

INTRODUCTION

To date, the gilt metal icons made in the early Ming period imperial workshops during the early 15th century have been the main focus of scholarly attention and are much in demand by collectors all over the world. These religious works of art, created between 1403 and 1435 under the patronage of the emperors of the Yongle and Xuande reign, are famous for their flawless casting, rich gilding and superb execution of detail; they are immediately recognizable by their specific style. Until today, the prevailing opinion has been held by many scholars that the Yongle and Xuande style appeared out of the blue, apparently fully formed and developed.

In contrast to the Buddhist images of these periods that are well documented and can be securely dated by the six-character reign mark they almost all bear, much less is known about their stylistic predecessors. Although it would seem logical that the early Ming highly refined style could hardly have appeared suddenly and “ex nihilo”, very few metal sculptures of the preceding Yuan period (1271-1368) have so far been identified. Currently, the consensus in the academic world is that for unknown reasons, only a very limited number of them survived.

The conquest and the unification of all of China under the Mongols and the ascension of Khubilai Khan (1215-94) to the imperial throne marked a historical and political turning point for large parts of Asia. After Khubilai had become the first emperor of the Yuan period and had adopted the Sakya tradition of Buddhism, he declared Vajrayana (“Diamond Vehicle”, Skt. for Esoteric Buddhism) as the state religion. This led to the production of Buddhist images in a new style with the help of many capable artists from Central Asia, but mainly from Nepal and Tibet, who collaborated with their Chinese counterparts in the imperial workshops in the newly established capital Dadu (modern Beijing). The most capable and influential Nepalese artist was Anige (Chin. Aniko; 1245-1306) who was introduced to the Mongol court in 1262. Although it is very likely

that the promotion of the new and foreign faith in China required the production of large numbers of Buddhist sculptures, the corpus of such icons in the early “Tibeto-Chinese” style of the 13th and 14th centuries is surprisingly small. Only a handful of Yuan metal images that can be accurately dated by inscriptions have hitherto been published. Of varying quality, they were all made as private commissions. No example has surfaced so far which bears an imperial mark or inscription that could confirm its production under imperial patronage raising the question of whether in fact the images made for the Mongol court had identifying marks.

In this exhibition, and for the first time, it is possible to present a large group of metal images of the Yuan and early Ming period in an attempt to place them in a chronology.

The focus is on the initial and early phases of Tibeto-Chinese metal sculpture relating to the introduction of Vajrayana Buddhism into China under the Mongol rule. Although this crucial period is of great importance for the understanding of the further art historical development of such statuary, it is hitherto understudied and still to large extent a “terra incognita”. The objects gathered for this presentation will attempt to initiate the long overdue art historical dialog that needs to take place so that this period of Buddhist art can be better understood.

PART ONE

is dedicated to sculptures produced in China, Nepal and Tibet during the 13th and 14th centuries, because it is these traditions that contributed to the creation of the new Yuan imperial Tibeto-Chinese style. During this enormously productive period, it is difficult to find icons in a “pure” regional style; this is especially true for Tibetan metal images, which display an “international” style comprising strong influences from the Pala and Newari traditions that have been combined with some specific Tibetan elements. After the demise of the Indian Pala Empire at the end of the 12th century, the direct influence of this important inspirational source waned, but certain idioms are still found on Tibetan sculpture well into the 14th century

and were repeatedly featured during later periods. The Newari artists from the Kathmandu Valley had always been widely employed in Central and Eastern Tibet, but from the early 13th century onwards their mature indigenous style became the dominant foreign influence on both Tibetan painting and sculpture. Despite the predominance of Tibetan Buddhism in China under the Mongol emperors, other schools, such as the Tiantai, Huayan, Pure Land and Chan persisted. The dissemination of Vajrayana Buddhism during the Yuan period also influenced the style of Chinese sculpture, while Chinese landscape conventions were newly encountered on Tibetan painting of this period and thereafter.

PART TWO

concentrates on images and ritual implements in the nascent Tibeto-Chinese style prior to the style established during the Yongle reign of emperor Zhu Di (1403-24). Within the sculptures shown, a group of four statues can be regarded as rare examples of the imperial Mongol court style.

When Khubilai Khan consolidated his rule over China and proclaimed his new dynasty, he chose a Chinese name, “Yuan” or “Origin” for it. The changes that occurred during the Yuan were so fundamental that the arts of this period became the new standard for the self-referential development of Chinese art in all subsequent periods. And it is here that the antecedent of the Buddhist Tibeto-Chinese sculpture can be looked for which emerged in the early Ming dynasty under the Yongle emperor.

It is the intention of this exhibition and its publication to begin the process of identifying the idioms that contributed to the emergence of an early Tibeto-Chinese style used for the articulation of metal sculpture during the Yuan period and to lay the foundation for further research in the future.