



A Painted and Lacquered Wooden Image of Bodhidharma

漆繪木達摩

Height: 83.82 cm. (33 in.)

Width: 42.55 cm. (16 3/4 in.)

Yuan dynasty

13th-14th century

The seated wooden figure was carved from a block of wood to sit on a dais with legs folded and garments pendent in front. Portrayed in a full-frontal posture with hands resting in the lap, the figure is garbed in a wide-sleeved, long robe. An undergarment is visible at the neckline where both garments cross in a V over the chest. The hem of the robe that wraps around the front of the figure is pulled through a circular clasp on one side. A mantle covers the rounded head in hood-like fashion, falls over the shoulders and across the back, the mantle, sleeves and edges of the robe displaying similar wide trimmings. The surface reveals evidence of a primary coat of a white substance, possibly calcium carbonate or kaolin, over which red lacquer, blue-green and black pigments were applied perhaps in various campaigns with evidence of enhancements of silver and gold. A small round obsidian bead was inserted in each eye socket, the reflective gleam of the stones producing a life-like quality to the image. A deep rectangular cavity was chiseled in the figure's back with a removable wooden plank serving as a door. The chamber contains decomposed fabric that appeared to have been rolled and tied with thread attached to a thin, round, bronze disc. Desiccated cardamom pods, coriander seeds, and star anise are also present along with some flakes of mother-of-pearl.

The individual with his tell-tale mantle and piercing gaze can be identified as Bodhidharma whose history is considered semi-legendary as so many tales have entered into the mix. Bodhidharma, nevertheless, is believed to have come to China from India in the early 5th century, transmitting Buddhist law during his travels and regarded in China as the patriarch of Chan Buddhism. One story has the monk cutting off his eyelids so appalled he had become with himself when realizing he had fallen into a lengthy slumber during meditation. He is therefore, especially paintings, depicted with

a piercing wide-eyed stare and with the mantle, his legacy and a symbol of his power, pulled over his head.

Wood is subject to many challenges: humidity, extreme heat, light, infestations of insects and the ravages of fungi, mold and mildew. The present sculpture has indeed suffered the vicissitudes of time and environment and while its material body has remained neither pristine nor unblemished, its spirit is unaltered, powerful and present. The offerings in the consecrational chamber are evidence of the very high regard in which the image was held.