

VANDERVEN ORIENTAL ART



Stone Drummer Souchang

Carved Stone, Height: 49.3 cm, China, Han Dynasty (206 BC - 220 AD)

This very rare carved stone figure of an entertainer, is captured whilst performing. He has a very exaggerated facial expression, head thrown back, forehead wrinkled, eyes squinting and his tongue sticking out. He has a slightly squat body, with his back arched showing an ample belly. He stands upright with knees bent; in his left hand he holds a small round drum and in his right he holds a beating stick. His upper-body is unclothed except an armband on his left arm. He wears low-slung voluminous trousers, with a sagging waistband, just about covering his bottom half. On his head he wears a close fitting cap tied over a pointy bun. The comical and caricatural posture and facial expression, show the sculptor's desire to immortalise the performance mid-act. Drummers such as this specialized in a kind of part-spoken, part-sung storytelling called Shouchang.

This figure is stylistically related to a known group of pottery figures of entertainers, which have been excavated from high-ranking Han dynasty tombs. These exceptional figures with their lively expressiveness, appear to be unmatched in the art of the ancient world. Their popularity, must mean such entertainers were highly appreciated for their virtuosity and an important part of court

life. Other known figures from this group - either drumming, singing, acting or miming - have been found over a large geographical area covering Chengdu Plain in Sichuan Province. Chengdu city itself was a wealthy trading hub during the Han Dynasty, attracting commerce and travellers from far beyond the region. This economic growth and increased wealth would have also triggered a flowering of the arts and literature.

The comical appearance, silly expressions and exaggerated gestures of these figures are part of the Shouchang storytelling performance - perhaps comparable to that of a court jester. The body shape may indicate these figures were perhaps dwarfs, who are generally known to have been popular as Chinese court performers. It is known that native as well as foreign dwarfs trained as acrobats, jugglers, tightrope walkers, dancers and musicians. These exotic entertainers formed troupes, which circulated in China from region to region, entertaining all levels of society. Similar entertainers also appear on tomb tiles, depicting scenes of juggling and sword balancing.

We have not been able to find a similar figure carved from stone. However, comparable ceramic figures of drummers can be found in private as well as in museum collections. The Sichuan Provincial Museum has a similar postured drummer made of pottery. The Minneapolis Institute of Art, has a pottery figure of a squatting drummer (acc.nr. 2003.101). A brickwork tile exhibited in the Metropolitan Museum, New York from the same period, has a relief with a banquet scene with entertainers.