

OBJECT IN FOCUS

Western Paradise of the Buddha Amitabha



China, Hebei province, Fengfeng,
southern Xiangtangshan, Cave 2

Period of Division, Northern Qi dynasty,
550–577

Limestone with traces of pigment

62 11/16 x 131 11/16 in

Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment. Freer Gallery of Art, F1921.2

Describe

This large relief is almost eleven feet long. At the center, a Buddha sits under a canopy decorated with strings of large jewels. He raises his right hand to make a teaching or preaching gesture. Seated devas crowd around him. Above the canopy, more Buddhas and bodhisattvas sit on lotus blossoms and are distinguished by the halos around their heads. Other flying divinities and musical instruments float in the sky. One tall lavish building appears at each side of the relief. A rectangular pond, flanked by the bodhisattvas Avalokiteshvara and Mahasthamaprapta, lies in front of the central Buddha. It is the focus of attention of the Buddha and the two principal bodhisattvas. Inside the pond, small childlike figures sit on lotus blossoms or are enclosed inside the flowers. These represent reborn souls. Some lotus blossoms are still tightly closed and others are in full bloom.

Analyze

The Buddha is Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light. He resides in his heavenly realm called the Western Paradise, or Pure Land. Devotees believe that absolute faith in Amitabha empowers a person to be reborn in his paradise. According to the scriptures, the Western Paradise is a land of bliss. People there enjoy peace and plenty. Beautiful music sounds from the sky. Trees grow precious jewels. The relief depicts Amitabha welcoming newly reborn souls who emerge from lotus blossoms. It is believed to be the earliest known illustration of the Western Paradise in Chinese art.

Interpret

The relief comes from the wall of a cave at Xiangtangshan, literally “Mountain of Echoing Halls,” in Northern China. The Buddhist cave temples of Xiangtangshan are a group of worship halls or shrines carved into the mountains during the sixth century. Created with the financial support of the royal family and officials, the caves represent the power and prestige of the throne and the popularity of Buddhist belief at the time. The relief was originally carved on top of the entrance to Cave 2, facing the main altar of the cave. Sculptures of Amitabha and other divinities also stood on the altar. One would have felt as if entering the heavenly dwelling of the Buddha Amitabha when walking into the cave.

Inquire

- Who is the most important figure in this work of art? What are the clues that make you think that?
- Why do you think it is important for religious traditions to promote and depict the concept of a paradise?
- This work of art was originally a part of a cave temple, and now it is displayed in a museum. Compare and contrast the display and experience of viewing the work of art in these two settings.

Resources

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