



Seated figure of a Bodhisattva

On display

Title/Description: Seated figure of a Bodhisattva

Born: 1297 - 1368

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Gold, Lacquer, Wood

Measurements: h. 320 x w. 212 x d. 120 mm

Accession Number: 298

Historic Period: Yuan dynasty (1297-1368), 13th century, 14th century

Production Place: Asia, China

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

This seated figure represents a Bodhisattva meditating in the position of *rajilila* or 'royal ease', with the right knee raised and the left leg laid flat on the ground. This posture was introduced to Chinese Buddhist art from Central Asia and India in the late Tang period. It was, for example, used for the figure of a Bodhisattva in Cave 14 at Dunhuang, a cave temple at the eastern end of the Silk Route in Gansu province (Tokyo, 1981: tv: pl. 168). The Bodhisattva painted in Cave 14 also has six arms characteristic of the Tantric form of Buddhism patronised by the Tibetans who dominated Dunhuang at this period.

The use of the *rajilila* pose and of Tantric images were aspects of the increased contact between Chinese and Central Asian and Indian Buddhism under the Tang. In addition, figures with bare torsos, elegant scarves and elaborate jewellery were also favoured at this period. Such semi-naked figures were less commonly part of the Chinese sculptural tradition, which usually displays figures - of civil officials, for example - fully clothed according to their rank. Indeed, in China, because dress was an integral part of the ranking system, any suggestion of figures without such dress was likely to be in some way the result of foreign contacts. Figures draped - as here - with scarves over a naked body and dressed in jewellery were shown in the styles of Indian and Central Asian figures of deities (Hindu as well as Buddhist). Such figures were used to represent Bodhisattvas, enlightened beings who assisted humans to attain enlightenment, and *apsaras*, spiritual beings who are often depicted flying through the air, not with wings but with scarves flowing behind them.

The sculptural styles established by the Tang remained in favour under the subsequent Song, Jin and Yuan dynasties, with some variations. The present figure, probably Yuan in date, exhibits the bare torso, drapery and jewellery typical of this style. The hair is arranged piled on the head, with a topknot carved from a separate piece of wood. The torso is adorned with a heavy jewelled collar with hanging loops and pendants. Bands encircle both upper arms, and twisted over the left shoulder is a light scarf, which is carried around the back and draped over the right arm. The rest of the scarf is wound around the waist. From the waist downwards a light robe covers the legs.

The figure is in generally quite good condition, although it has lost much of its surface. The back is better preserved than the front, with more lacquer and gilding. The right forearm and hand have broken off; a hole for a dowel shows where the piece had once been reattached. A small figure of this kind may have been displayed with similar but monumental figures in Buddhist temples, or may have come from a rural temple or domestic shrine. It can be compared with gilt bronzes of this period, including pieces in the British Museum and the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco (Lee and Ho, 1968: sculpture no. 9; d Argence and Turner, 1974: no. 154).

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

Provenance

Formerly in the collection of Sir Herbert Hughes-Stanton. Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1938. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
