

OBJECT of the **month**

October 2020

BEGIN TRANSCRIPT

Hello, my name is Norma Landis—a Museum Guide at the Dayton Art Institute. In this presentation, I'll introduce you to a Japanese wooden sculpture, *Kannon Bosatsu*, created in the Muromachi period during the 15th-16th centuries.

I believe a brief history of Buddhism in Japan may help us better understand this statue.

Buddhism, a religion of 300 million followers worldwide, was founded in an area around northern India and Nepal, by Prince Siddhartha in the 5th century BCE. He was raised as a prince in an opulent palace built by his father to protect him from the miseries and sufferings of the world. In his 20's, he ventured outside the palace wall and was confronted with the realities of human frailty. The prince gave up his life of luxury in his late 20's, seeking to overcome the suffering around him, to meditate on the cycle of life and rebirth to which all living beings are subject.

At age 30, while in deep meditation, he discovered a path to wisdom that could free a person from this cycle. The prince became a Buddha by achieving pure awakening or enlightenment. Buddha's teachings and moral code were taught by his followers throughout India, then along the trade routes through southeast Asia, being introduced to Japan by Buddhist monks in the 6th century. Adapting to different cultures and languages, the appearance of Buddha, bodhisattvas and other figures changed during this process.

This *Kannon Bosatsu* represents an Avalokiteśvara, a bodhisattva, a spiritually advanced being of compassion that has postponed becoming a buddha in order to save others by staying on earth to help them achieve enlightenment. Avalokiteśvara is originally from India and called a "bosatsu" in Japan.

Let us look more closely at the symbolic, significant details of this sculpture. The jewel in the center of the forehead indicates the great wisdom of Buddha. What do notice about the hairstyle? It is raised in a



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sophisticated style with an ornate headdress. This tells us about the figure's continued presence in the earthly world to help others to achieve enlightenment.

Next, the elongated earlobes indicate an advanced spiritual state and wisdom, perhaps recalling the heavy earrings that historical Buddha might have worn in his first life as a prince. How do you describe the facial expression? Nearly closed eyes with a slight smile reminds us of compassion and inner peace indicative of meditation. The bosatsu wears a bronze necklace with bead drops and fine robes. Once again, we are reminded of their earthly presence, in opposition to the simple monk-style robes worn by the Buddha.

Notice the hands. The right hand forms a gesture known as a mudra and is one of understanding of Buddha's teachings. The left hand holds a lotus flower which is a symbol of purity as the lotus flower rises from the mud of a pond to the surface to form a beautiful flower. The bosatsu is seated in a lotus or meditative pose with the soles of the feet pointing up.

This artwork is a part of [“What is a Masterpiece?”](#) available on the DAI website. On your next visit to the Dayton Art Institute, please visit our Asian galleries and discover *Kannon Bosatsu* in gallery 107. Thank you for joining me today.

END TRANSCRIPT

Click [here](#) for full multimedia presentation.

RESOURCES

www.daytonartinstitute.org

www.metmuseum.org

www.bl.uk

www.si.edu

www.asianart.org

IMAGE CREDITS

British Library, London: www.bl.uk

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: www.metmuseum.org

Indian Museum, Kolkata: www.indianmuseumkolkata.org

The British Museum, London: www.britishmuseum.org

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: www.metmuseum.org

Anandajoti Bhikkhu, Indonesia: www.photodharma.net

Harvard Art Museums / Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Cambridge: www.harvardartmuseums.org

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