

ENGLISH LANGUAGE, LARGE PRINT

Encountering the
BUDDHA | Art
and
Practice
across
Asia

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Encountering the Buddha: Art and Practice across Asia

Buddhism—and the art it inspired—helped shape the cultures of Asia. Today, its extraordinary art is a source of beauty and contemplation for audiences across the world.

Encountering the Buddha brings together more than two hundred artworks, spanning two millennia, to explore Asia's rich Buddhist heritage. Although all Buddhist traditions seek to overcome suffering and the cycle of rebirth, different schools based on the Buddha's teachings developed over time. The artworks displayed here reflect this diversity.

Many visitors have already heard of Buddhist meditation and seen images of the Buddha. This exhibition also introduces other practices and objects that, while perhaps less familiar, are central to Buddhism.

Encountering the Buddha reveals how Buddhist artworks are endowed with sacred power and ritual use. We ask, why were they created? How did Buddhists engage with them? And how do Buddhist understandings of objects differ from those of art

museums?

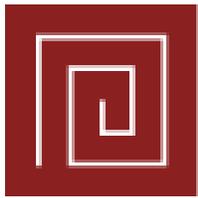
While pursuing answers, we highlight different contexts: grand shrines, intimate altars, royal palaces, artists' workshops, and treacherous pilgrimage routes. All are sites for encountering the Buddha.

—Curators Debra Diamond, Robert DeCaroli, and Rebecca Bloom, and the *Encountering the Buddha* team

Exhibition Panel

Encountering the Buddha: Art and Practice across Asia

The Freer|Sackler gratefully acknowledges the exhibition's lead sponsor



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The Buddha

The Awakened One

The Buddha was born a prince in a kingdom on the border of Nepal and India in the fifth century BCE. Troubled by the inevitability of disease, aging, and death, he abandoned royal life to become a holy man. Six years of extreme self-discipline did not reveal a way to end the pain of existence. Finally, he sat under a tree, determined to acquire insight. His meditation led to the profound realization that attachments to impermanent things cause suffering. Through this enlightenment, he earned the designation Buddha, or “Awakened One.”

The Buddha then taught others the path to overcome sorrow. In the centuries following his death, the Buddha’s teachings, or dharma, spread across Asia and became the foundation of Buddhism in all its forms. His life and image became central to Buddhist practice throughout the world.

Beyond Death and Desire

Artists across Asia often depict the Historical Buddha with his left hand resting in meditation and his right hand lowered to touch the earth. The gestures signal his victory over death and desire—the impediments to profound spiritual knowledge.



In recognition of his special status, Buddha images are consecrated through rituals that imbue sculptures and paintings with a sacred power. Consecration is not permanent, however. When displayed in a museum, objects are typically appreciated for their aesthetic or historical importance rather than their sacred presence.

The Historical Buddha

Central Tibet, 14th century

Gilt copper with pigment

Purchase—Friends of Asian Arts in honor of the 10th

Anniversary of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery

Arthur M. Sackler Gallery S1997.28



Outward Signs, Inner Perfection

No matter when or where an image of the Buddha was made, notable markers of his identity remain the same. These characteristics, which include the cranial bump or hair bun (*ushnisha*) and the dot between his eyes (*urna*), are outward signs of his inner perfection. His long earlobes, stretched by the heavy earrings he wore as a prince, remind us that he renounced all worldly attachments.

Carved over fifteen hundred years in four different countries, these sculptures cover a wide chronological and geographical span. Yet each is identifiable as the Buddha.

From Icon to Artwork

Broken buddhas like these have no religious use in Buddhist communities. In museums, however, fragments are considered

art, appreciated for their beauty and historical importance.

How do Buddha images break? Some disintegrate naturally: sculptures of the body are structurally weakest at the wrists and neck. Others are intentionally defaced or damaged. And art thieves sometimes sever the heads for easy transport to distant markets.

Frustratingly, there are no chisel marks on these heads that indicate how—or even when—they were separated from their bodies.

From right to left:

India, Mathura, Kushan period, ca. 150

Red sandstone

Purchase—funds provided by Rajinder K. Keith and Narinder K.

Keith

Freer Gallery of Art F2014.3

Pakistan (ancient Gandhara), ca. 250

Schist

Gift of Ann and Alan Wolfe

Arthur M. Sackler Gallery S1989.19

Indonesia, Java, ca. 800

Andesite

Transfer from National Museum of Natural History,

Smithsonian Institution

Freer Gallery of Art F1978.35

Thailand, Ayutthaya period, ca. 1700

Bronze with glass and mother-of-pearl

Gift of Charles Lang Freer

Freer Gallery of Art F1909.49

A Sacred Shape

Stupas, monuments containing Buddhist relics, are among the most important structures in Buddhism. Because stupas are ritually charged with the Buddha's sacred presence, their

distinctive shape has special importance. Not all of the ritual objects in this case held relics, but all of them recall the shape of a stupa. They each display a dome- or bell-shaped body capped by a tall spire of umbrellas. Umbrellas are a traditional way of indicating importance, and multiple umbrellas indicate exceptional importance.

A Sacred Presence

For Buddhists, relics include the cremated remains of the Buddha and enlightened teachers, as well as their possessions and written teachings. To honor a relic is to reflect on the Buddha's positive qualities. Many Buddhists also believe that relics have a sacred power that bestows blessings.

Stupas, which contain Buddhist relics, range from massive sites of pilgrimage (such as the Sri Lankan stupa in the film playing behind you) to small containers made for altars, such as those in this case.

Bell in the shape of a stupa

Indonesia, 9th century

Copper alloy

Promised gift of Ann and Gilbert Kinney to the
Arthur M. Sackler Gallery

LTS2015.3.3



Reliquary with stupa-shaped top

China, Tang dynasty, 7th century

Gilt bronze

Gift of Charles Lang Freer

Freer Gallery of Art F1914.86a–c



Stupa

Central or eastern Tibet, late 17th–early 18th
century

Gilt copper alloy

The Alice S. Kandell Collection

Arthur M. Sackler Gallery ELS2010.4.13



Stupa

Central Tibet, late 13th century

Gilt copper alloy

The Alice S. Kandell Collection

Arthur M. Sackler Gallery S2015.28.7



Many Buddhas

Buddhas of the Past, Present, and Future

A buddha realizes the true cause of suffering and teaches the world how to overcome it. According to most Buddhist traditions, the Historical Buddha attained enlightenment through a process that had occurred countless times in the past. In every age, a remarkable individual rediscovers timeless truths and attains buddhahood. The buddha of the future awaits the chance to repeat the process.

Some traditions state that only one buddha may exist in an era. Others allow for many buddhas to be active in the world simultaneously. In the latter traditions, buddhahood is the goal for all humans, who seek assistance from the buddhas they worship.

As the number of buddhas grew, new forms of practice

developed around specific buddhas. Because of their shared accomplishments, though, all buddhas are represented with the same physical characteristics.

Express Lane to Paradise

Amitabha, the celestial buddha of infinite light, created a perfect world or “pure land” known as the Land of Bliss. His goal was to make buddhahood easily attainable, even for ordinary people. Anyone who spends one lifetime practicing Buddhist teachings in the Land of Bliss automatically becomes a buddha.



Buddhists from various traditions pray to be reborn in the Land of Bliss; others enter the pure land by merely reciting Amitabha’s name.

Amitabha

Central Tibet, ca. 1450–1500

Gilt copper repoussé, traces of pigments on hair and face

The Alice S. Kandell Collection

Arthur M. Sackler Gallery S2014.20

A Daughter's Devotion

Buddhists often commission images to earn spiritual merit. They then dedicate this good karma to their loved ones, benefiting them in this life and the next. An inscription etched on the base of this sculpture records that it



was commissioned in 609 by “the devoted religious daughter Zhang Pengle” for her father and mother. To honor her parents, the donor selected a scene from the *Lotus Sutra*, a scripture widely known among Chinese Buddhists at the time.

Two buddhas seated side by side

China, Sui dynasty, 609

Gilt bronze

Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment

Freer Gallery of Art F1945.30a–b

League of Extraordinary Gentlewomen

From the first century BCE through the present day, women have played important roles as patrons of Buddhist art.

Sixteen women, including several members of the Chinese imperial court,

sponsored the creation of this buddha attended by two bodhisattvas. The women's names are written on the front of the pedestal, along with the date of their gift in 597. Because the women acted collectively, this altarpiece likely went to a public institution, such as a monastery.



Buddha attended by bodhisattvas

Northern China, Sui dynasty, 597

Gilt bronze

Gift of Charles Lang Freer

Freer Gallery of Art F1914.21a–h

Making Buddhism Chinese

In China, large stone slabs known as steles were used to commemorate important events and people. Buddhists adopted this practice in the sixth century.

A group of Chinese Buddhists pooled their resources to sponsor this stele. Their goals, written in Chinese on the narrow sides of the slab, were to bring success to the emperor and peace to the empire.



The stele features the so-called Thousand Buddha motif, which became especially popular in China. On each side, rows of identical buddhas flank images of the Historical Buddha in the lower niches and of the Future Buddha Maitreya in the scenes above. Reflecting Buddhism's local relevance and Indian origins, the Historical Buddha wears Chinese robes with flowing sleeves that look like ribbons. In contrast, the many small, meditating

buddhas wear Indian robes that cover one shoulder.

Buddhist stele with the Thousand Buddha motif

China, Northern Wei dynasty, probably 521

Sandstone with traces of polychrome pigment

Gift of Marietta Lutze Sackler

Arthur M. Sackler Gallery S1991.157

The Mother and Father of All Buddhas

This sculpture represents Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion. At his chest's center is the embodiment of wisdom, the goddess Prajnaparamita. Compassion and wisdom are necessary for buddhahood. The result of their union is represented by the many small buddhas that cover this sculpture.



In 1191, King Jayavarman VII of Cambodia distributed this and twenty-three similar images across his kingdom. He used Buddhist imagery to reinforce his political power by associating his father with Avalokiteshvara and his mother with Prajnaparamita, thereby suggesting that he himself was a buddha.

Avalokiteshvara

Cambodia, Angkor period, 1175–1225

Sandstone

Gift of Arthur M. Sackler

Arthur M. Sackler Gallery S1987.910

Tablet: The Buddha + Many Buddhas

Why is my hair blue?

In Tibet, blue was the color of choice for the Buddha's curls, even though Buddhist texts describe his hair simply as "dark." Wealthy donors demonstrated their piety and generosity by commissioning large images fashioned from precious materials. Blue pigments,



made from the mineral lapis or azurite, were considered luxurious because they were expensive imports. Such opulent goods conveyed the donor's respect for the Buddha, as well as his or her social status.

Rear view, the Historical Buddha (S1997.28)

Why am I touching the ground?

Mara, the god of death and desire, tried to prevent the Buddha from attaining enlightenment by disrupting his meditation. His victory over Mara (that is, over death and desire) set the stage for the Buddha's awakening. Artists



represent this miraculous moment by depicting his right hand lowered to call forth the earth goddess, who testified to his countless virtuous past lives. Although he did not actually become the Buddha until the next day, the “earth-touching” gesture serves as a reminder of all the events that led to his enlightenment and buddhahood.

Detail, the Historical Buddha (S1997.28)

How did World War II impact this Buddha?

Objects can have many lives and circuitous travels. Although the journey of this Javanese piece from Indonesia to the West is lost to history, its arrival at the Freer | Sackler is a twentieth-century saga.



In 1939, as the Nazis advanced across Europe, a Jewish dealer of Asian antiquities closed his Amsterdam gallery and sent objects to New York for safekeeping. In 1946, after the end of the war, a German banker who had lived in Switzerland for many years purchased this head and lent it to an American museum. The US government alleged that the banker had aided the Nazis and seized his assets under the Trading with the Enemy Act of 1917. The Buddha head was later transferred to the Smithsonian Institution, and the Freer Gallery of Art formally accessioned it in 1978.

Side view, Buddha (F1978.35)

Where's the body?

We don't know exactly what this buddha's body looked like, but we have comparable examples from the same period in Java. Many of these sculptures are found at the



spectacular architectural sites built by the Shailendra dynasty. Although the accompanying photo depicts a much larger image from the site of Borobudur, it provides an excellent example of the smooth, tubular bodies and clinging, almost invisible garments that characterize Buddha images made at that time.

Buddha at Borobudur, Java, Indonesia

Courtesy of Robert DeCaroli

Can a buddha help avert war?

Seven artists fashioned this image of Amitabha, the celestial buddha of infinite light, out of the finest gilded copper. A minister in the Tibetan government had commissioned the sculpture in the hope of avoiding future wars. His generous gift was



understood to create good karma, which can positively influence events both in an individual's life and in the larger world. As long as an image is worshiped, it continues to fulfill its donor's wishes.

The minister's goals for this sculpture, as expressed in the inscription on its base, were that all "frontier wars be averted and all beings attain buddhahood."

Amitabha (S2014.20)

Why is my skin gold but my robe patched?

A fine layer of pure gold covers this bronze image of the Buddha Amitabha. Because it never rusts or discolors, this precious metal perfectly conveys one of the important marks (*lakshanas*) of enlightened beings: luminous, golden skin.



All buddhas, in their final lifetimes on earth, become monks who renounce material wealth. Accordingly, they usually are represented wearing garments fashioned from scraps of old fabric. Here, however, Amitabha's robe is a patchwork of expensive Chinese silk, which Tibetans highly valued for its sumptuous beauty.

Detail, Amitabha (S2014.20)

What happens when two buddhas meet?

Despite its quiet composition, this sculpture depicts a dramatic event in one of

Buddhism's most important scriptures, the

Lotus Sutra. In this scene, the massive

stupa, or reliquary mound, of a past buddha

miraculously rises from the ground at the very moment that the

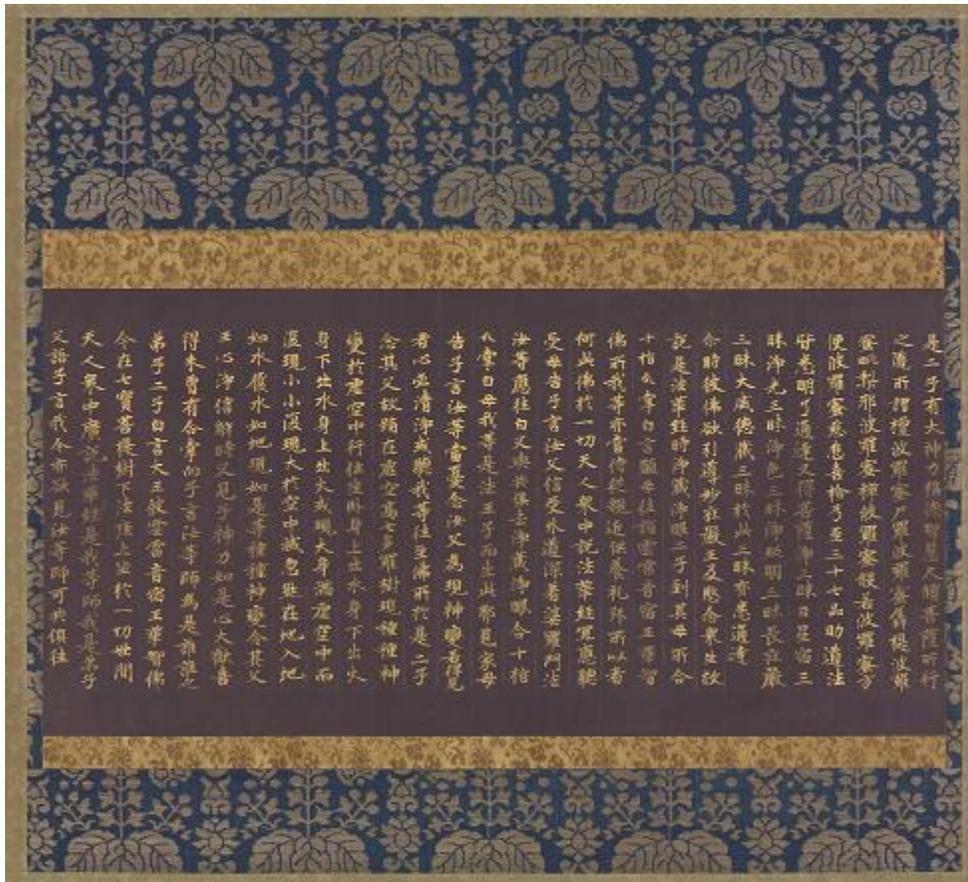
Historical Buddha begins to teach. Invited inside the floating

stupa, the Historical Buddha sits beside the past buddha.



This pivotal moment, represented here by almost identical buddhas seated beneath a stupa-shaped halo, validated the revolutionary idea that many buddhas can exist in the world simultaneously.

Detail, Two buddhas seated side by side (F1945.30a–b)



How did the *Lotus Sutra* become a “bestseller”?

For several centuries after the death of the Buddha, his teachings were preserved orally, memorized and chanted by monks. Around the first century, as monks began committing Buddhist teachings to writing, a new tradition of Buddhism emerged that strongly emphasized the written word.

The *Lotus Sutra* dates to this period. In it, the Buddha constantly exhorts his disciples to “copy, preserve, recite, and revere this sutra and expound it for the sake of others.” Not only did this mandate promote the sutra’s teachings, but it also inspired the creation of thousands of *Lotus Sutra* artworks and illuminated manuscripts—some quite opulent. For example, this scroll section, on view in Freer gallery 7, is written in gold.

Section of *Lotus Sutra*, chapter 27, “The Former Affairs of King Wonderful Adornment”; Japan, Nara period, late 8th century; section of a handscroll mounted as a hanging scroll; gold and silver on purple-dyed paper; Gift of Sylvan Barnet and William Burto F2014.6.9

Sri Lanka's Great Stupa

The Texture of Practice: Sri Lanka's Great Stupa

Stupas, hemispherical mounds that house sacred relics, are major sites of pilgrimage across the Buddhist world. Buddhists have visited the Ruwanwelisaya (pronounced **Ru-on-way-li-saya**) Stupa in Sri Lanka for more than two thousand years. Inspired by needs both spiritual and personal, believers come to receive blessings from the Historical Buddha's bodily relics that the stupa enshrines.

Made of fired bricks, the stupa rises 338 feet from its foundation to its pinnacle—50 feet higher than the US Capitol. Ruwanwelisaya often is called the Great Stupa for both its size and the potency of its relics.

Recorded in December 2016, this film captures one day—from dawn to moonrise—of worship during Ruwanwelisaya's monthly full-moon festival. It reveals the texture and emotional

power of a site that is at once broadly representative of Buddhist practice and distinctively local.

CREDITS

Ambient sound, no narration

Length: 10:05

A film by Stanley J. Staniski; producer: Debra Diamond; content advisors and location coordinators: Lakshika Senarath Gamage and Sriyani Senarath Gamage; editor: Penny Trams; sound recordist and camera assistant: Janith Jayasekara; production assistant: Sachin Sanjeev.

Tablet: The Great Stupa

Why do Buddhists visit stupas?

Stupas are mounds built to enshrine relics of the Buddha and of spiritually advanced Buddhist teachers.

The *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, one of the oldest Buddhist

texts, includes the Buddha's explanation of the practices and benefits of stupa worship: "Those who offer a garland, a scent, or a perfumed powder there, or bow down there, or brighten their minds there: that will be for their long-term welfare and happiness."



Translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

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Why do Buddhists walk around stupas?

Architecture and practice are interrelated. Platforms always surround stupa domes because walking around the stupa is a way of venerating the Buddha.



Whether alone, with family, or in a large procession, devotees circle the stupa in a clockwise direction. This ensures that their right shoulders are always closest to the relics: the right side of the body traditionally was considered more pure than the left side.

Nuns, monks, laypeople, and other visitors also may meditate, chant prayers, feed their babies, and rest on the large stone platform. Everyone faces the stupa out of respect for the Buddha.

Who are these young men?

These teenagers are student-monks who live and study at the monastery attached to the Ruwanwelisaya Stupa.

When they go to the stupa, they walk, sit, and meditate in order of their seniority. Here, the most advanced student-

monk is on the right, and the newest boy, who arrived only a few months prior, is on the left.



Why are these nuns sitting so close to the stupa?

Nuns and monks often meditate or recite prayers with their knees practically touching the dome. In this way, they are closest to the relics enshrined at the stupa's center.



In Sri Lanka, both nuns and monks shave their heads. Nuns wear long-sleeve blouses under their robes, while monks' arms remain bare.



Why do worshipers offer flowers to the Buddha?

Offering flowers is a form of veneration that reminds Buddhists of the impermanence that pervades all things. Sri Lankan Buddhists recite this *gatha* (verse) when offering flowers:

I offer these different kinds of flowers to the Buddha. Just as flowers bloom and wilt away, my body will one day disintegrate. From this offering, may the experience of nirvana come.



Why do worshipers light lamps?

Lighting candles is a form of worship in many religious traditions. Because light is associated with wisdom, Sri Lankan Buddhists offer lamps to honor the Buddha's spiritual wisdom. Many Buddhist students also light lamps before taking important exams.

These lamps, which are fueled by coconut oil, are clustered just outside the main (eastern) entrance to the Ruwanwelisaya Stupa.



What do people wear to Sri Lankan stupas?

All visitors to Sri Lankan stupa sites, including tourists, remove their shoes and hats as a sign of respect for the Buddha. Lay visitors, especially women, customarily wear white, which is thought to help clarify the mind and minimize distractions to meditation. Sri Lankan monks and nuns wear orange, ochre, or maroon robes; the different colors indicate different religious communities. They adopted the practice from India, where both Buddhist and Hindu holy men and women wear saffron-colored garb.

What is the cloth ceremony?

Buddhists offer robes to monks as a form of veneration. In Sri Lanka, Buddhists offer robes to the Buddha by wrapping the stupa in a belt-like covering. Families



or villages band together to sponsor the ceremony. At the stupa, the sponsors invite everyone to join the procession and help carry the cloth. Participants hold the cloth aloft with their right hands as a form of respect. Many devotees also chant the word *sādhu* (may all be well) to honor the Buddha's rejection of material wealth in favor of spiritual insight.

After some time, as soon as a day after the stupa has been wrapped, monks and lay helpers take the cloth down. Now that it has been worn symbolically by the Buddha, the cloth is sacred. The orange cloth is typically cut up into monks' robes. In cremation ceremonies for deceased monks, the cloths are also used to wrap the body and help fuel the funeral pyre.

How old is the Ruwanwelisaya Stupa?

The Ruwanwelisaya Stupa is both a living and historical site. The relics at its core were deposited circa 225 BCE. Its outer structure is a twentieth-century reconstruction based on an ancient representation of



the stupa. Devotees continue to add to the site: recent donations include icons and ornamental gateways.

The chief abbot of the monastery, Pallegema Hemarathana, strives to balance the needs of practicing Buddhists with those of archaeologists working to preserve and study an important past. “It is my job to protect the site while being aware of both values: it has historical value, but it is also a living site,” he says. “The main idea is to maintain that balance.”

Bodhisattvas

SECTION CHAT (Bodhisattvas)

Travelers on the Path

The path to becoming a buddha is long and difficult. In most traditions, it takes countless lifetimes of exemplary virtue to achieve this goal. The journey to awakening begins with a sincere vow to become a buddha for the benefit of others.

Those determined to follow this path to buddhahood are called bodhisattvas.

Motivated by profound compassion, bodhisattvas spend lifetimes perfecting their benevolent qualities, such as patience and wisdom. Because bodhisattvas have attained advanced spiritual states, they are able to assist others in worldly and religious matters. Thus, bodhisattvas are important objects of devotion for many Buddhists.

Artists typically depict bodhisattvas as radiant figures, richly adorned with jewelry. Bodhisattvas' pristine beauty is an outward expression of their perfected inner virtues. It reflects the good karma they have garnered through innumerable virtuous deeds over many lifetimes.

Rising to the Occasion

In the coming age, Maitreya will become a buddha and spread the Buddhist teachings. Until then, he is a bodhisattva awaiting his birth in the human realm. Here, his readiness is apparent in his posture: feet on the ground, ready to rise to the occasion.



Buddhists worship Maitreya in hope of being reborn in his proximity when he becomes the next buddha. They sometimes expressed their faith in Maitreya on a large scale. This preparatory drawing for a massive copper sculpture conveys the monumental size of such images, which populated monasteries and mountainsides from Afghanistan to China.

Maitreya

Kuber Singh Shakya (ca. 1881–1957)

Nepal, Patan, ca. 1950

Ink, jeweler's rouge, red and black pencil on paper

Gift of Rudra Raj Shakya and family in memory of his father,
Kuber Singh Shakya

Arthur M. Sackler Gallery S1998.1

Comfort in Chaos

Lost in thought, resting an ankle on his knee and raising two fingers to his chin, the Future Buddha Maitreya patiently waits in heaven for his final rebirth on earth. This will occur when all Buddhist teachings have been forgotten.



Many devotees of Maitreya hope to be reborn in the time of his teaching. The promise of this coming buddha offered comfort to many Buddhists in sixth-century China, a chaotic time of constant warfare and civil disorder.

Future Buddha Maitreya (Mile)

China, Hebei Province, Quyang, Northern Qi dynasty, 550–77

Marble with traces of pigment

Gift of Charles Lang Freer

Freer Gallery of Art F1911.411

Buddhist Ideas and Greek Style

Its body now lost, this monumental head of a bodhisattva once graced a Buddhist temple or monastery in ancient Gandhara (modern-day Pakistan and Afghanistan).

Gandhara was located at the eastern edge of the empire of Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE), and the region remained a conduit between East and West for centuries. Local artists drew upon the area's Greek legacy to create Buddhist images. This bodhisattva's wavy hair, bridgeless nose, and naturalistic lips resemble those of a sculpted Apollo.



Bodhisattva

Afghanistan (ancient Gandhara), ca. 4th century

Stucco with traces of paint

Gift of Arthur M. Sackler

Arthur M. Sackler Gallery S1987.951

Mind Palace

Mandalas are abstract representations of the places where buddhas dwell. Each comprises a particular arrangement of buddhas, bodhisattvas, and other figures within a geometrically ordered palace. Although mandalas are usually meant to be visualized in meditation, they can also be painted and sculpted.



This wooden bodhisattva may have been part of a monumental three-dimensional mandala. Located within a temple, the assemblage would have constituted a powerful space for ritual practice. Almost life-size, the sculptures would have aided practitioners in imagining and internalizing the mandala and its deities, ultimately recognizing no distinction between a buddha and themselves.

Bodhisattva (*bosatsu*)

Japan, Heian period, late 12th century

Wood with gold leaf

Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment

Freer Gallery of Art F1962.21a–c

From Male to Female

The pale standing figure holding a leaf-shaped tray of fruit most likely represents Guanyin, whose temple this painting once adorned. Guanyin is the East Asian form of Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion.



In India, Avalokiteshvara is male. In China, the bodhisattva was frequently depicted in ways that make its gender ambiguous. Over time, Guanyin came to be seen as a female figure who provides protection and children to her devotees.

Bodhisattva, possibly Avalokiteshvara (Guanyin)

China, Song dynasty, ca. 952

Ink and colors on primed mud-wall construction

Gift of Arthur M. Sackler

Arthur M. Sackler Gallery S1987.224

A Bodhisattva without Jewels

Bodhisattvas typically wear lavish clothing and jewelry. This small bronze, however, resembles an ascetic, one who has given up worldly riches to attain spiritual insight. He has the matted hair (tied in a conical topknot) of an Indian holy man, and he wears only a simple loincloth—no crown, no bracelets, no silk sarong.



Other images from this region also represent bodhisattvas as renouncers. There may have been a local practice of venerating bodhisattvas for their spiritual accomplishments rather than for their interventions in the world.

Bodhisattva Maitreya or Avalokiteshvara

Northeastern Thailand, Khorat plateau, Prasat Hin Khao Plai Bat II, 7th century

Copper alloy with high tin content and silver inlay

Gift of Ann and Gilbert Kinney

Arthur M. Sackler Gallery S2015.24

A Buddha with Jewels

Buddhas are usually depicted in simple monk's robes, reflecting the importance of abandoning worldly wealth and attachments in the pursuit of enlightenment. Surprisingly, this buddha wears elaborate jewelry, an ornate belt, and a large crown. These regal accessories may refer to a story of the Buddha's life that was



especially popular in the region where this sculpture was made. In that tale, the Buddha adorns himself with splendid regalia to convert an arrogant king.

Crowned buddha

Thailand or Cambodia, Lopburi period, 12th–13th century

Bronze

Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment

Freer Gallery of Art F1976.11a–e

Mudras

A hand gesture with a consistent meaning, made during Buddhist ritual practice or depicted in Buddhist images, is known as a mudra. Find these examples in works on view.

“Approach without fear” and “gift-giving”

“Earth-touching”

“Threatening”

“Meditation”

“Gift-giving”

Double “approach without fear”

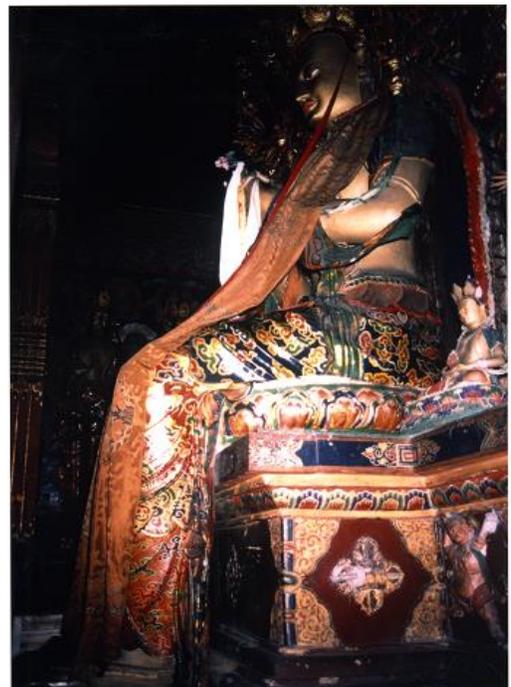
Tablet: Bodhisattvas

Does it matter how a bodhisattva looks?

Like all enlightened beings, Maitreya has a beautiful body with perfect proportions and distinctive attributes. Images of such beings must be accurate to be worthy of worship and effective in rituals.



The copper sculpture of Maitreya made from this preparatory drawing was a complicated, multipart construction. Its pieces were designed in a workshop, cast separately in Nepal, and assembled in the commissioning monastery in Bhutan.

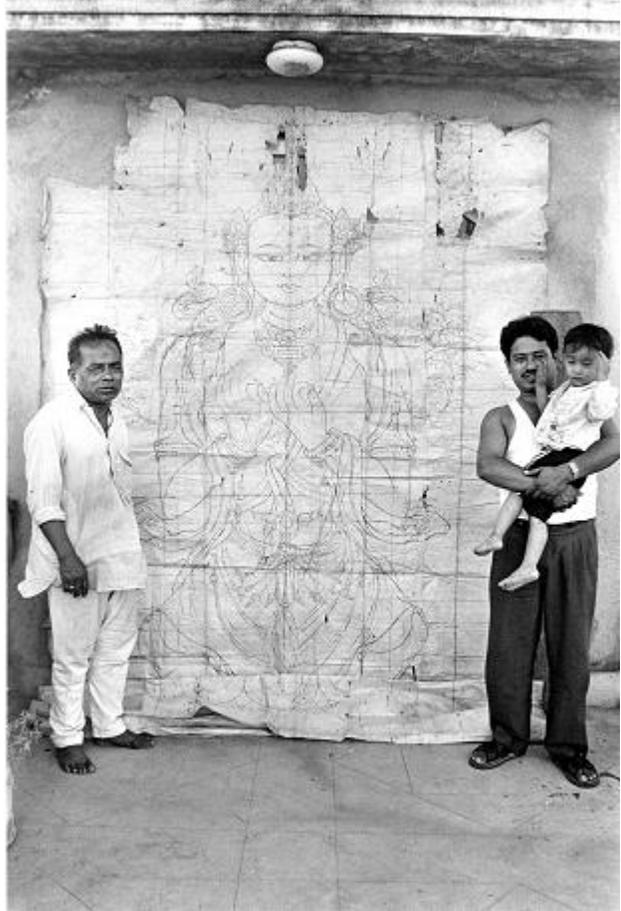


To create this drawing, the workshop's senior artist sketched the body in pencil until he got it right. He then used brush and ink to render the correct form. He inked in only half of the jewelry, knowing that the other artists on his team could reverse and replicate the details. The grid was part of the process as well: it enabled the artists to more accurately transfer the image from paper to copper.

Sculpture of Maitreya at Tongsa Dzong, Central Bhutan; likely based on drawing of Maitreya (S1998.1); Courtesy of Françoise Pommaret and Mary Slusser

How did I get here?

This drawing has traveled a long way from the artisan quarters of Patan, Nepal. For fifty years, it was folded and stored atop a cabinet in a sculptor's home. Dust and dirt took their toll, and insects bore holes in it.



In 1997, while traveling in the Kathmandu Valley, Mary Slusser, a Freer|Sackler research associate, recognized the value of this drawing: it is one of only five remaining drawings by the renowned artist Kuber Singh Shakya. She urged the family to donate the work to the museums so it could be preserved. The family agreed, and Slusser hand-carried the drawing from Nepal to Washington, DC.

Family of the artist Kuber Singh Shakya next to drawing of
Maitreya (S1998.1); 1997; Courtesy of Mary Slusser

How was this made?

In ancient Gandhara (modern-day Afghanistan and Pakistan), stucco was commonly used for sculptures and



decorations on Buddhist monastic buildings. Heads were made of a solid mixture of clay and stucco (lime, sand, and water) and attached with dowels to the bodies. Stucco sculptures were often set into niches to protect them from the elements. But because the bodies were made of a softer mixture, they rarely survived.

The use of stucco in this region persisted for centuries. Even the two monumental buddhas at Bamiyan in Afghanistan, which were made in the fifth century and destroyed in 2001, were coated with a layer of stucco.

Bodhisattva (S1987.951)

Why did artists in Afghanistan and Pakistan draw on Greek imagery?

Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE) led his army to the banks of the Indus River in modern-day Pakistan. When Alexander died, command of this eastern empire passed to his general, who was subsequently defeated by an Indian emperor, Chandragupta Maurya (321–297 BCE). This region thus became a center of contact and exchange between the Indian and Mediterranean worlds. Buddhism quickly spread into the area. This process is reflected in the *Questions of Milinda*, a Buddhist text that describes the conversion of a Greek king by an Indian monk.

This Gandharan frieze, on view in Freer gallery 2, also features Greek-inspired imagery.



Enlightenment, from the four great events in the life of Buddha Shakyamuni; ancient Gandhara (modern Pakistan/Afghanistan), Kushan dynasty, late 2nd–early 3rd century CE; schist; Purchase; Freer Gallery of Art F1949.9a–d

How was I made?

Japanese sculptors of Buddhist images overwhelmingly preferred to work in wood, joining separate parts to form a single image. Carving multiple small pieces allowed the wood to dry evenly, ensuring that it would not split.



This sculpture is constructed from seven wooden parts. The head and torso are one piece, the crossed legs another. The hands connect at the wrists, and the forearms attach at the elbows. The gold-decorated halo behind the figure also is attached separately. And the elaborate lotus pedestal consists of another eight pieces. A close examination of the sculpture reveals where the different pieces connect.

Highlighted assembly points, Bodhisattva (*bosatsu*) (F1962.21a–
c)

Why am I so difficult to identify?

Buddhist figures can be identified by the clothes they wear, the objects they hold, the position of their hands, and their relationship to other images. This sculpture, however, offers very few clues about its identity.

The crown, short-sleeved robe, and delicate

armbands identify the figure as a bodhisattva, but the lower parts of his arms are modern replacements. His current hand gestures, which may be different than his original ones, are not specific to a particular deity, and he doesn't hold anything that might offer clues to his identity.



If the bodhisattva was definitively part of a three-dimensional mandala, like the one pictured here, his location within the mandala might lead scholars to texts containing evidence of his identity. But for now, the singular beauty of the image must suffice.

Garbhadhatu (Taizokai) mandala; Japan, Kamakura period, mid-13th century; hanging scroll; color on silk; Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment; Freer Gallery of Art F1998.1

How did I get here?

After a torrential rainstorm in August 1964, farmers in northeastern Thailand noticed a stone protruding above the ground. They began digging and ultimately uncovered a pit containing more than thirty bronze bodhisattvas. Scholars believe that the deities were hidden during a period of religious or political instability, perhaps in the eighth century.



After the discovery, some of the bronzes entered Thai museums, and others went onto the international art market. A New Yorker acquired the Sackler bronze sometime before 1971, the year that he sold it to another American collector. The sculpture pictured here, which was found at the same site in northeastern Thailand, is now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Avalokiteshvara; northeastern Thailand, Khorat plateau, Prasat Hin Khao Plai Bat II, 8th century; Metropolitan Museum of Art (Rogers Fund 1967, 67.234)

Why is it difficult to tell who I am?

Most prominent bodhisattvas can be identified by the object they hold or by an attribute in their topknot.

Avalokiteshvara, for example, typically holds a lotus and has a seated buddha

in his hair, while Maitreya carries a vase and has a small stupa atop his head. The attribute in this bodhisattva's topknot has weathered beyond recognition. He holds a water vessel, but this neither marks him as any particular figure nor distinguishes him from many other images discovered at the same site. His identity thus remains a mystery.



Detail, Bodhisattva Maitreya or Avalokiteshvara (S2015.24)

Guardians and Guides

The Bearers of Tradition

Countless masters have preserved the Historical Buddha's teachings (dharma) by instructing pupils on Buddhist doctrines and practices. Teachers therefore are central to all Buddhist traditions. Using ritual objects that reinforce the dharma, teachers not only explain Buddhist concepts to students, but they also link modern devotees with all who have practiced the dharma over the centuries. Buddhist schools honor different teachers and founders, although some are revered in multiple traditions.

Alongside human teachers are a host of divine and enlightened beings who preserve and defend the dharma. Their images often appear outside Buddhist sites. Buddhists relate to these beings as fellow devotees and worship them for worldly benefits, such as health and wealth.



Ancient Protectors of the Dharma

Luohan is the Chinese term for arhat, a disciple of the Buddha who has attained spiritual realization and supernatural powers. Arhats defend the dharma, particularly when no buddha is actively teaching in the world. Due to their exceptionally long lives, they often appear aged, as exemplified by the gnarled features and bushy eyebrows of these two sculptures. The images were cast out of iron and coated with plaster and paint, of which few traces remain.

Two arhats (*luohan*)

China, Ming dynasty, 1368–1644

Iron

Gift of Charles Lang Freer

Freer Gallery of Art F1913.78–79

Demon-Taming Teacher

Padmasambhava, a legendary master of Tibetan Buddhism, possessed remarkable spiritual attainments and magical powers.

He used these potent skills to subdue demons across Tibet and the Himalayas, converting them

from enemies to protectors of Buddhism. These sites of subjugation became important places of pilgrimage.



Along with clearing obstacles to the spread of Buddhism, Padmasambhava is venerated for transmitting to Tibetan disciples new teachings and practices from India. He is therefore known as Guru Rinpoche, or “Precious Teacher.”

Padmasambhava

Central Tibet, ca. 1700–1750

Gilt copper alloy, pearl, and turquoise, traces of pigments on
hair and face

The Alice S. Kandell Collection

Arthur M. Sackler Gallery S2014.18a–b

Building a Buddha

Tibetan Buddhists use specialized meditation techniques to visualize themselves as peaceful or wrathful buddhas.

Practitioners learn these techniques through initiations, which may involve cards painted with images of body parts, ornaments, and offerings.

Raising up the cards one by one, a teacher reads aloud the instructions or blessings written on the back (see below) as the initiate beholds the image on the front. By viewing the cards, practitioners sharpen their abilities to hold a buddha's image in their minds, building it limb by limb, ornament by ornament.

These fifteenth-century cards are primarily related to Heruka, a wrathful buddha. Meditating on Heruka's image enables practitioners to destroy all mental obstacles to enlightenment.



Initiation cards (*tsakali*)

Western Tibet, 15th century

Opaque watercolor on paper

Private collection

LTS2015.2.27, 29, 32, 39, 57, 60

LTS2015.2.39 (verso)

The text on the back is handwritten in Tibetan script.

Weapons of Ego Destruction

Tibetan Buddhism includes practices so powerful that they can lead to enlightenment in a single lifetime. Because of their potency, instructions for conducting these rituals must



be carefully transmitted from teacher to student through secret initiations. Special implements, such as these silver-inlaid weapons, are used in the complex ceremonies of admittance.

During an initiation, practitioners lift each weapon to symbolically destroy mental obstacles to spiritual progress. Each weapon has a specific purpose. The axe cuts through negative thoughts, the handcuffs control the ego, and the skull club crushes bad habits. The bow and arrow reinforce wisdom and compassion—the positive qualities that motivate all activities aimed at enlightenment.

Handcuffs, arrow, bow, axe, and skull club

Tibet, Derge, 19th century

Iron and silver

The Alice S. Kandell Collection

ELS2010.4.114.1–3, .8–9

Divine Devotees

The teachings of the Buddha apply to more than just humans: following the dharma is also believed to benefit gods and spirits. All Buddhist traditions incorporated divinities from other faiths who accepted the dharma, typically assigning them roles as guardians and providers. While most Buddhist figures address transcendent spiritual goals, these guardians and protectors help with worldly concerns, such as wealth and health. For Buddhists, these deities are recognized as both objects of devotion and fellow devotees of the Buddha.

Giver of Gifts

Vasudhara is a goddess of abundance in many parts of the Buddhist world. Her multiple arms are a visual representation of her generosity.

Here, her bottom right hand makes the “gift-giving” gesture while other hands hold symbols of abundance, such as a full jar and sheaves of grain.



A husband and wife donated this gently smiling image of Vasudhara in the winter of 1082. They likely were expressing a wish for children or gratitude for their wealth.

Vasudhara

Nepal, 1082

Gilt copper with semiprecious stones and traces of vermillion

Gift of Susanne K. Bennet in memory of Felicja “Lusia” Arendt
(1928–1942)

Arthur M. Sackler Gallery S2012.2

Personal Wealth Management

Sometimes associated with the Hindu god Kubera, Jambhala is a god of wealth who protects and provides for the Buddhist community. Some Tibetan Buddhist traditions accept the existence of five separate Jambhalas.



This image depicts the very popular Yellow Jambhala, who grants wisdom and riches. Finely adorned, he sits in a regal posture, with one leg hanging down from his throne. His left hand grasps a mongoose with gems streaming from its mouth; his right hand holds a fruit with healing properties.

Seated figure of Jambhala

Western Tibet, 13th century

Bronze with traces of paint

Purchase

Arthur M. Sackler Gallery S1996.39

Crossing Borders

On the Road

In East Asia, famous monks were frequently honored; images of them were even worshiped on altars. Among the most well-known monks were those who made a pilgrimage to the holy land of India.



Over many centuries, hundreds of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean pilgrims braved countless dangers to visit places where the Historical Buddha had lived and taught. A young Korean monk named Hyecho traveled farthest. His journal and poems, which are explored in the tablets to your right, offer an intimate account of pilgrimage and a compelling view into Buddhist history.

Buddhist monk standing on a lotus

China, Tang dynasty, 618–907

Bronze

Gift of Charles Lang Freer

Freer Gallery of Art F1912.93

Leaving a Trace

Buddhist pilgrims traditionally seek to leave a trace of themselves at holy sites and to return home with a souvenir of their visit. In Tibet and the Himalayas, pilgrimage tokens take the form of small, clay objects called *tsha-tsha*.



Artisans handstamp *tsha-tsha* with images of buddhas and bodhisattvas or shape them like stupas. They then sun-dry the tokens and sell them to pilgrims. Mounds of deposited *tsha-tsha* are frequently found at Himalayan stupas, monasteries, cave temples, and roadside shrines.

Votive offerings (*tsha-tsha*)

Nepal, 14th century

Terra-cotta

Private Collection

RLS1998.26.1–20, .24

- 1–2: Avalokiteshvara, bodhisattva of compassion
- 3: Padmasambhava, a legendary Buddhist master
- 4–9: Amitayus, buddha of infinite life
- 10: Guhyasamaja, a meditational deity
- 11: Akshobhya, a principal buddha
- 12: Manjushri, bodhisattva of wisdom
- 13: Vajrapani, a wrathful buddha
- 14–16: Avalokiteshvara, bodhisattva of compassion
- 17: Unidentifiable fragment
- 18: Mahakala Chaturbhuja, an enlightened protector
- 19–20, 24: Stupikas

Follow the journey of Hyecho

Around 724, a young Korean monk named Hyecho began a journey over land and sea to visit the Buddhist holy land of India. The interactive map on these tablets allows you to explore many of the sites Hyecho described in his journal.

Created by undergraduate participants in the Multidisciplinary Design Program at the University of Michigan, this interactive map continues the school's century-long relationship with the Freer | Sackler.

Remote Locations, Global Connections

Religiously motivated travel has always been a part of Buddhist practice. Buddhist pilgrims visited nearby shrines and distant sacred centers, seeking blessings, good karma, and new teachings.

Alongside merchants and migrants, pilgrims crossed vast deserts and treacherous seas. Such long-distance travel brought ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity to otherwise remote locations, such as Kizil, an oasis town in western China.

The Buddhist monastery at Kizil flourished from the third to the eighth century. It included 236 caves that were carved into a rocky mountainside and often plastered and painted. Most of the mural fragments displayed here are from a single cave.

Kizil's patrons included men and women of the local community and travelers praying for a safe journey. The

cultural diversity of this crossroads is reflected in the different complexions, costumes, and styles of the human and divine figures.

Adoring Crowds

Scenes of the Historical Buddha giving sermons to diverse audiences decorated Cave 224's walls. These mural fragments depict members of two assemblies gazing upward at a (now missing) Buddha, whose presence is suggested by a blue-edged halo. The gods wear pearl-studded ornaments while the monks have no jewelry; their varied skin tones allude to their distant homelands. Yet all four figures are unified in their adoring gestures, either folding their hands prayerfully or cupping their ears to better hear the teachings.

Two monks

China, Kucha, Kizil, Cave 224, 6th century

CE

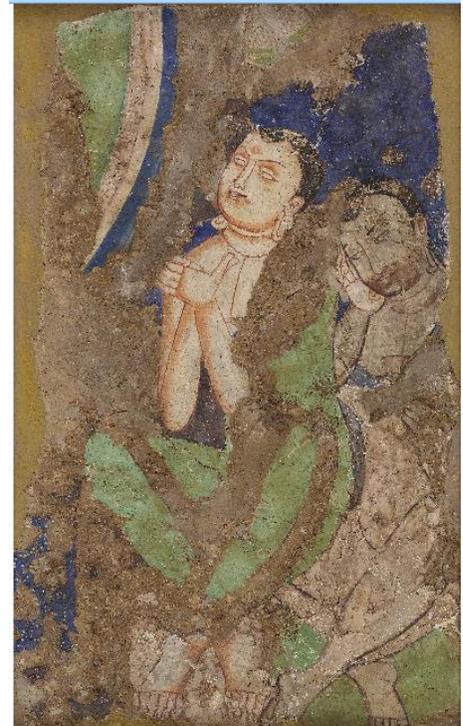
Gypsum plaster with pigment

Long-term loan from the Smithsonian

American Art Museum; gift of John

Gellatly

LTS1985.1.325.8



Two celestial beings

China, Kucha, Kizil, Cave 224 or 205,

6th century CE

Gypsum plaster with pigment

Long-term loan from the

Smithsonian American Art Museum;

gift of John Gellatly

LTS1985.1.325.13



Teachings Come to Life

Many of the wall paintings at Kizil represent stories that the Buddha told. While the narratives can be impossible to identify now, Kizil's inhabitants likely would have recognized them, seeing the Buddha's teachings come alive before their eyes.

A scantily clad woman dances on the left. She may be a goddess or a character in one of the Buddha's sermons. To dramatically convey the inevitability of decay and death, the Buddha occasionally told of the fleeting beauty of famed women.

On the right, blue-bearded ascetics in patched robes listen to a sermon as they pay homage to the Buddha, who is not visible here.

Two assemblies

China, Kucha, Kizil, Cave 224, 6th
century CE

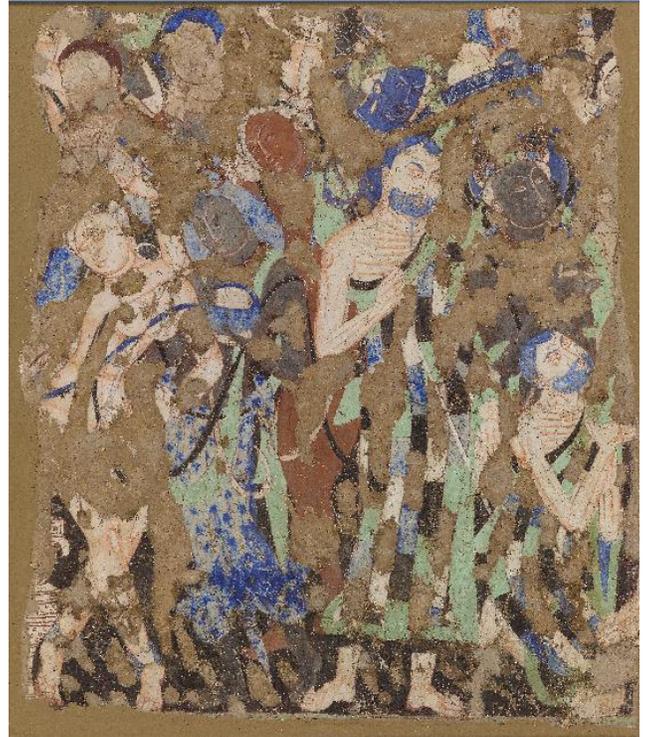
Gypsum plaster with pigment

Long-term loan from the

Smithsonian American Art

Museum; gift of John Gellatly

LTS1985.1.325.5



A God Reunited

What appear to be the heads of several blue-bearded men are actually multiple heads of a single deity. Based on the faces' similarity, curators determined that these two fragments are from the same image and the heads belong to one figure.



Such multiheaded figures were inspired by descriptions of Hindu deities. Buddhist texts frequently describe Hindu gods attending Buddhist sermons, and some became absorbed into Buddhism as protectors.



Celestial beings

China, Kucha, Kizil, Cave 224,

6th century CE

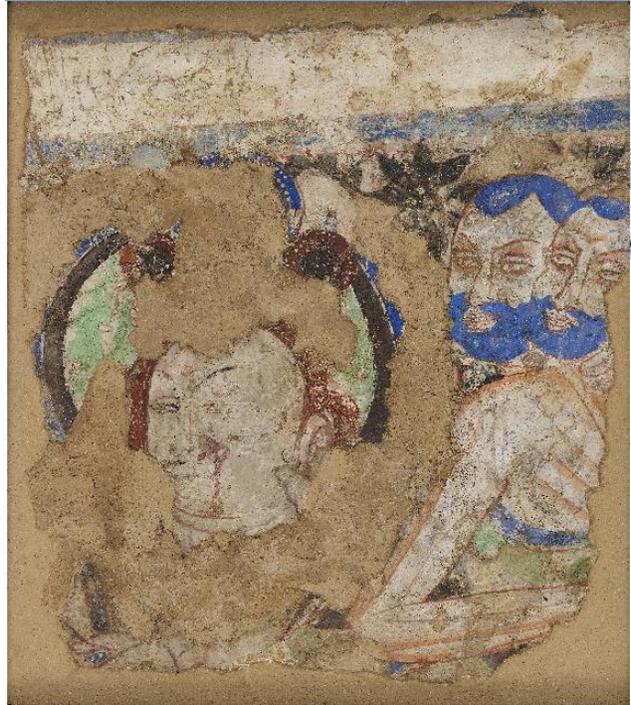
Gypsum plaster with pigment

Long-term loan from the

Smithsonian American Art

Museum; gift of John Gellatly

LTS1985.1.325.9, .11



An Oasis of Color

The blue-and-white stripe connecting these three fragments originally ran across the walls of Cave 224, creating two rows of sermon scenes. Here, the upper fragment shows a white-haired, gaunt renouncer listening in rapt attention. Below, celestial beings tilt their heads and focus their attention down toward an absent buddha.

Both rows were painted in bright pigments on the cave's plaster-covered walls, providing a dramatic contrast to the desert outside. While the organic pigments have faded, the mineral-based pigments remain vibrant.

Three figures

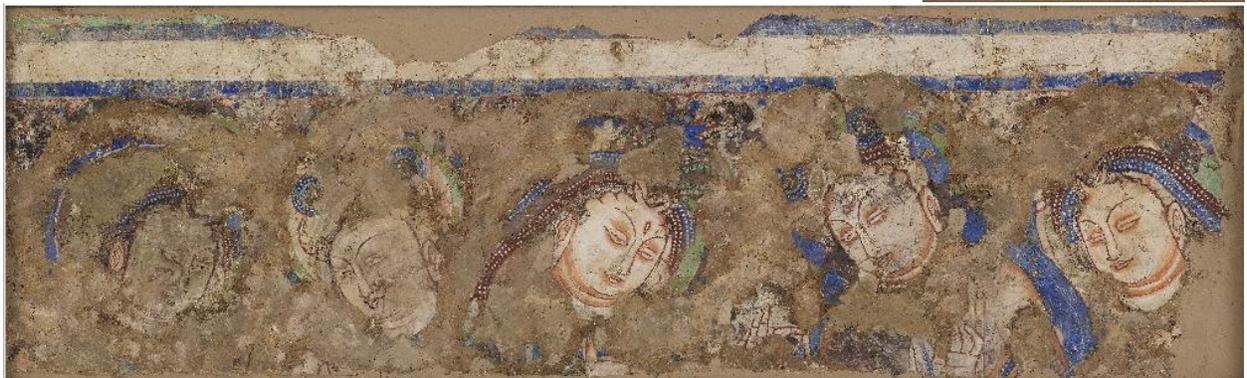
China, Kucha, Kizil, Cave 224, 6th century CE

Gypsum plaster with pigment

Long-term loan from the Smithsonian

American Art Museum; gift of John Gellatly

LTS1985.1.325.15



Celestial being

China, Kucha, Kizil, Cave 224, 6th century CE

Gypsum plaster with pigments

Long-term loan from the Smithsonian American Art Museum;
gift of John Gellatly

LTS1985.1.325.4



Celestial beings

China, Kucha, Kizil, Cave 224, 6th century CE

Gypsum plaster with pigment

Long-term loan from the Smithsonian American Art Museum;
gift of John Gellatly

LTS1985.1.325.7

Crossing Borders

This map displays a handful of the thousands of Buddhist sites located across the vast and varied landscapes of Asia. Some are connected to objects in this exhibition that were created or discovered nearby.

Legend

Monastery, Kizil (Kezi'er), China

Monastery, Mes Aynak, Afghanistan

Potala Palace, Lhasa, Tibet Autonomous Region, China

Boudhanath Stupa, Kathmandu, Nepal

Great Wild Goose Pagoda, Xi'an, China

Wat Phra Si Sanphet, Ayutthaya, Thailand

Ta Prohm, Siem Reap, Cambodia

Chandi Borobudur, Central Java, Indonesia

Todaiji Temple, Nara, Japan

Mahabodhi Temple, Bodhgaya, India

Ruwanwelisaya Stupa, Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka

Bulguksa Temple, Gyeongju, Korea

Dazu Rock Carvings, Chongqing, China

Temple of Soul's Retreat, Hangzhou, China

Temple of Six Banyan Trees, Guangxiao, China

Mogao Caves, Dunhuang, China

Ajanta Caves, Maharashtra, India

Temple, Erdene Zuu Monastery, Kharkhorin, Mongolia

Tibetan Buddhist Shrine Room

The Tibetan Buddhist Shrine Room from the Alice S. Kandell Collection

Whether small domestic altars or grand temple halls, the sacred spaces of Tibetan Buddhism are filled with images of enlightened beings and powerful deities. Sites of ritual performance and worship, such spaces present a spiritual hierarchy, from buddhas at the top to butter lamps below. Sonorous chants, flickering lamplight, and incense smoke stimulate the senses and inspire Buddhist practice.

Inside this shrine room, you will encounter Tibetan Buddhist art in a manner that evokes the sacred precincts of the Himalayas. More than two hundred objects, assembled by the New York collector Alice S. Kandell over many years, reflect Tibetan Buddhist concepts and customs rather than museum conventions. Objects are placed on painted furniture, arranged

among paintings and textiles, and presented without labels. This dynamic, densely layered display restores the relationships between Buddhist figures and viewers that are typically dissolved within museums.

The Tibetan Buddhist Shrine Room from the Alice S. Kandell Collection

Tibet, China, and Mongolia, 13th–20th century
Mixed media

Gifts and promised gifts from the Alice S. Kandell Collection,
Arthur M. Sackler Gallery

Dharma: The Teachings

[Main text panel + teachings]

Encountering the Buddha: The Power of Words

Statements of great truth hold great power in Buddhism, and few passages are as important to this faith as the one presented on the screen to your left. Written in the ancient Indian language of Sanskrit, the verse emphasizes the fleeting nature of all existence. It asserts that suffering is caused by desire for temporary things and declares that the Buddha has taught the means to destroy those attachments.

The full importance of these words, like that of the objects throughout this exhibition, is revealed in both meaning and use. Buddhists place great significance on the act of writing and reciting sacred verses and sounds. Known as mantras or dharanis, they are believed to offer protection, increase insight, and bring blessings.

Although the objects in this exhibition are widely varied and often alluringly beautiful, they were all created to help devotees overcome attachments. This idea rests at the heart of Buddhist teachings, and to encounter those teachings is to encounter the Buddha.

To start at the beginning, walk to the introduction at the

opposite end of this gallery.

The Art of Healing

The ultimate goal of the Buddhist path is to transcend all suffering by attaining an enlightened state beyond life and death. That said, Buddhists worship the medicine buddha Bhaishajyaguru to alleviate the more immediate miseries caused by disease, cold, hunger, and even mosquito bites.



With his gentle smile, cranial bump, and forehead mark, this bronze figure looks like many other buddhas. The medicinal myrobalan fruit in his right hand, however, identifies him as Bhaishajyaguru.

Magic Words

A sacred passage, or mantra, was added to the back of this image of the medicine buddha. Writing or speaking mantras is believed to produce concrete results. This mantra, which is also featured on the video, enhances the sculpture's ability to relieve mental or physical illness.

Though the image was made in Java, its inscription is written in Sanskrit using a script from northeast India. This exemplifies Indonesia's close ties to the region where the Historical Buddha once lived.

Medicine buddha Bhaishajyaguru
Indonesia, central Java, 8th–9th century
High-tin bronze
Gift of Ann and Gilbert Kinney
Arthur M. Sackler Gallery S2015.25

Wisdom Personified

Over time, different Buddhist schools developed different methods for attaining enlightenment. One approach is taught through a collection of texts called *Prajnaparamita* (The Perfection of Wisdom). In India, the Himalayas, and Southeast Asia, these teachings are also personified as a goddess. Prajnaparamita's eleven heads represent her supreme wisdom, and her twenty-two arms indicate her extraordinary power. The crablike appendages that radiate from her upper arms in this sculpture are unusual. They may be the result of artists grappling with the unfamiliar challenge of sculpting many arms.



Prajnaparamita

Cambodia, Angkor period, ca. 1200; Bayon style

Copper alloy

Gift of Ann and Gilbert Kinney

Arthur M. Sackler Gallery S2015.26

Knowledge and Power

The inscription on the base of this devotional image identifies the figure as Dipa Malla, a fifteenth-century queen of Nepal. She is represented as the Buddhist goddess of perfect wisdom, Prajnaparamita. This sculpture probably served a political function by highlighting the queen's close connection to an important Buddhist goddess. It also reflects the queen's personal devotion to Prajnaparamita.



Queen Dipa Malla as the goddess Prajnaparamita

Nepal, 14th century

Gilt copper with traces of gold and blue pigment

Purchase

Freer Gallery of Art F1986.23