



The Bodhisattva Maitreya, 100–300
Pakistan; ancient region of Gandhara
Schist
The Avery Brundage Collection, B605597

WHO IS DEPICTED HERE?

This statue depicts the bodhisattva Maitreya. Bodhisattvas are enlightened beings who postpone their own salvation in order to help all sentient beings. The bodhisattva is an ideal type, not a depiction of an historical person like the Buddha. Bodhisattvas have some of the characteristics of Christian saints. They are compassionate figures who help worshippers. Unlike saints, however, they are not associated with historical persons, hagiographies, or martyrdom.

There are many bodhisattvas. Maitreya is the Buddha of the future, who will be born to teach enlightenment in the next age. According to Mahayana teachings, a Buddha is first born as a bodhisattva, and then after many lifetimes, progresses on to Buddhahood. The historical Buddha was himself referred to as a bodhisattva before becoming the Buddha. Another common bodhisattva to appear in Buddhist art is Avalokiteshvara, who is known by different names in different parts of the Buddhist world (for example, Guanyin in China and Kannon in Japan). Many images of this bodhisattva are found throughout the Asian Art Museum, represented in the galleries of various national traditions.

HOW DO WE KNOW WHO THIS FIGURE IS AND WHERE IT CAME FROM?

Bodhisattvas tend, as a whole, to be more richly attired than figures of buddhas. Where many Buddha figures (except crowned buddhas) have only a simple monk's robe draped over one shoulder, bodhisattvas are adorned with flowing robes, bracelets, necklaces and threads containing amulet boxes, elaborate hairdos, and sometimes a moustache. Bodhisattvas are often represented as princely figures, alluding to the historical Buddha's life as a prince before he renounced his kingdom, and distinguishing them from the Buddha who is attired as a mendicant monk. The bodhisattva Maitreya is identified here by the small flask he holds in his left hand, filled with a liquid of immortality.

The style of the sculpture is similar to the previous image, and the sculpture also comes from the region of Gandhara. The schist stone allows for detailed carving, especially in the deeply carved lines of the drapery, the hairdo, and jewelry. Gandharan sculpture is reminiscent of Hellenistic sculptures in the naturalistic attention to anatomical details. There are also direct references to Greco-Roman imagery, for example, in the centaurs holding the central amulet on the main necklace. A centaur is a classical mythological animal that is half-human, half horse.

The bodhisattva figure is carved realistically, with enough attention to detail to make one suspect that local princes in the area probably were adorned this way. By combining local styles and characteristics with messages having universal appeal, Buddhist art effectively helped spread the faith into central Asia and beyond.

WHEN DID BODHISATTVAS EMERGE IN BUDDHIST ART?

We do not know for sure when the first Buddhist image was created, but historical evidence provides examples of Buddha images within several centuries of his lifetime (approximately 560–480 BCE). The earliest Buddhist imagery was probably created in ephemeral materials. By the first century CE, we find Buddhist images and stone in the North Indian center of Mathura, and in the northwestern region of Gandhara.

This sculpture dates from about 100–300 CE, the same time as object in slide 15. Sculpted images of the Buddha and of bodhisattva figures are prolific in this period.

The concept of the bodhisattva is, in philosophical terms, associated with the rise of Mahayana, a branch of Buddhism that offered the possibility of Buddhahood to everyone. Other branches of Buddhism presented a more arduous path to Buddhahood through the monastic order, with less hope of individual salvation. In the Mahayana path, having compassionate figures to work on behalf of the worshipers' spiritual goals served to make the faith more accessible to larger numbers of people.