



# Figure of a seated lion

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## On display

**Title/Description:** Figure of a seated lion

**Born:** 0618 - 0906

**Measurements:** h. 170 x w. 72 x d. 84 mm

**Accession Number:** 292

**Historic Period:** Tang Dynasty (618-906), 7th Century, 10th century

**Credit Line:** Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

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Lions are not native to China and therefore they do not appear in ancient Chinese art. However, powerful figures in stone, often with wings, were carved as guardians to tombs from the Han period, apparently referring distantly to the lion sculptures popular in Iran and other parts of the Near East. Such creatures combined leonine features with horns and wings, making mythical beasts which, in China, were often described as *bixie* (Akiyama et al., 1968: figs. 238-9). More lifelike lions entered the Chinese repertory with Buddhism during the early part of the first millennium ad. In the Indian sub-continent and Central Asia, pairs of lions were often placed as guardians on either side of figures of the Buddha, and this practice was borrowed by the Chinese. These figures were also borrowed from this Buddhist context and used as tomb guardians. Massive examples in stone, several metres high, guard the avenues at the Imperial tombs near Xi'an (see an example at Qianling in Paludan, 1991:126). The present lion is a miniature version of such large figures erected at Tang Imperial tombs. Presumably, like the large sculptures, these miniature lions were thought to protect against evil (Watson, 1984: 202-5).

This lion is seated on a square base, its forelegs braced beneath a heavy rounded chest. Powerful muscles are indicated by deep lines on the legs and back. The paws show large claws, except the rear left, over which the sculptor has draped the end of the creature's tail. The head has a wide jaw, three-pointed undercut beard and a mane rendered as a series of corkscrew-like spirals. A small, roughly carved cub nestles behind the right forepaw. The ears, which are damaged at the tips, appear to be horn-like, possibly a reference to the mythological *bixie* mentioned above.

This is the most common of a number of poses for lion figures. Sometimes they are shown in a more playful manner, biting or scratching their bodies, with one leg lifted in an asymmetrical pose. Such lions are more often made of ceramic, and several examples have been found in Buddhist reliquaries near Lintong. Small carvings like this one either came from Buddhist monasteries, where they were perhaps part of the reliquaries underneath pagodas, or from tomb burials.

Entry taken from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection 3 volume catalogue, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997).

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## **Provenance**

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1937. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.

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