Worship at a Stupa

India, Bharhut, early 2d century B.C.E.

Stone

47.5 x 51.9 x 8.0 cm.

Purchase  F1932.26

Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

In early Buddhist art, the Buddha is rarely depicted in human form; instead, symbols represent his presence and his teachings. The stupa is one of many images used to indicate the presence of the Buddha. This raised sandstone carving from a fence rail that once encircled a stupa refers to the continuing presence of the Buddha on earth. At the center of the carving is the Buddha’s funerary mound, or stupa. Worshipers stand to the left and right of the stupa. Celestial figures fly overhead and offer garlands and flowers in adoration. Two pairs of flowering sal trees frame the scene and add to its visual symmetry. Some scholars think sal trees grew in the grove where the Buddha left his physical body and ascended into nirvana. Their presence here helps the viewer to identify the scene with the Buddha’s death and his passing into the state of nirvana. Along the base of the dome are nine right hands — nine is an auspicious number in many ancient traditions — that represent worshipers encircling the stupa. One way of showing reverence for the Buddha is to walk slowly around the stupa and place your hands at its base.
With the incorporation of the Buddha’s human image into art after the first century, sculptors began to depict legends surrounding the youth of Siddhartha, including stories of his birth and death. These legends and historical events were eventually consolidated into a clear story line that usually centers on four main events in the Buddha’s life, referred to as the Four Great Miracles. Thereafter, these four events were frequently depicted on narrative relief panels such as this. Such panels were often placed around the base of important stupas and can be considered in chronological order.

The first of these four panels represents the miracle of the Buddha’s birth. Siddhartha, complete with halo, emerges from the right hip of his mother Maya as she stands beneath a tree. The baby’s halo, which signifies divine radiance, is a symbol of honor that routinely appears on South Asian images of deities and royalty. Artistic and cultural elements borrowed from ancient Greek and Roman art include the wreaths around the women’s heads, the long-sleeved blouses and gowns, and the cornucopias held by several figures.
One of four scenes from the life of the Buddha
Gandhara (present-day Pakistan), 2d century B.C.E.
Stone
67.0 x 290.0 cm. overall
Purchase  F1949.9a-d
Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

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The miracle of the Buddha’s enlightenment appears in the second relief. The Buddha sits beneath a tree in meditation. Mara, the evil one, stands in the foreground, ready to draw his sword. Meanwhile, Mara’s fearsome demon armies attack the Buddha from all sides. Notice the array of animals and half animal-half human creatures that make up Mara’s army. Despite all this activity around him, the Buddha remains serene. Two soldiers underneath the Buddha’s elevated platform are stricken down by the power of the Buddha’s awesome presence. With his mudra, or hand gesture, of touching the ground, the Buddha calls the earth to witness his realization of enlightenment and thus his victory over the evil Mara.
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Illustrating the miracle of the first sermon, the third panel shows the Buddha preaching to a crowd of monks and ordinary citizens. The deer depicted underneath his platform identify the location of the sermon: Deer Park at Sarnath. Between the two deer, which appear to be as mesmerized by the Buddha’s teachings as the people gathered, is the wheel of dharma. The wheel is a pre-Buddhist symbol of kingship, and some Hindu gods are shown holding one. Although the Buddha gave up his earthly possessions and kingdom, this wheel refers to his spiritual authority and teaching. His first sermon is thus referred to as “the first turning of the wheel of the dharma [or law].”
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In the fourth and final relief, showing the miracle of the Buddha’s journey to nirvana, local chieftains appear above him and express their intense grief. The monks, on the other hand, seem to be at peace. One monk sits directly under the Buddha’s couch and calmly meditates, thus signifying his understanding that the Buddha’s passing is not death but rather a release from the endless cycle of rebirth.
Seated Buddha

Central Tibet,* 14th century

Gilt copper with pigment

45.0 x 34.0 x 27.0 cm.

Purchase—Friends of Asian Arts in honor of the 10th Anniversary of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery  S1997.28

Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

This Buddha was created to grace the altar of a Buddhist monastery in Tibet. Sitting serenely with one hand in his lap, the Buddha extends his other hand to touch the earth in a traditional symbol of his enlightenment. To ensure that worshipers recognize this figure as the historic Buddha, the square pattern on the robe recalls the patchwork of fabric scraps that were sewn together for the only garment the Buddha wore as he wandered the land. Characteristic signs of the Buddha’s superhuman perfection include the tightly curled hair covering his ushnisha, the bump on the top of his head that symbolizes his immense knowledge. The dot in the middle of his forehead, called an urna, indicates his understanding of all things. His long earlobes, which were caused by the heavy earrings he wore when he was a prince, refer to his rejection of his earthly wealth.

This hollow-cast copper figure was covered in gold using a complex gilding process that is still in use today. A mixture of gold and mercury was applied to the surface of the copper figure, then heated over a smokeless fire until the mercury evaporated and the gold adhered to the surface. The gilded surface was then polished with a smooth stone. Relics or charms could have been inserted into the figure’s hollow body before it was sealed with a thin metal plate. Such relics might have included holy texts, precious objects, and ashes or bits of bone left over after the cremation of an enlightened being or great Buddhist teacher.

* Buddhism had been introduced into Tibet from India as early as the seventh century. Tibet looked to eastern India, Nepal, and Kashmir for spiritual and artistic inspiration.
Standing bodhisattva holding a lotus bud

China, Henan Province, Northern Qi dynasty (550–577)

Limestone

173.3 cm.

Gift of Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer    F1968.45

Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

This sculpture of a bodhisattva, or enlightened being, is from Xiangtangshan (pronounced she-ang taw-ng shon), a well-known archaeological site in China where many Buddhist chapels were built into mountainside caves. Holding an offering of a lotus bud, this figure would have stood next to an image of the Buddha. Its almost rigid dignity and somewhat introspective expression are characteristic of the high artistic accomplishment of the Xiangtangshan sculptors. The figure wears a skirt, or dhoti, fastened at the waist by a knotted sash. The cloth falls in a fluid, simple manner, forming a scalloped pattern with its hem. The bodhisattva's upper body is partially covered by a long stole draped around the shoulders and alongside the body. It also wears a simple but heavy necklace. The presence of jewelry often distinguishes an image of the Buddha from that of a bodhisattva. Since the Buddha rejected earthly wealth, he is never shown wearing any form of jewelry. A bodhisattva, on the other hand, is usually crowned or bejeweled because he chose to return to earth to assist others in attaining salvation.

The headdress consists of three parts, with ribbons descending over the shoulders and mingling with the carefully placed strands of hair. The rough surface found on the back of this bodhisattva indicates that the sculpture was originally attached to a wall in one of the caves at Xiangtangshan.
Buddhist altarpiece

China, Sui Dynasty, 597

Gilt bronze

32.1 x 14.1 cm.

Gift of Charles Lang Freer     F1914.21
Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

These three gold-covered figures share a low platform and stand atop pedestals within a few inches of one another. The figures in this altarpiece include a central standing Buddha flanked by standing bodhisattvas. The upper bodies and pointed halos of all three incline forward slightly. This impression of active involvement is reinforced by the smiling, friendly expressions on their faces. The central Buddha’s hands are in the Abhaya mudra (“fear not”), and his simple monastic robes clearly contrast with the elaborate gowns of the bodhisattvas. The smaller figures wear intricate headdresses with long ribbons and scarves that seem to flow alongside their willowy bodies.

The central Buddha’s physique and adornment are simple in comparison. He stands upon an inverted lotus that fits into an elaborate base, which, in turn, fits onto a low, rectangular stand. In contrast, the bodhisattvas stand on long-stemmed lotuses that project out from the rectangular base into space. A long inscription on the front of the pedestal reads: “On the twenty-fourth day of the tenth month in the seventeenth year of Kaihuang [December 8, 597], donor Wu...had an image made.” The inscription then goes on to list the fifteen donors after “donor Wu,” two of whom were women of some standing in the imperial court, and many of whom share the same family name.
Guanyin of Eleven Heads
China, Shaanxi Province, Tang dynasty, ca. 703
Limestone
108.8 x 31.7 x 15.3 cm.
Gift of Charles Lang Freer F1909.98
Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Guanyin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, holds a flower in his raised right hand and grasps the end of a long scarf with his left hand. The deity wears a thin skirt, or dhoti, tied around the hips, and jeweled arm rings and necklaces adorn the body. The sensuous style of the sculpture reflects the influence of Indian art in China.

The hair is arranged into a high cone, and ten small bodhisattva heads are scattered throughout the hair. The heads represent different stages on the path to enlightenment, while Guanyin’s head stands for its final attainment. The halo and the two celestial beings flying overhead refer to divine radiance and enlightenment. Guanyin stands upon a lotus flower pedestal, a symbol of purity and divinity.

Guanyin is one of a few bodhisattvas that became an independent deity and attracted a following, much as the Buddha himself did. Guanyin is of great importance in the realm of Chinese Buddhism. This sculpture once adorned the Seven Jewels Pagoda, which was built in the Tang dynasty (618–907) capital, present-day Xi’an.
Guardian figures
Japan, Kamakura period (1185–1333)
Wood
226.4 cm. (F1949.20), 233.5 cm. (F1949.21)
Purchase F1949.20 and .21
Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

These powerful figures with ferocious expressions are “guardian” images that once flanked the entrance gate to a Buddhist temple near Osaka, Japan. Such guardians are meant to ward off evil spirits and protect the sacred ground of the temple. The practice of placing guardian figures at a temple entrance has origins in a legend about the Buddha, which says powerful guardians attended him as he taught and traveled throughout India. In China and Japan, these guardian figures frequently appear in pairs, often in the form of larger-than-life, half-naked warriors who raise their clenched fists and sometimes hold weapons. These particular statues were once painted dark red, but the color has worn off due to centuries of exposure as they stood guard at the temple gates.

The Japanese produced Buddhist images in wood that range in size from monumental statues to miniature, devotional images intended for portable shrines. Many times figures were not carved from one piece of wood; rather, numerous uniquely shaped wooden blocks were seamlessly joined together without the use of metal. For example, the heads of these guardians consist of three separate pieces: the mask or face, the back of the head, and a hollow ring on the sides of which are the ears.
Bosatsu

Japan, Heian period (794–1185)

Wood

Image, 98.0 x 75.0 x 50.8 cm.; overall, 206 x 114.0 x 114.0 cm.

Purchase  F1962.21

Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

This wood sculpture represents a bodhisattva (*bosatsu* in Japanese) seated in meditation on a lotus-shaped pedestal. The halo behind the figure still shows traces of its original gold-leaf decoration. Both the bodhisattva’s facial expression and the hand gesture are intended to convey reassurance and peace. This figure, which would have been placed on the altar of a Buddhist temple, exemplifies the simple, elegant style prevalent in Japanese Buddhist sculpture late in the Heian period. The wooden figure consists of seven separate parts. The elaborate lotus-shaped pedestal is made of eight components, but it was not a part of the original design for this statue. The entire figure was once covered with black lacquer and gold leaf, which have worn away over the past thousand years.
Amida Buddha, Attended by Kannon and Seishi, Welcoming Souls to Paradise
Japan, Kamakura (1185–1333) or Muromachi (1333–1573) period
Hanging scroll; color and gold on silk
110.0 x 49.3 cm.
Purchase     F1954.9
Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Japanese belief in salvation by the Buddha of Infinite Light, who was known as Amida in Japan, reached its height during the Kamakura period of warrior rule. Amida was believed to descend to earth at the moment of a person’s death to rescue the soul and carry it to paradise, where it would be reborn. Two or more bodhisattvas often accompanied Amida.

Buddhist priests frequently carried paintings such as this one to a believer’s deathbed as a final assurance of salvation. This painting depicts Amida Buddha welcoming the souls of the faithful into paradise. Amida is the central figure; his two attendants — the bodhisattvas Kannon and Seishi — form the base of the triangular composition. Amida stands with his right hand raised in the Abhaya mudra, a hand gesture that means “fear not.” His left arm is lowered in a welcoming mudra. The combination of these two gestures — the raised hand represents the heavenly realm and the lowered hand the earthly world — suggests that Amida is capable of saving both those in the heavens and those on earth.

Below her left hand is the smaller figure of the bodhisattva Kannon. Her body is turned and bent slightly forward, and she holds a lotus blossom in her hands, upon which she will receive the faithful souls. The deity wears a crown and many jewels in typical bodhisattva tradition. The bodhisattva Seishi to Amida’s right forms the third corner of the pyramid. The same size as Kannon, Seishi is similarly clothed and bejeweled and is depicted in a similar stance of humble devotion. Seishi differs from Kannon, however, in that the hands are pressed together with her fingers extended in front of the chest in a mudra of prayer and devotion.