

Kim Tae-Song, Korea's Michelangelo

by Marilyn Goldstein

Hidden away high up on Korea's Mount Tohan is one of the world's great artistic monuments, Sokkuram Grotto, a private Buddhist chapel for the powerful United Silla Dynasty. It was built in the eighth century when Korea, stable, unified and wealthy, traded as an almost equal partner with T'ang China and Nara Japan.

Like Michelangelo, Kim Tae-song, the Silla noble responsible for Sokkuram's construction, was a genius in combining sculpture, architecture and philosophy to create a powerful unified work. His grotto, an artificial man-made cave temple, was completed in 776 A.D., two years after his death. He probably had the delight of watching the Spring equinox there in 774 A.D. Rising out of the East Sea, the sun's first rays climbed to the top of Mount Tohan, entered the grotto's forty-nine feet high antechamber (Plate 3), flowed down its slanting walls into the narrow corridor, guarded by reliefs of local divinities, nine feet high,¹ passed the octagonal pillars, each with two eleven feet high Bodhisattvas decked out in flowing scarves and ornate jewelry, and finally filtered into the domed rotunda lighting on the jewel set in the forehead of Sakyamuni Buddha, seated in the center. One can imagine Kim Tae-song's delight. He had been working on this cave-temple for twenty-three years and finally knew, with certainty, that the complex astronomic and geometric calculations, aligning the central Buddha with the movement of sun and earth, were correct.

As the sun continued rising, it flooded into the rotunda, fully illuminating the majestic Buddha and his surrounding retinue, each man in detailed relief, set in framed a rectangular space, and arranged with mathematical and geometric precision, to focus on Buddha. Hardly visible in the shadow directly behind Buddha, an elegantly-robed, eleven-headed Kwan-yin, the Bodhisattva of Mercy, was the only feminine figure in the grotto. Five of Buddha's historic disciples (arhats) stood on either side of her, each in a seven-foot niche. Circling Buddha, these ten haloed disciples, in their monks' cloaks, turned toward each other as if in conversation. Above the disciples, on the upper wall under the domed ceiling, was another row of ten haloed

¹ These figures are variously described as *lokapala*, guardians of the four directions, *inwang*, benevolent kings, and *deva* kings (Portal 2000:p.73.) They are local nature deities co-opted by the Early Buddhists to serve as guardian figures. The reuse of familiar deities made it easier for the Korean people to accept Indian Buddhism.

figures in much smaller niches. They sat cross-legged, their haloed heads tilting to one side or another. Generalized, repetitive figures, they were hard to identify. Perhaps they were students listening attentively to Buddha. In the antechamber, eight zodiac figures (Chin:38) in human and animal forms, sculpted in painterly fashion, stood on rocks with clouds behind them, preventing evil from entering.

Ancient records refer to Sokkuram as “a stone niche woven like silk,” (Covell p.42). They also confirm that in 751 AD, Kim Tae-song, a dignitary at the Silla Dynasty court of King Kyongdok (742-765) was entrusted with the construction of Sokkuram Grotto and the neighboring Pulguksa Temple, and that he died in December of 774. But, these are the only recorded facts of Kim Tae-Song’s life. The rest is legend - A great sound announced Kim Tae-song’s birth into a royal family. As a baby, he kept his left hand tightly clenched for seven days. When he finally opened his fist, it held a gold medallion engraved with the name Tae-Song, “Big Wall.” He remembered this had been his name in a previous life with a poor mother. It is said that he built Sokkuram Grotto to honor his former impoverished mother, and the Pulguksa Temple to honor his present noble Silla parents.

Perhaps, like Michelangelo, Kim Tae-song was actually the son of a poor family, and just as Michelangelo, once his talent was recognized, became part of a Medici ruling household in Florence, so too, Kim Tae-song was adopted and educated in the home of a nobleman in the Silla court at Kyongju. Eighth century Kyongju, like sixteenth century Renaissance Forence, was an exciting international center of trade and culture, where the nobles lived extravagant lives of pleasure and the newest scientific, religious and artistic ideas were promulgated (Lee 1984, p.78.)

In the eighth century, a cave temple was a revolutionary idea in Korea. The concept, like Buddhism itself, probably originated in India where extensive cave temples were carved into mountainsides, the most famous being at Karle with its nave over one hundred feet deep. The idea traveled the Silk Route from India and Afghanistan, to China, by way of the Gobi Desert where functioning temples and monasteries were cut into the sun-baked cliffs. Korean monks studying in India and China travelers described the cave temples at Yun Kang, carved in 450 AD (Covell 1980:P.57.)

Kim Tae-song was obviously familiar with both Indian and Chinese examples for he took ideas from both, adapting them to Korean methods and materials. Sokkuram’s circular rotunda

follows Indian prototypes with Buddha enthroned slightly off center toward the rear, while the idea of surrounding Buddha with related figures comes from China. The figural style of corpulent Buddha (Plate 1), seemingly inflated by an inner force (Covell 1980: p.57), originated in Gupta, India, and is referred to as “International Gupta Style.” Buddha’s massive body curves softly. Three rolls of neck fat form a base for his wide gentle face (Plate 2). The features are carved in low relief. The mouth, left slightly open, seems to be speaking. He is seated with crossed legs, his toga’s fan-like folds spreading out in front of him in the Indian fashion.

The lotus, an Indian symbol of purity because it thrives even in filthy water, is repeated three times. Buddha sits on a lotus throne, his halo is rimmed with lotus petals, as is the dome above his head. Legend has it that as Kim Tae-song sat on the ground carving the lotus dome, the stone cracked. He fainted. When he awoke, the cracked stone was in place directly above the Buddha’s head. Supernatural spirits had raised it, cracks and all, into its planned position. Three cracks in the dome are still visible today. Buddha’s lotus halo looks like a circular element attached to Buddha’s lotus shaped halo, but is actually an oval carved on the wall behind him (Chin, p21.). Kim Tae-song made allowance for the visual distortion that would occur because of the halo’s distance from the figure. This is just one example of the geometric fine-tuning that governs every detail in the grotto.

All the measurements, including those of the ground plan and domed ceiling (Plate 4) are based on multiples of a single unit of Tang linear measurements equaling 29.7 cm. (Harrell:325). Each architectural and sculptural element is perfectly proportioned to fit within this set grid, thus creating a sense of total harmony and balance surrounding Buddha. Michelangelo’s plan for St. Peter’s Cathedral in Rome is similarly organized with proportionally scaled shapes surrounding a large central space, covered by a huge dome. Both are extraordinary in having double domes, one pressing against the other to support their great weight.

Buddha’s underlying formal, geometric relationships - a dramatic series of right triangles – create a sense of great strength and controlled tension. His gaze is focused down to the sea toward Japan. The Buddha’s pose, right hand pointing to the ground, is usually described as the “bearing witness pose,” but here it is identified by Korean scholars (Covell 1980:P.57) as a protective gesture signifying, “this land, given to the Korean people, is protected by me.” The Silla Dynasty transformed Buddha from an international preacher of peace to a national protective deity, similar to the way Renaissance Florentines, eight hundred years later,

transformed Michelangelo's sculpture of the biblical David into a protective symbol for their city.

The site chosen for the grotto, Mt. Toham, had potent political, as well as religious, ramifications (Harrell:334). It overlooked the Eastern Sea, where the underwater mausoleum of the great Silla King Munmu was situated. Munmu wished, even after his death, to continue protecting Korea from sea invasion by its ancient enemy, Japan. Silla nobility customarily performed ceremonies and made sacrifices on Toham's granite peak. It was a difficult site, always damp because a stream ran underneath it, and the granite was too hard to excavate. Kim Tae-song solved these problems using ancient Korean technologies. He built a cave on top of the mountain by constructing an empty hemispherical form of granite and covering the dome with earth and plants (Plate 3), similar to ancient royal Korean tombs, earth-dressed tumuli resembling hillocks. He created stone channels underneath the grotto, like the Korean under-floor heating system, permitting dry air to circulate around the sculpture.

Sokkuram Grotto has at its heart an underlying political, as well as religious statement. It enshrines a model of the perfect Buddha Universe, aligned with the sun and stars, which is meant to mirror the ideal political state (Harrell:333). Everything focuses on an enthroned, larger than life figure - the Buddha/ King. He is protected by powerful warrior guardians, advised by richly-adorned courtiers, and served by his loyal nation. Men from all the world harken to his wisdom. In the background is a well-hidden female figure. The idealized pattern, here established, is powerful male kingship - an ideal, totally foreign to the traditional Buddhist idea of self-removal from worldly concerns. Korea turned Buddhism into a nationalistic state religion.

Michelangelo and Kim Tae-song were recognized as geniuses in their own times. Their works continued to be greatly valued by succeeding generations.

Korean records indicate that the grotto was repaired by priests in 1703 and again in 1758 (Yu:191). But in the nineteenth century, European Christianity took hold in Korea and Buddhism fell out of favor. Buddhists were persecuted; Sokkuram Grotto was forgotten.

Early in the twentieth century, when the Japanese occupied Korea from 1910-1945, they rediscovered Sokkuram Grotto. Supposedly a postman, taking shelter from a storm, stumbled into the man-made cave. The Japanese had already shipped many Korean art treasures to Japanese museums and now they wanted the Sokkuram Buddha. They were prevented from carting him off by the quiet, but adamant, refusal of cooperation by local Korean administrators.

The Japanese finally decided to repair the grotto to preserve it. They dismantled the whole complex, built a new grotto with a cement floor, enclosed it with a steel roof, and reinstalled the sculpture. Dampness settled inside the new grotto, and condensation gradually began to erode the sculptures.

Sokkuram Grotto was again restored from 1962 to 1964, this time by UNESCO and the South Korean government. Although built in the traditional Korean manner, it survived for over a thousand years, it was restored as a cement structure with a glass wall separating the viewer from Buddha. It is still damp, and an air-conditioning system is to be installed to dry the air and protect the sculpture. There is some talk of building a replica of the grotto for tourists to visit, to protect and preserve the original “for mankind.” Only scholars, priests and important political figures would have access to the original.

Hopefully, Westerners, generally uninformed about Korea’s art, will learn of its existence and be able to appreciate its beauty and magnificence before it is closed or hopelessly decayed. For Buddha, as conceived by Kim Tae-song, is the Asian equivalent of Michelangelo’s David. Both David and Buddha were idealized human beings who succeeded in accomplishing supernatural deeds. In David, Michelangelo sculpted idealized Western man, intellectual and active with a gorgeous, muscular physique. Kim Tae-song’s Buddha is idealized Asian man, spiritual and contemplative, heavy, solid and eternal like the mountains.

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[not available with paper]

Plate 1. Sokkuram Buddha

Plate 2. Profile of face of Sokkuram Buddha

Plate 3. Side view of Sokkuram Grotto

Plate 4. Geometric calculations of Sokkuram components

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