



Xu Zhen's reclining Buddha

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Xu Zhen's colossal reclining Buddha of steel and industrial clay stretches not only the length of the ancient Silk Road that once joined China with Europe in the first handshake of trans-Asian trade, but also the new one – the one that might soon stretch out from China across the bellies of its western and southern neighbours in the form of railways and highways, and that might also soon tickle the coastlines of Africa, Arabia, and (just perhaps) Australia, via new or expanded seaports. With its eyes half closed, the great figure seems to dream not only of the dissonances between such widely separated cultures, but also of their harmonies.

During the time of Imperial Rome on one end of Asia, and of the Han Dynasty on the other, the mysterious silkworm-spun fabric flowed westwards between the shifting kingdoms of Central Asia and around the top of the roof of the world, while a bit of glassware flowed east. What mainly flowed east, though, was a large quantity of silver and gold, meaning that by the first century CE the then Chinese capital of Chang'an found itself awash with European coinage, while the statesmen of the Roman forum began to mutter darkly of trade deficits.

But it was not only goods and money that made the Silk Road their conduit, there were also ideas about how to live, how to make art and how to pray. A branch leading down into the Indian subcontinent allowed Buddhism to spread along the route from the earliest times, with the first monks and scriptures arriving in China around the second century CE.

By the time of the Tang Emperors some half a millennium later, the desert oasis of Dunhuang, on China's ever-shifting western border, had become a teeming Buddhist metropolis. One of the richest and most cosmopolitan cities on Earth, it was a place where the faithful rubbed shoulders daily with Chinese Taoists and Confucians, and with migrant Christians, Manichaeans, Zoroastrians and Jews.

It was in this environment that the reclining Buddha that forms the basis of Xu's piece for the NGV Triennial, *Eternity-Buddha in Nirvana, the Dying Gaul, Farnese Hercules, Night, Day, Sartyr and Bacchante, Funerary Genius, Achilles, Persian Soldier Fighting, Dancing Faun, Crouching Aphrodite, Narcissus Lying, Othryades the Spartan Dying, the Fall of Icarus, A River, Milo of Croton*, 2016–17, was created, between the eighth and ninth centuries, in a man-made grotto some twenty-five kilometres from the centre of town. At the time, the

(previous) Reclining Buddha in Cave 148 Of Mogao Caves, Dunhuang, Gansu Province, China, 2016
(below) Xu Zhen, *Eternity-Buddha in Nirvana ...* 2016–17, detail featuring *Wounded Achilles* by Albacini, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne



original statue would have been one donation among many, for Dunhuang was the last stop before you exited civilisation for the lands of the barbarians – one would want to have completed at least one act of merit before chancing one's arm.

Perhaps more importantly for local trading houses, Dunhuang was also the *first* stop if you were heading into China from the west. The landscape on the run-up to it was dominated by the Taklamakan, a desert of 300 square kilometres whose name in one of the local Uighur dialects means, 'The place you don't come back from', and so traders in silk and other commodities would have been keen, in addition to building up their own spiritual credentials, to bless the caravans filled with money as they returned across those badlands from Rome and points east.

It was along with earlier caravans, centuries before, that the first Buddhist artists must have entered China intending to sell the idea of lifelike statuary to a culture that seemed to prefer abstract art. Such devotional sculpture was already a hybrid of East and West, having been born, most probably, out of the conversion to Buddhism centuries before of the left-behind cohorts of Alexander the Great of Macedonia in a region straddling the border of present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan. These descendants of Greeks essentially wished to see the statuary of their homeland adapted to their new beliefs instead of to the abandoned gods and heroes of the Aegean, and so the first naturalistic images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas were created. *Eternity*, 2013–14, a separate work by Xu Zhen, replicates the so-called Elgin Marbles, probably the most famous Classical Greek sculptures of all, but replaces their heads with inverted Tianlongshan Buddhist statues very similar to these Graeco-Buddhist creations – an apt commentary on the profound continuities between Western and Eastern art.

All of which brings us to the smaller, paler figures that pose, lean and loiter on top of, in front of, and next to the great mass of Xu's reclining Buddha like a gaggle of road-tripping bogans picnicking drunkenly at the sacred rock of Uluru. And some of the figures *are* drunk – notably the famous *Dancing Faun* of Pompeii (now in the National Archaeological Museum, Naples), the original of which was probably created not by the Romans but by the Greeks around the time their cousins a few thousand miles east were beginning to convert to Buddhism, and the pair of entwined figures made by the French virtuoso Clodion two full

millennia later, one of whom is a furry-legged satyr (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). Fauns and satyrs were lumped in together by Roman and later European artists as companions of Dionysus, the god of wine and dance, and Clodion's revelling couple is intoxicated not only with alcohol, but also with the beauty and sensuality of their bodies. A carefully hinted spiral running up through the figures' legs and arms (a typical feature of eighteenth-century European statuary) suggests an ecstatic frozen moment plucked out of the flow of time.

Classical Greek sculpture and its later European derivatives are, in fact, all about the body and time. The tradition's quintessential pose is the *contrapposto*, in which the figure appears to be transferring the body's weight from one leg, shown becoming relaxed, to the other, shown becoming tense, and the abdomen flexes and the shoulders offset one another to accommodate the movement – the *Dancing Faun* provides an up-tempo example, while a down-tempo one can be seen in the musclebound *Farnese Hercules* placed by Xu at the feet of his reclining Buddha. Essentially, such figures have the same forward momentum as the implacable, linear march of the seconds and hours, bringing death closer all the time, and with nothing good to look forward to on the other side.

The afterlife for the Classical Greeks was a miserable business, a dingy hole in the ground packed with the snivelling revenants of formerly great warriors, all of which makes it very easy to sympathise with the anguish of the famous *Dying Gaul* from Rome's Capitoline Museums – a copy of a lost Hellenistic original – and of Filippo Albacini's nineteenth-century *Wounded Achilles*, which borrows extensively from it (Chatswood House, Derbyshire). So dismal was the Greek underworld, in fact, that Achilles's ghost is heard to complain amid the pages of the *Odyssey* that he would rather grovel as the poorest slave among the living than be raised as emperor over the dead. With such things in mind, Greek sculpture warns, love well, drink well, fight well – take pride in your body, for you will never occupy another, and when your death does come, make sure it is a spectacular one, so at least the poets remember the human being you were and not the shabby spectre you will become.

If Classical Greek statuary and its descendants in later European art see time as a line with a beginning and an end, Buddhist sculpture sees it as a circle, or exists entirely outside its confines. Just the West has its

contrapposto posture, so Buddhism and its successor in India, Hinduism, has its preferred stance for the human body – the *tribhanga*, a subtle S-curve where the neck tilts, the hip projects, the knee bends, and if there is any movement at all it is a stationary shimmy very different from the invasive gait of the *Dancing Faun*. Moreover, it is a repetitive movement that is quite in keeping with the idea not of one life, but of many – of a conception of time that is circular rather than linear, a story of endless incarnations rather than merely one.

That sort of takes the pressure off, doesn't it? For in Buddhism, things can always be put off until a future life. If you don't have time to seek enlightenment by practising meditation, you could pay for sculptures like the ones at Dunhuang, you could wish aloud for all living beings to be without suffering, and in certain sects you could mutter over and over the names of one or other of the cosmic Buddhas that existed in other epochs and in other universes – any one of which three activities might win you a more leisurely incarnation the next time around. Thus, you would have more time for the serious business of meditation, and might be in with a chance of escaping the entire sorry cycle of birth and death forever.

For Buddhists, the pleasures of the ego and the body so valued by the Ancient Greeks are a trap that increases the appetite without ever fulfilling it. If you pursue such things and become drunk on life, they suggest – like the frolicking satyr and maiden in Clodion's sculpture – by the time you die you will be so full of cravings that you will plunge willingly into another existence full of delusion and suffering. The trick instead is to observe yourself minutely and to see each desire come into being and to note what internal processes led to its appearance, and by doing so to recognise that they are based on nothing, and are, to all intents and purposes, illusory. That is the process Gautama Buddha himself is said to have gone through around the late fifth century BCE, sitting in the shade of a tree in India, and achieving, after more than a month and a half of meditation, the penetrating understanding of reality known as *nirvana*.

The reclining Buddha is basically what happens when a person who has achieved nirvana reaches the end of their life. It is different from what happens when an ordinary Buddhist dies, because the craving for physical existence has disappeared entirely, and so the consciousness won't hurry back into flesh, into a





further incarnation, but will instead enter *parinirvana* – nirvana without a body. Gautama Buddha always refused to answer questions from disciples about what happens after death, and so Buddhist scholars since have had a rough time explaining to people what *parinirvana* is actually like, with some suggesting it would be similar to describing the concept of ‘up’ to a being of only two dimensions. Whatever the case, on the face of Xu’s copy of the great reclining Buddha of Dunhuang, we do not see the mixture of stoicism and anguish we recognise in the *Dying Gaul* and the *Wounded Achilles*, but the detached smile of a creature about to experience a reality far different from the one familiar to us – a reality without subject, object or duration.

The question we must ask, of Xu’s *Eternity Buddha in Nirvana* ... is whether the specific Western sculptures reproduced within it are really any more original. The white marble *Dying Gaul*, familiar to us by now, is a Roman facsimile in a different material, the original

having been cast in bronze during Greece’s Hellenistic period and then mislaid, perhaps melted down for weapons stock during one of the region’s innumerable wars. The *Farnese Hercules* the same, copied into marble for the Roman Emperor Caracalla for his baths in Rome from a now-missing Greek bronze cast half a millennium earlier. The Louvre’s famous *Crouching Aphrodite*, also included in Xu’s piece, the same – not only reproduced by a Roman artist from a lost Greek original but also freely modified, so that the right arm reaches back over the head rather than forward to cover the breasts, as would be normal in most other Roman copies available today. The point is this: practically all we have seen of Ancient Greek sculpture, we have seen via skilful Roman imitations, and who can say how greatly the makers of such copies might have improved upon the originals?

The multiplication of such duplicates can be dizzying. Take the *Fighting Persian*, for example, another statue reproduced in Xu’s NGV Triennial

work. The Greek original was produced around 200 BCE for a monument on the south wall of the Athenian acropolis, and numerous Roman copies were later made in marble, probably the most famous of which is the one now in the Vatican Museums. Plaster casts of the Vatican copy were made in the late nineteenth century at the Malpieri casting studio in Rome for sale to art schools and galleries. One of these was sketched by art students for decades in the Classical section of the British Museum before being donated to the army during the First World War to be shot to pieces during target practice.

Training to be an artist in the European academies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was all about copying such plaster casts of Classical statuary. Most students would draw them for years before being allowed anywhere near a live model, and they were familiar enough to the gallery-going public for their influence on a contemporary work to be recognised straight away. We have already noted the similarities between Albacini’s *Wounded Achilles* and the famous *Dying Gaul* – plaster casts of which later were to be found at every single art school in Europe – and its pose can also be seen echoing through Johan Tobias Sergel’s *Othryades the Spartan Dying*, c. 1779 (Louvre, Paris); Paul-Ambroise Slodtz’s *Fall of Icarus*, 1743 (Louvre, Paris); and even in Jean-Pierre Cortot’s highly idealised *Narcissus Lying*, 1818–19 (Museum of Fine Arts, Angers), applied to widely varying narratives. As Xu’s has said to this writer with regard to his piece for the NGV, ‘In history there are always repetitions and coincidences, it is an artwork that can possess various existing values throughout time’.

Such later works as Cortot’s *Narcissus Lying* were seldom completed in their finished stone version by the artists themselves, but were copied over by workmen from an original in clay, plaster or wax, using a pointing-machine to take exact measurements, and industrial drilling equipment to rough the thing out. A number of marble ‘editions’ were copied in this way from the same original, and their purchasers had no way of knowing whether the artist whose signature appeared on the base had even laid a hand on its surface, or whether the final refinements to the figure’s features had been done merely by an assistant.

By the early twentieth century, the great French sculptor Auguste Rodin was employing so many assistants and making so many editions for sale that he ended up in court accused of selling fakes of his own



Creating the metal framing in Xu Zhen’s studio in preparation for construction of the reclining Buddha for *Eternity-Buddha in Nirvana* ... 2016–17, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

(previous) Xu Zhen’s studio during the preparation of *Eternity-Buddha in Nirvana* ... 2016–17, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
(below) Xu Zhen’s studio during construction of the reclining Buddha for *Eternity-Buddha in Nirvana* ... 2016–17, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne





Xu Zhen's studio during casting of the Classical European sculptures 2017

Xu Zhen, *Eternity-Buddha in Nirvana ...* 2016-17, detail featuring the *Dancing Faun*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne



Xu Zhen's studio during casting of the Classical European sculptures 2017 (opposite) Xu Zhen *Eternity-Buddha in Nirvana ...* 2016-17, detail featuring the *Fighting Persian*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne



work – a situation that hastened the replacement of such norms with the modernist preference for artists who hacked things straight out of stone using chisel and mallet.

Despite replacing a pointing machine with a 3D scanner, then, Xu's working methods, with their industrial approach and their forty or so assistants, would not have seemed out of place amid the glory days of the European academies, but they also resemble in some ways those of the makers of the Dunhuang reclining Buddha in its cave just off the Silk Road. That sculpture began with a wooden frame instead of one of welded metal, but was in like manner built up over it by a team of artists out of layers of clay. The work was more a collective effort than one of employer and employee, for the people doing it were monks for whom creating an image of the Great Teacher was as much an act of piety as of producing an object for display, just as it had been for the makers of the first ever recumbent Buddhas thousands of miles west.

But the ancient Silk Road's gateway to China was still a long way from where the long migration of the reclining Buddha would come to an end. The languid figures may be seen in solid bronze as far eastward as Japan, in concrete and gold leaf as far south as Java, carved from the living rock as far west as Pakistan, and now, in steel and ceramic, as far out into the Pacific as Melbourne, Australia.

Given the current hubbub over China's One Belt One Road policy, which may not include Australia but will certainly affect it, the construction of such a powerful symbol of the ancient Silk Road will seem to some very timely. Yet for others, the fears of millennia past over trade imbalances will continue to hold currency. During the first century CE, author Pliny the Elder remarked that luxury goods from Asia were draining Rome's coffers of some 45 million sesterces a year. A single sesterce at the time would get you three jugs of wine, and for we who live – for better or worse – in a society that inherits the norms of Classical Greece and Rome, that might mean a lot of missed rounds at the bar.

But when it comes to the exchange of ideas between cultures on how to make art, an invisible Silk Road is already in full operation, and its teeming highways



Xu Zhen, *Eternity-Buddha in Nirvana ... 2016-17*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

reach not only across Asia but into every conceivable corner of the globe. 'The new Silk Road is actually the internet,' Xu told me recently, 'our way of creating, studying and exchanging is based on the development of internet technology, and it is constantly changing'. For in studying the global history of art, how many of the artworks known to any given individual have been seen in the flesh, so to speak, rather than as a JPEG or TIFF in an online museum, or as part of a PowerPoint slideshow in the lecture theatre? In such a fluid environment, Xu asserts, an artwork becomes not an object but 'a piece of information' whose ubiquity renders notions of cultural appropriation and protectionism entirely meaningless. 'One cannot forbid people', he concludes, 'the right of *observing*'.