



HEAD OF A LION

China • Cast iron

Ca. 1000–1127, Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127) • 31.281



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This lion head was part of a **Buddhist** sculpture created during a period when monumental projects using cast iron were popular. It is closely related to China's oldest and largest surviving cast iron sculpture, the Lion of Cangzhou, forged in 953 and considered a Chinese national treasure. This extremely rare lion head was placed on a body that was either cast separately or made of a different material, such as wood. Both lions were probably mounts for the **Bodhisattva** of Wisdom (*Wenshu*) descending from Mount Wutai to guide devotees in wisdom of the Buddhist faith. Believers traveled to Mount Wutai in Shanxi Province, stopping at temples where such a sculpture was enshrined.

With its piercing eyes, flaring nostrils, curling lips, fiercely arching eyebrows, and jaws open wide exposing powerful teeth, the face of the lion is very expressive. At the same time, the mane's large stylized curls create a striking visual pattern. **Realism** and imagination would have successfully created a dynamic balance if the ferocity of the lion were paired with a calm Bodhisattva who was most likely riding the lion.

This lion head may have originally been covered with a thin layer of plaster that was painted with bright colors. Known as gesso, this technique was probably used to disguise the piece-mold casting seams running outside the eyes down to the corners of the mouth and then angling sharply into the curly mane.