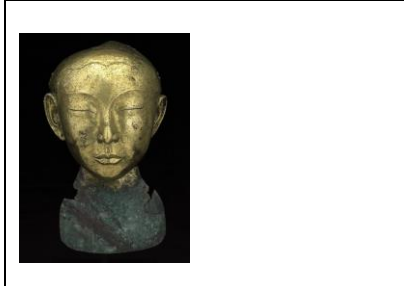

Title of Object

Funerary Mask of a Young Woman

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: Unknown

Culture: China (Liao dynasty)

Date of Object: 916-1125

Country: China

Accession Number: 2002.220.1

File Created: 5/10/2016

Material/Medium: Gilt bronze

Author of File: Susan Arndt

Department: Chinese, South and Southeast
Asian Art

Reviewer of File: Kara ZumBahlen

Last Updated/Reviewed: 6/29/2016

Tour Topics

Group 4 tour, ancient culture, beauty, cultural encounters/exchanges, funerary/afterlife, identity, power/status, ritual/ceremony, spirituality/sacred, women

Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

Let's focus our attention on this face for a few moments. Take a deep breath in and as you exhale notice the shape of this face, the features, the color... As you observe this object move quietly to get a better view.

Now after looking for a minute - What words would you use to describe this object to a friend? What if anything makes you curious? What does the presence of gold suggest to you?

You have noticed the flange... or... Did anyone notice the flange here? - What does it suggest to you?

What religions can you name that people practice in the United States? Have our beliefs comingled?

Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

Mia's funerary mask from the Khitan people, founders of the Liao Dynasty, is bronze with gold gilt. The form is derived from the contours of the young woman's face and the artist has used a somewhat stylized line sparingly to complement the bone structure around the hairline, eyebrows, and the mouth. The eyes are closed and there is a peaceful, serene expression. The ears are delicate and pierced, the jewelry now missing.

The mask would have first been created by shaping and forming thin sheets of bronze to create a likeness of the deceased and all of the masks that have been found in Liao tombs are assumed to be portraits. Once the bronze mask was produced it was then gilded with gold or silver using a traditional method of mercury gilding. This is a process whereby mercury is mixed with gold to form an amalgam. The pasty amalgam is then applied to the surface of an object. The object is heated and the mercury evaporates leaving a thin coating of gold. In a final step, the object is burnished to smooth and polish away any impurities from the process.

Placing a metal mask on the face of the deceased was a unique tradition of the nomadic Khitan; they buried their high-ranking men and women with various amounts of metal body attire such as a mask like this one for the face and a suit "woven" from wire for the body. The masks were highly personalized and fashioned in a variety of shapes and sizes, the type of metal depending on the status of the wearer. The simplest were made of thinly hammered bronze while those of silver and, in rare cases, gold were reserved for the elite (philamuseum). (Prop: image of other mask) The mask was placed on the body, the flange under the chin resting on the chest. This was secured when the body was carefully wrapped with silk and wound with bronze wire (gold or silver could have been used). There is speculation the Khitan believed that this helped to preserve the body.

The ears are pierced and were probably once adorned with earrings, a custom practiced by both male and female Khitan.

Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

The Liao empire came to power in the north roughly about the same time as the Song Dynasty toward the end of a period of unrest, known as the five dynasties/ten kingdoms period, about 907 AD. As the name suggests it was an unstable time with multiple power shifts and no unified rule.

The Khitans were a semi-nomadic people. They lived primarily on the eastern steppe of Inner Mongolia, an area that was also occupied by other ethnic nomadic groups. Described as mainly "hunting and pastoral," their economy was based on trade, animals, horses, horses and military might. (Think of them as a raid and trade culture) Pared down for nomadic life on the steppes, the Khitan only developed a written script through the association of the Song Chinese they had conquered. While they did have a functional ceramics and metal working tradition, they did not have a strong individual artistic tradition.

The Khitan and other nomadic peoples of the steppes originally practiced shamanism. This is a belief system where there is a spiritual world, a physical world and the interaction of those worlds are governed by intermediary shamans. One of the beliefs common to ethnic groups on the steppes is that a person had three souls, a body-soul, a bone-soul, and soul that left the body the second after death. Song records of the period reference a practice where the Khitan brought the body of the deceased

north to the mountains and placed it in a tree. The bones were collected after three years and burned. The Song also recorded a mortuary practice where the Khitan would preserve a body by removing the fluids, stomach and intestines and fill the cavity with fragrant herbs.

It is believed that many of the artists and architects employed by the Liao were conscripted or enslaved. Art and architecture from this period and Khitan tombs in particular demonstrate the influence of these artisans.

Khitan tombs (prop) were small compared to the tombs of earlier Chinese dynasties such as the Qin. (Think-terra cotta warriors) Through the contact of conquest and trade with others, they were exposed to a variety of belief systems. Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist traditions were eventually mingled becoming incorporated with shamanistic beliefs. In time, Liao tombs would demonstrate a very unique mix of Chinese architecture and painting programs mixed with the unique mortuary practices of the nomadic Khitans.

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

Founded in North China by semi-nomadic Khitans, the Liao dynasty (907-1125) produced a large number of superb gold and silver wares using traditional Chinese metalworking and gilding techniques. Unlike traditional Chinese burial customs, the Liao often used gold or gilt bronze funerary masks in burials of important individuals. It is thought these masks were portraits of the deceased. This superb life size example of a serenely elegant young woman is fully rounded and unusually well-finished. The flange below the chin is integral to the mask and, wrapped beneath silk clothing, it would have functioned to keep the mask in place.

Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

The Arts of China, Michael Sullivan, The Five dynasties and the Song, pages 164-165.

Empires Beyond The Great Wall: The Heritage of Genghis Khan, Adam T. Kessler, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles. Pages 104-117.

Tenth Century China and Beyond: Funerary Art. Chapter entitled: "Two Royal Tombs from the Early Liao: Architecture, Pictorial Program, Authorship, Subjectivity," by Wu Hung.

https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/wuhung/files/2012/12/Wu_TwoRoyalTombs.pdf

Liao Archeology: Tombs and Ideology along the Northern Frontier of China, by Nancy Shatzman Steinhardt (access through Jstor)

Oxford Art Online, Grove Art Online, Liao Dynasty

Oxford Art Online, Grove Art Online, China, XI: Gold and Silver, (iv) Five Dynasties (AD 907-60) and Liao (907-1125).

Philadelphia Museum of Art, Finishing Techniques in Metalwork, Mercury Gilding/Silvering:

https://www.philamuseum.org/booklets/7_42_77_1.html

And another mask from the Liao: <http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/322022.html>