

Anonymous Bodhisattva

China, Five Dynasties Period, Later Zhou dynasty, c. 952 A.D.
Fragment of a wall painting, mineral pigment and ink
Gift of Mrs. Charles M. Cooke, 1928
(2691)

This was recovered by the dealer C.T. Loo in 1923 from a ruined Buddhist temple known as the Cishengsi in Wen County, Henan province, northern China. The main image is of a jeweled bodhisattva, holding a tray with a vase emitting a beam of light. The date can be established on the basis of an inscription on a fragment from the same temple, now in Kansas City. A recent study suggests that the original wall depicted five seated manifestations of Guanyin (Avalokiteshvara), the Bodhisattva of Compassion, surrounded by standing bodhisattvas with offerings. The Academy's fragment depicts one of the latter figures. The style of the painting is considerably more realistic than that on the Tang bodhisattva from Turfan (1447.1, in this gallery), indicating that this represents a transitional style between the Tang and Song dynasties.

Bodhisattva (Fragment of a Wall Painting) (#2691)
Gift of Mrs. Charles M. Cooke Sr., 1928
52 1/2" high x 20" wide

GAL 18

China
12th C. (Sung or Chin Dyn)
Gallery 18

ARTIST: Unknown. From Kwan Yin Temple of Yu Vouen-sang, Honan.

SUBJECT: Standing Bodhisattva, holding tray with vase in left hand, head surrounded by a halo (with part of 2nd figure at right corner, arm upraised over head. Headdress and part of shoulder visible.) Main figure holding vase on a tray in left hand, right hand pendant. Male figure, dressed in elaborate tiara, jewellery, long flowing scarves. Note mustache.

MEDIUM AND TECHNIQUE: Painted on plaster over dried mud, in mineral colors. From an extensive mural. Fine uniform-width lines for contours of face and figure, long sweeping thicker lines for clothing and jewellery. Colors--brown and greens for robes, filled in between lines. Halos perfectly circular shaded white to deep green at edge. Fresco-like technique but the colors do not sink into wet plaster as in European fresco.

Reference for technique: See Museum Journal Sept. 1926, p.2.

STYLE: Fleshy, somewhat corpulent body. Eyes narrow and elongated. This is the late style of Buddhism in China and corresponds stylistically to the seated Kwan Yin of 13-14th C.

INSTRUCTIONAL AIDS: Note graceful flowing lines. Proud, confident expression on face. The Chinese did have murals, not many survive. Talk about fresco-like technique. Maybe this fragment was part of a large mural with many figures in a paradise scene, a backdrop for polychrome wood sculptured figures of deities.

What's a Bodhisattva?

Enlightenment Beings of Mahayana Buddhism

By Barbara O'Brien



Manjushri, Bodhisattva of Wisdom

Photo Credit: MarenYumi, Creative Commons License

Buddhism calls itself a "non-theistic" religion. The historical Buddha taught that believing in and worshipping gods was not useful for those seeking to realize enlightenment. Many Buddhists consider themselves to be atheists.

Yet Buddhist art and literature are richly stocked with godlike beings. This is especially true of Mahayana Buddhism. Mahayana temples are populated by statues and paintings of many characters and creatures, some beautiful, some demonic.

Enlightenment Beings

After buddhas, the most important beings in Mahayana iconography are bodhisattvas. The word *bodhisattva* means "enlightenment being." Very simply, bodhisattvas are beings who work for the enlightenment of all beings, not just themselves. They vow not to enter Nirvana until all beings enter Nirvana together.

The bodhisattva is the ideal of all Mahayana Buddhists. The bodhisattva's path is for all of us, not just the beings in the statues and pictures. Mahayana Buddhists take Bodhisattva Vows to save all beings. These are the Four Vows of the Zen school:

Beings are numberless;
I vow to free them.
Delusions are inexhaustible;
I vow to end them.
Dharma gates are boundless;
I vow to enter them.
The Awakened Way is unsurpassable;
I vow to embody it.

Transcendent Bodhisattvas

The bodhisattvas found in art and literature are sometimes called transcendent bodhisattvas. They are beings who have realized enlightenment but who remain active in the world, appearing in many forms to help others and lead them to enlightenment. They are venerated and called upon for help in time of need.

Doesn't that make them something like gods? Maybe. Maybe not. It depends.

The bodhisattvas of literature and art can be thought of as allegorical representations of the activity of enlightenment in the world. In Buddhist tantra practice, the bodhisattvas are archetypes of perfect practice to be emulated and, eventually, to *become*. For example, one might meditate on the image of the Bodhisattva of Compassion in order to become a vehicle for compassion in the world.

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Understanding Will Vary

It's true that transcendent bodhisattvas are sometimes spoken of and thought of as distinctive supernatural beings. There are Buddhists who worship and pray to buddhas and bodhisattvas as one would to gods.

In Buddhism, all beliefs and conceptualizations are provisional. That is, they are understood to be flawed and imperfect. People understand the dharma as best they can, and as understanding grows, conceptualizations are discarded.

We're all works in progress. Some Buddhists go through a process of believing in buddhas and bodhisattvas as something like gods, and some do not.

<http://buddhism.about.com/od/thetriyaka/a/whatsabodhisatt.htm>