China, the Buddha had a makeover.

THERE are moustached Buddhas, hollow-cheeked, starving Buddhas, jolly, big-bellied ones and slim smiling figures. The Buddha is nothing if not adaptable. As the religion spread across Asia from its birthplace in northern India about the 5th century BC, the Buddha has taken on the features of those it has encountered.

The Buddha grew a moustache, put on sandals and developed rippling muscles as he appeared in Gandhara, present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan. These Buddhas resemble ancient Greek or Roman gods and reflect the impact on the region of the conquest by Alexander the Great.

As Buddhism entered China, probably via the Central Asian Silk Road about the 2nd century, the early images still looked distinctly Greco-Roman. But the imported style of the Gandharan-influenced Buddhas was gradually supplanted by a home-grown look. A Chinese style emerged with sinocised features and courtly robes by about the 5th century. That slow stylistic change is in contrast to the Qingzhou sculptures, which, created over about 70 years, undergo a dramatic transformation in that short period.

In the earliest Qingzhou works, dating from the late Northern Wei (500-534) and Eastern Wei (534-550) dynasties, the Buddhas have oval or cone-shaped faces, open almond-shaped eyes, aloof expressions and stiff, formal poses. They have a large topknot, or ushnisha, which indicates omniscient wisdom. Their heavy Chinese-style robes cover both shoulders and hide the body.

The Northern Qi (550-577) works are more naturalistic. The faces are round or fleshy, eyes downcast and lips full. The topknot is smaller and the heavy robes have been replaced by fine, diaphanous clothing that reveals the body.

How to read a Buddha means understanding the symbolism. The big ears with long, perforated lobes indicate the renunciation of worldly pleasures and riches – earrings included – after the historical Buddha, who was born Prince Siddharta, abandoned his life of privilege. Similarly his simple robe is unadorned, while his lively attendants wear the jewels.

The position of the Buddha's hands is also symbolic, with gestures that can indicate fearlessness, compassion or even warding off evil. A swastika carved into the gilded chest of one of the Qingzhou Buddhas looks unsettling to the contemporary viewer. But long before it was misappropriated, the sign indicated good fortune and the Buddha's many perfections.

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