Chinese Buddhist Sculpture Under the Liao
(Free standing works in situ and selected examples from public collections)

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A study of the Chinese Buddhist sculptures of the Liao dynasty (907-1125), both those in situ as well as those in public collections. They are of the greatest importance as resources for the study of a large number of sculptures in the USA, Europe and Asia. They have been thoroughly examined by Prof. Marilyn Leidig Gridley for charting the development of style, iconography and patronage during a vital period of Buddhist activity in north China. The Liao sculptures provide important correctives to many generalizations about Buddhist art in China during these centuries. They make it clear, for instance, that the mid-ninth century persecution did not spell the end of the mainstream of Buddhist art of T’ang China.

The second chapter is a historical background of the Liao emperors, their attitude toward and patronage of art, which is primarily Buddhist art. The 13-storey octagonal Ta t’a or Great Pagoda is the most massive Liao structure extant, 264 feet high. It is a valuable reference point for style and iconography. The Preservation of Sutras Hall built by Hsing-tsung in 1038 to house 579 volumes of the Tripitaka, has 29 original statues on its altar and is the single most important source for the study of Liao sculptures.

The third chapter details the three major monuments in the environs of Ta-t’ung in Shansi Province, the site of the western capital of Liao. The three monuments are the Hsia-ssu (Hsia Hua-yen-ssu or Lesser Avatamsaka monastery), Shih-chia-t’a and Liao sculptures in Yün-kang caves III and XI. The identification of the clay sculptures of Hsia-ssu has been discussed at length, besides the stylistic features of their crowns, costumes, haloes and jewelry. The cloud collar (yün-chien) as a distinctive feature of imperial dress in the Liao period, seen on the seated Bodhisattvas, has been treated at length. The second Mu-t’a pagoda is a sculptural mañḍala from the end of the 11th century. It is the earliest extant wooden (mu) pagoda (t’a) in China. The first floor is dedicated to Śākyamuni, the third to the four Buddhas of the Vajradhātu-mañḍala, the fourth again to Śākyamuni, the fifth to Eight Bodhisattvas around the central Buddha, Vairocana in the mudrā of knowledge fist. A close analysis of their style supports a date of late 11th to early 12th century. The Liao emperors repaired and expanded the cave temples of Yün-kang. The overall impression of Liao sculptures is one of softness with no bone structure. The popularity of the cloud collar is one aspect of a large effort to emphasise ties of the divinity and this world. The parted lips, the sparkling eyes, the trembling ornaments infuse the sculptures with the pulse of life. The austere styles and iconography of early Buddhist art were tempered by emphasis on the human element.

The fourth chapter deals with sculptures in the Tu-lo-ssu monastery, that date from 984. The Kuan-yin at the back of the altar is the single most important statue to this study. He is flanked by two small guardian kings dressed in full armor. It is an extensive study of the evolution of Avalokiteśvara in general, besides that of the Water-Moon Kuan-yin and of his other forms. The style and iconography of the Tu-lo-ssu sculptures leads to Sri Lanka, SE India, Turfan, Tun-huang, and of course to Japan.

The life-size ceramic Lohans or Arhats in the Hsi-ling mountains reveal the high level of technical and artistic excellence in Liao portraiture.

The sixth chapter treats of 23 clay sculptures on the altar of the Feng-kuo-ssu monastery, that date from 1020. The enormous size of these Buddhas and the Shang-ching Kuan-yin show distinctive stylistic components. Certain motifs and iconography take us to Pāla art, to Mai-chi-shan in Kansu, and to Sokkur-am in Korea, but all the inspirations were synthesised into a new statement.

The seventh chapter analyses sculptures in public collections, like the Sickman collection at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.
The book ends with a conclusion, bibliography, chronology and 178 plates. It is a rich and revealing analysis of the major changes in Liao art that evolved from T’ang tradition, enriched by newly arrived inspirations form South India and Central Asia. The vigorous evolving art form of the Liao period is a continuation of the great tradition of Chinese Buddhist art.

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Information about this dynamic and well-preserved Buddhist icon, a protective divinity, has largely been drawn from stylistic analysis and records that postdate or predate the work, some of which may be spurious. Recent repairs to the clay image and its pigmented surface and subsequent studies have provided new information about the Shūkongōjin.