

Anonymous

Guanyin

China, Northern Song (960-1126)

or Tangut Xia (1038-1227) dynasty, first half of the 11th century

Wood with traces of pigment

Purchase, 1927

(2400)

This is a superb early example of one of the most popular iconographic styles for portraying Guanyin (Sanskrit Avalokiteshvara), the Bodhisattva of Compassion. The tenth and eleventh centuries saw an increasing naturalism in Chinese Buddhist sculpture, particularly in depictions of Guanyin, who around this time started to be most commonly shown in the position of “royal ease” (*maharaja lalitasana*), often sitting on an outcropping of rock that suggested this Bodhisattva’s island-mountain home of Potalaka. The sculpture originally might have been placed on such a rocky throne, perhaps as part of an entire sculptural wall suggesting a divine grotto. The naturalism of Song-dynasty sculpture led to increasingly feminized images of Guanyin, but in fact the deity remains male in the Academy’s sculpture.

This Guanyin was acquired in 1927 from the renowned collection of Matsukata Kōjirō (1865-1950). Matsukata was a prominent industrialist, and president of the Kawasaki Shipbuilding Company. He is best known for his collection of European painting and sculpture, which forms the core of the National Museum of Western Art in Tokyo, Japan.

According to early information in the museum's archives probably originating with Matsukata, the sculpture was discovered in 1919 at the site of an abandoned Tang dynasty (618-906) temple called "Chang-chiao ssu [sic]," located at the upper reaches of the Yellow River in a region that would have been controlled by the Tangut Xia dynasty, a non-Chinese kingdom that was at once a rival to, but also influenced in culture and politics by, the Chinese Northern Song dynasty. While this would make the Academy's Guanyin one of the most significant examples of Tangut sculpture to have survived, historical records have not confirmed the existence of this temple, and so the origins of the sculpture remain a mystery.