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Korea

Gilt Wood Seated Bodhisattva

Choson dynasty (1392–1910), seventeenth century

Wood with gilt and polychrome; two sets original sutra pages

Sculpture: 25½ × 17¼ × 13½ in. (64.8 × 43.8 × 34.3 cm)

Museum purchase, gift of Michael and Donna Singer

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Buddhism traces its earliest roots to the Nepalese foothills and the founding figure known as Siddhartha (ca. 566–ca. 468 bce). Born into a warrior caste with the family name Shakya, Siddhartha was raised as a prince and enjoyed a full and regal life. However, by the age of twenty-nine he came to disavow his princely airs and left his worldly compound to live a simple life denying all that was stately. Years later he sat beneath what would become known as the Bodhi tree (*Ficus religiosa*) in meditation for forty-nine days that culminated in his realization of enlightenment. He went on to give sermons to fellow seekers of truth and meaning for humanity. The transformation following his enlightenment and sermons led to his being known as Shakyamuni, the sage of the Shakya, and later as the historical Buddha, the Enlightened One.

Siddhartha's small group of followers gathered more and more adherents. Eventually, over the course of a few hundred years, Buddhist communities developed in various places. It was only after the groups caught the attention of political leaders in neighboring regions that Buddhists acquired the necessary capital to expand their proselytizing efforts along what we today term the Silk Road. Buddhist missionaries carried texts and portable religious artifacts with them during travels to central Asia, east Asia, and Southeast Asia. They were skilled in adapting their messages to fit local traditions and religious sensibilities, especially through works of art created for veneration and temple construction.

After reaching China during the first centuries of the Common Era, missionaries established themselves in Korea by the mid- to late fourth century. As had been the case in central Asia and China, the Buddhism that developed in Korea took on its own characteristics while incorporating traditions dating back to Shakyamuni and the first forms of Buddhist artist heritage, such as long robes and specific mudra, or hand gestures.

Sutra Pages removed from sculpture's interior
Black Pages: 11 ⅝ × 7 ⅞ in. (29.5 × 18.7 cm)
Red Pages: 16 ¾ × 12 ½ in. (42.5 × 30.8 cm)

The Gilt Wood Seated Bodhisattva is an exceptional example of a wooden sculpture with gilt lacquer and polychrome from the seventeenth century. A bodhisattva is a merciful Buddhist saint and savior, a Buddhato-be. A bodhisattva refrains from entering



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enlightenment out of compassion for all others striving to reach this goal. The Harn Museum's bodhisattva was formerly in the collection of John D. Rockefeller Jr. (1874–1960) and ranks among the best extant seventeenth-century examples of wooden Buddhist sculpture from Korea.

The serene visage and gently carved proportions of the seated figure with raised mudra combine to generate an intangible resonance. The calm stillness of the posture is reinforced by a slight archaic smile below knowing eyes. Carved from a single tree trunk, the bodhisattva has a removable hair knot and hands. The face was attached separately with lacquer, while iron nails secure the elongated ears. The head was carved with the face to be added slightly later so that consecrated pages of sutra, sacred text, could be placed within his head; his base was also hollowed out for more sutra pages. The paper sutra pages are in two sets, one woodblockprinted in red and the other in black ink. The texts recorded are from the Lotus Sutra, one of the most sacred tracts in Buddhism.

