



Seated figure of the Amida Buddha

Not on display

Title/Description: Seated figure of the Amida Buddha

Born: 1600 - 1969

Measurements: h. 206 x w. 180 x d. 170 mm

Accession Number: 281

Historic Period: Edo period (AD 1600-1868), 17th century

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

This stern-faced, seated, wooden figure is a representation of Amida Nyorai (Skt. *Amitābha*), the Buddha of Infinite Light. Amida is the principal deity worshipped in Pure Land Buddhism, a branch of East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism. According to Pure Land teachings, Amida Nyorai welcomes the souls of the recently deceased and guides them to the Western Paradise (Skt. *Sukhāvātī*). [1]

Veneration of Amitābha had established itself in China by the 5th century where practices included 'voicing the Buddha's name, visualisation of Sukhāvātī and prostration.' [2] Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the 6th century and flourished under the imperial patronage of Prince Shōtoku (573-621). [3] But it was the Japanese itinerant monk Genku Hōnen (1133-1212), who simplified the teachings of Pure Land Buddhism and founded the Jōdo sect (J. *Jōdo-shū*). [4]

Hōnenurged the faithful to seek refuge in Amida's compassion by repeating the words 'Namu Amida Butsu' 南無阿彌陀佛. This invocation is known as the Amida *nenbutsu* or prayer. The belief that 'the final moments of one's life can influence one's fate after death' led to the cultivation of 'right mindfulness at the last moment (*rinjūshōnen*).' [5] For this reason, the Amida *nenbutsu* became associated with Buddhist deathbed rituals. Pure Land Buddhism's central concept of universal salvation appealed to ordinary people and Pure Land teaching gained in popularity from the 12th century onwards. [6]

The Amida Nyorai in the Sainsbury Centre Collection is shown seated in a full lotus position (Skt. *padmasana*) with right hand raised, palm facing outwards, in a gesture of fearlessness (Skt. *abhayāmudra*). Amida's left hand rests palm upwards on left knee. The sculptor has given Amida a symmetrical, oval face with a firm, pronounced chin and high, rounded cheeks. Previous historians have noted how the 'heavy-jowelled, severe face shows the influence of the Chinese Buddhist sculptural style of the twelfth to thirteenth centuries.' [7]

Long, arched eyebrows form a continuous ridge that connects with the perpendicular line of the nose. The downcast, narrow eyes of the Buddha have been inset with crystal or glass, animating the deity's solemn expression. At the base of the statue it is possible to see traces of lacquer, coloured pigments and gilding, used here to enhance the dynamic folds of Amida's garment.

Amida Nyorai possesses the standardized physical characteristics associated with the Buddha that are interpreted as external signs of his inner spirituality. For example, the sculpture exhibits: unwrinkled skin without blemishes; broad, rounded shoulders; a fleshy neck with three lateral folds; a domed protrusion from the crown of the head (Skt. *uṣṇīṣa*); locks of clockwise-curling hair; a white clockwise-curling hair above the middle of the brow (Skt. *ūrṇākośa*); and elongated earlobes. [8] Round indentations, once inset with crystals, are located on the protuberance at the crown (J. *nikkeishu*), and at the brow (J. *byakugō*). [9] The bright crystals reminded worshippers of Amida Buddha's radiant, purifying light.

The figure is constructed from at least nine separate pieces of wood, constituting: the head and trunk; the face; each shoulder and thigh; each forearm; each hand; and the knees and robe in front. [10] This method of construction, known as *yosegi-zukuri*, reveals the enduring influence of the master carver of buddhas, Jōchō (d. 1057). Jōchō and his apprentices developed this revolutionary multi-block technique in order to create large, durable, crack-resistant, wooden sculptures. This process involved splitting, hollowing-out and re-joining the front and back of the wooden form before commencing more detailed carving of the head and body. [11]

Jokei refined this method in the 11th century and *yosegi-zukuri* carving became the preferred method of construction of wooden figures from the Kamakura period (1185-1333) until the Edo period (1600-1868). The prevalence of this effective technique has made it difficult for scholars to accurately date Buddhist sculpture; however, the sculpture in the Sainsbury Centre Collection dates from the Edo period. [12]

Vanessa Tothill, June 2020

[1] Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich, eds, *The World of Buddhism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), pp. 104-05 and 198-99; Penelope Mason, *History of Japanese Art*, 2nd edn (New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005), p. 209.

[2] Jana Igunma and San San May, eds, *Buddhism: Origins, Traditions and Contemporary Life* (London: The British Library, 2019), p.46; Denise Patry Leidy, *The Art of Buddhism: An Introduction to Its History and Meaning* (Boston: Shambhala, 2008), p. 89.

[3] Bechert, pp. 212-14.

[4] Bechert, p. 223.

[5] Karen M. Gerhart, *The Material Culture of Death in Medieval Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), pp. 91-92.

[6] Lawrence Smith and Yutaka Mino in Steven Hooper, ed., *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection: Catalogue* (Newhaven; London: Yale University in association with University of East Anglia, 1997), vol. 3, p. 148.

[7] Hooper, p. 148.

[8] There are 32 major marks of greatness (Skt. *mahāpuruṣalakṣaṇa*; J. *daininsō*) that signify the Buddha's virtue. These marks are discussed in the *Lakkhaṇa Sutta* from the Pali Canon, in Ronald Epstein and the Editorial Committee of the Buddhist Text Translation Society, *Buddhist Text Translation Society's Buddhism A to Z* (California: Buddhist Text Translation Society, 2003), p. 200.

[9] <http://www.aisf.or.jp/~jaanus/deta/b/byakugou.htm> [accessed 1 June 2020]

[10] Hooper, p. 148.

[11] Joan Stanley-Baker, *Japanese Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984, repr 1995), p. 73.

[12] Date provided by Nicole Rousmanière (Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures).

Further Reading

Bechert, Heinz, and Richard Gombrich, eds, *The World of Buddhism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984)

Epstein, Ronald and the Editorial Committee of the Buddhist Text Translation Society, *Buddhist Text Translation Society's Buddhism A to Z* (California: Buddhist Text Translation Society, 2003)

Hooper, Steven, ed., Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection: Catalogue, 3 vols (Newhaven; London: Yale University in association with University of East Anglia, 1997)

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Gerhart, Karen M., *The Material Culture of Death in Medieval Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009)

Leidy, Denise Patry and Donna Strahan, *Wisdom Embodied: Chinese Buddhist and Daoist Sculpture in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New Haven; London: New York and Yale University Press, 2010)

Mason, Penelope, *History of Japanese Art*, 2nd edn (New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005)

Stanley-Baker, Joan, *Japanese Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984, repr 1995)

Provenance

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1967. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.

