



## Faith, etched in stone

### Sackler's Cosmic Buddha in fine detail

BY KRIS CORONADO

In a room brimming with ancient art, the headless and armless limestone statue is easy to overlook. Nevertheless, Keith Wilson, curator of ancient Chinese art at the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, suggests visitors linger in front of Vairochana, the Cosmic Buddha, a little longer. "As you can see it's super complicated and very, very dense," he says of the intricately carved 6th-century piece on the main floor of Smithsonian's Freer Gallery (1200 Independence Ave SW; 202-633-1000; [asia.si.edu](http://asia.si.edu)). "It has never been fully analyzed, though it's been here at the museum for 90 years."

That is quickly changing though: In November 2013, the Smithsonian Institution unveiled Smithsonian X 3D ([3d.si.edu](http://3d.si.edu)). The site, which features three-dimensional scans of the Cosmic Buddha statue and other objects, allow researchers and the public to examine the objects in fine detail.

The 3-D scans of the Buddha open the door for further analysis of the piece, says Wilson: "Because I can see more, I can research more and identify more. It's made me look at the piece in a very different way." Here, Wilson offers a glimpse of what he and scholars have uncovered about the statue.

Not all versions of the Buddhist heavens are shown: "This is the lowest paradise," Wilson says. "There's something even beyond this." In the middle here sits a preaching **Siddhartha Gautama**, the founder of Buddhism.



The nearly 5-foot-tall **statue** depicts the cosmic realms, with heaven at the top and hell at the bottom. It might have been used as a visual aide to teach people about the Buddhist cosmos, Wilson says.

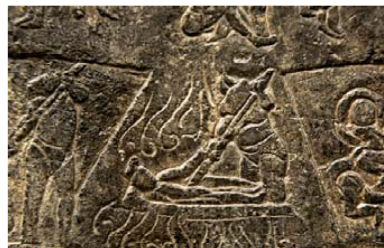
"When the Buddha begins to speak, divinities come from all the other heavens," Wilson says. "See the **figures** inside sitting on lotuses? Those are representatives coming from other heavens coming to listen to the teachings of the Buddha."



On mountains about midway down the statue are four-armed figures called **asuras**, demigods who used to live in a higher realm until they were kicked out.



In hell, people plead their cases before a king. They are directed up to salvation or down to terrifying consequences. "Buddhist hells are either ice — so you're frozen — or there are **fiery** hells," Wilson says.



"Even though much of the flesh is obscured by the robe, there still is the real sense of a **human form** underneath," Wilson says. The piece shows a stylistic transition from works made 20 to 25 years prior, which were very flat, Wilson says.

The limestone figure's **head and arms** were missing when the museum bought the statue in 1923. Wilson says the right hand would probably have been raised in the gesture of teaching, the vitarka mudra, and its left would have been holding the hem of his robe.

