

Stone Sculpture
(Marble)

78.30

Chinese

Shang dynasty, 1523-1028 B.C.

Water buffalo.

Compact, block-like body with curving horns, blunt ears and head indicated summarily.

Height: 8.4 cm (3-1/4") Width: 8 cm (3-1/8")

Length: 15.3 cm (6")

1. Acquired from the von der Heydt Collection in February 1973; transferred from the Study Collection (SC-S-7), August 1978. Museum of Natural History No. 448091.

2. (T. Lawton, 1978) Examples of Chinese stone animal sculpture from the Shang dynasty are extremely rare. Umehara Sueji 梅原末治 in In-kyo 殷墟, provides a convenient series of reproductions of most of those pieces now extant.

The surface of the Freer water buffalo is unornamented in contrast with that of the well-known example formerly in the Sedgewick collection (Sickman and Soper, Art and Architecture of China, pl. 2b), where incised lines suggest specific features, musculature and abstract designs.

3. Entry No. 1, "Decade of Discovery": Roughly hewn from a block of marble, this water buffalo presents a monumental, forceful appearance despite its modest size. Although its features are no more than summarily indicated, the creature's identity is assured by the unmistakable pair of curved horns on top of its head. Examples of the kneeling water buffalo are known from excavations of Shang sites at Anyang. While these excavated figurines often bear secondary designs and stylized features incised on the surface of the stone blocks, in shape and general handling of the stone medium they are closely relatable to the Freer piece.

Study of the incised examples indicates that the animal is in a kneeling posture, baring its teeth. The protrusion on each side of the head, furthermore, is clearly revealed to be an ear. A white marble elephant found in excavations at Anyang before World War II may be used in a comparison with the Freer water buffalo. Of approximately the same size, the elephant also is left with unadorned surfaces instead of being covered with incised patterns. By shape and indication of its most characteristic attributes, the identity of the animal is conveyed, leading many writers to describe Shang sculpture as "abstract" or "symbolic."