



**Figure of the infant Buddha**

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**On display**

**Title/Description:** Figure of the infant Buddha

**Object Type:** Figure

**Materials:** Bronze

**Measurements:** h. 173 x w. 55 x d. 18 mm

**Accession Number:** 911

**Historic Period:** Koryo or Yi dynasty (14th century)

**Production Place:** Korea

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This figure of the infant Buddha was used in the annual ceremony feting the story of the birth. According to Indian sutras, Buddha was born miraculously from the armpit of his mother. He is said to have walked seven paces, raised his right hand, and uttered the words, 'I am alone the time honoured one'. At this, lotus flowers materialised in his footsteps whilst apsaras (flying 'angels') descended celebrating with music, incense and dance. Stone reliefs from Gandhara of the second to third century ad depict this scene, and also show Indra and Brahma bathing the child who is being supported by women. The ceremony in Korea today involves bathing the image in a ritual bowl. After drying it with a white cloth, the performers set it on an altar bedecked with flowers, burning incense and bottles of perfumed water.

Chinese records indicate the enactment of the ceremony during the fourth century, about the time when Buddhism was introduced into Korea, but it only became widely practised in Korea during the age of the flowering of Buddhism in the Unified Silla period of the seventh and eighth centuries. At that time Korea greatly influenced Buddhism in Japan, and Korean images of the period are found in Japanese temples, where the birthday ceremony can still be seen.

The swell of the breasts and the defined waist of this figure contrast with the rather infantile straight circular-section limbs, which are a feature of Korean Birthday Buddhas since the Unified Silla period. Examples earlier than this usually have the archaic smile inherited from the Gandharan origin of Buddhist sculpture. The more knowing and adult expression on this piece can be compared with others such as that in the Kofukuji temple, Kumamoto prefecture, in Japan, which dates from the same period. This also has cylindrical limbs, with characteristically long arms protruding powerfully from the shoulders. The hand which points downwards on such figures has at least one, and usually all the fingers clenched or hooked, as in this case. The short loin cloth is a further feature of Korean examples, particularly those of this period.

This figure stands on a small flat quatrefoil lotus base above a cylindrical pin for fixing into a mount of some kind. For further examples of Korean Buddhist sculpture, see Kang (1990) and National Museum of

Korea (1990).

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

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