

19. GUARDIAN OF THE WEST

Gilt wood with glass inlays and traces of pigment
Tibeto-Chinese
Late Yuan – early Ming, 14th / 15th century
Height: 44.5 cm (17.52 in.)

Standing defiantly on a rockwork base, this striking sculpture represents Virupaksha (Tib. *sPyan mi bzang*; Chin. *guangmu tian*), guardian of the west and one of the Lokapalas or 'Four Divine Kings' (Chin. *tianwang*), which are considered being guardians of the world and of the four cardinal directions.¹ In China, the 'Four Divine Kings' were worshipped as guardians of the empire and of Buddhist temples since the Tang period, where their images were installed at the four corners of an altar platform and on all four sides of major temple halls.²

This enraged bearded figure with fierce expression and glaring eyes is wearing an elaborate full armor, displaying a large lion-mask below the broad belt, further monster-masks on the chest, the epaulets, at the wrists and above the heavy boots and a long, fragmentary scarf billowing around the shoulders. His hair is pulled up into a double-loop topknot behind the five-leaf crown, each of the pointed elements depicting an image of Buddha Amitabha. While his left hand is grasping a snake, of which the head has been lost, his raised right held an attribute, now missing - probably either a flaming jewel or a reliquary in the form of a *stupa*. Both the snake and the attribute allude to his role as guardian of Buddha's relics and king of the Nagas.³

It is noteworthy that the iconography of the four Lokapalas is shared both in Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist art; it seems to be fully established by the end of the Tang period (618-907 AD), as murals and sculptures from the caves at Dunhuang (Gansu province) illustrate.⁴ A woodblock print from Dunhuang, dated to the year 947 AD of the Five Dynasties period and now in the British Museum, London, depicts an image of the guardian of the north, Vaishravana, wearing a Mongolian full armor, similar to the one on the present figure.⁵

Stylistically, the sculpture still displays idioms which can be compared to those found on related sculptures of the Yuan period, such as the iconography of the large lion's mask, the rendering of the facial features, the complex movement of the massive body and the soft modeling of the long scarf and other elements of the armor.⁶ As several of these details are still found on early Ming images, a dating to the second half of the 14th or the early 15th century is probable.⁷

NOTES:

1. They are also known as 'The Direction Guardians', 'The Four Guardian Kings' or 'The Four Heavenly Kings'.
2. Brinker 2011, pp.72.
3. On the iconography of Virupaksha see Liebert 1986, p.341; Chandra 1991, p.155, no.319, p.217, no.547; Schumann 2001, p.169.
4. For an example of a sculpture dated to the Tang period see Juliano/Lerner 2001, pp.207, no.78.
5. Zwalf 1985, p.226, no.331.





6. Compare with the depiction of the Lokapalas on the reliefs of the Juyong Guan (1342-45). A similar gilt bronze figure of Vaishravana attributed to the Yuan period is preserved in the Nelson Atkins Museum (Purchase of the Asian Art Acquisition Fund in memory of Laurence Sickman, F95-4). See also A & J Speelman, *Oriental Sculpture & Works of Art*, London 1999, pp.26, no.12.
7. An early Ming image of Vaishravana is illustrated in cat. Christie's London, 'Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art', May 15, 2007, lot 178.