

Rhinoceros, bronze

Circa: Liao Dynasty, 916-1125

Size: 10.5cm H., 25.0cm L.



The first and most distinctive impression left by this bronze rhino statue is the strength it expresses, the strength created through the contrast between balance and unbalance. Its four limbs are wide spread as if it is forward marching and ready for competing with a giant invader. The muscle details on its body and head, coupled with the expression the beast carries, also increase its aesthetic appreciation.

It's rare for a bronze statue with a small and hollow volume such as this one to communicate such a high level of energy. It's even more rare that this is achieved with extremely simple and precise lines. During the Xia, Shang, Zhou Dynasties (21st century B.C. – 221 B.C.) and continuing to the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.), a tradition was formed and popularized to emphasize on the static figures and conveying the aesthetic effect through large and solid volume. Contrary to this tradition, this bronze statue seeks an exotic and uncertain design to create the balance out of unbalance. It resembles some of the characteristics of ancient Greek sculptures.

Actually, to certain extent, the source of this bronze statue explains why it is such an unusual collectible piece. It was discovered in a commonly known as Liao (916 A.D. - 1125) cemetery site in the Ba County, Hebei Province at the beginning of 1980's.

Liao Dynasty, existing in the similar period as Song Dynasty (960 A.D.-1279), was established by Khitans in 916 A.D. It governed the area extending east to Heilongjiang Province, west and north to the middle of Mongolia and south to Hai River in Tian Jin Province. It bordered with Song Dynasty in the south.

As Nomads, the Khitans were attached to animals in such a special way that their works of art often seemed foreign to the Chinese. With the establishment of Liao Dynasty, there were extensive mutual influences and exchanges among the Khitans and the Chinese. The Khitan styles impacted a wide range of Chinese art works such as painting, sculpture, architecture, etc. At the same time, influenced by the Chinese artists, the Khitan styles got enriched and expanded as well.

The subject of rhino should not be the invention of the Khitans. They might have never seen a rhino if they didn't interacted with the Chinese and other foreign people. Even with the Chinese, rhino was not a subject as frequently depicted as other animals, although the archeological discoveries of the pre-historical fossils and artifacts made of bones demonstrated that there had been rhinos lived in China long time ago. Since Han and Tang Dynasties, many paintings and art works had foreign people and animals as subjects. Today, many scholars attribute this to the result of "Silk Road" (the trading route from China to western Asia and Europe via ancient Persia) as "the Chinese application of the foreign subjects".

This bronze statue contains higher level of copper. The exterior was gold decoration but faded because of prolonged burial. The left over gold traces reveals Khitan's technique of covering the surface with gold leaf, which is different from the Chinese's gold plating technique that applying the dissolved gold (in mercury) to the exterior of the bronze.