

Asian Art Museum

Masterpieces | Audio

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The Buddha triumphing over Mara, 900-1000

NARRATOR: The Buddha triumphing over Mara, created about 900 to 1000. Our audio begins with an overview, followed by an audio description.

This 10th Century stone sculpture features an image of the Buddha rendered in exquisite detail. The array of heart-shaped leaves and branches at the top of the object represent the Bodhi Tree, under which the Buddha-to-be sits in meditation on the threshold of enlightenment.

The sculptor imbued this Buddha image with both humanity—using details like the softly rounded belly—and spirituality. There are many signs pointing to the Buddha-to-be's special qualities. Curator Forrest McGill.

FORREST MCGILL:

He has a lump on the top of his head and that symbolizes his extra insight. And then on the palms of his hands and the soles of his feet, he has special symbols, and both are marks of a special kind of a being who's more advanced, more powerful, than a regular human being.

He's actually sitting on a throne here, there's a cross bar and uprights that make up the throne with a pair of mythical creatures on each side. And then what he's touching with his right hand is the base of the throne, but we understand that symbolically to be touching the Earth.

Below him there's a lion and the lion is facing us head on, and has this very powerful upper body, and the Buddha image too has this very powerful upper body, a lion-like torso, showing his spiritual power and accomplishment.

NARRATOR:

The face relays a combination of emotions, from serenity to strength and perhaps sadness, reflecting the Buddha-to-be's realization that life is full of suffering.

In the large halo above and behind the figure's head a statement appears in Sanskrit. It reads: *"The Buddha has explained the cause of all things that arise from a cause. He, the great monk, has also explained their cessation."*

FORREST MCGILL:

It gives this fundamental statement of Buddhism and infuses the actual Buddha image with the message of the Buddha.

NARRATOR:

The Buddha is said to have achieved enlightenment in Bodh Gaya, in northeastern India, where this sculpture was made.

Continue listening to hear an audio description of this artwork.

The sculpture stands approximately three feet high and nineteen inches wide. It was carved from a single slab of charcoal-grey stone. The museum's designers have placed it in a golden alcove, reminiscent of a temple niche. The Buddha sits with legs folded and feet placed on opposite thighs, known as the lotus position. He wears barely-noticeable monk's robes, which are smooth and sheer. One robe covers his upper body, but leaves his right shoulder bare. The end of this robe has been pleated and hangs over his left shoulder, reaching halfway down his

chest. The robes are only detectable as raised lines in other places, like the left wrist and near the ankles.

The Buddha holds his left hand in his lap, with his palm facing the sky. His right hand reaches downward, symbolizing the moment of his enlightenment. A circular symbol representing the “wheel of the Buddha’s doctrine” has been carved into his open palm and both of his upturned feet, further indicating the Buddha’s superhuman qualities. He has a smooth, V-shaped torso, with broad shoulders and a slightly rounded belly. The smoothness stands in contrast to the throne he sits on, its uppermost part a horizontal bar with geometric patterns. Below this bar, on either side, are lion-like mythical creatures in profile, rearing-up on their hind legs with open jaws.

The Buddha has an oval-shaped face with elongated earlobes that extend down to his shoulders. His eyes are downcast in meditation. A small, incised circle, an auspicious mark, is at the center of his forehead. The bridge of his nose is long and narrow, culminating in broad nostrils. His lips are bow-shaped and slightly upturned.

Tightly coiled curls dot his head, including a lump at the top. A twisted garland of beads forms a circular halo behind and above his head; Sanskrit text is in the inside edge. Hanging down from above the halo are branches with heart-shaped leaves, representing the Bodhi Tree.

There are four supports beneath the Buddha and throne. Between the left-most supports, a tiny figure sits with hands in prayer position, who may represent the donor of the sculpture. Between the other supports, two alert lions gaze straight ahead, underscoring the Buddha’s resolution to attain enlightenment, called the “lion’s roar.”

The Hindu deity Shiva, approx. 1300-1500

NARRATOR: The Hindu deity Shiva, created about 1300 to 1500. Our audio begins with an overview of the artwork, followed by an audio description.

NARRATOR:

Shiva is one of the three most important Hindu deities. We can identify him here by his adornments: the dreadlocks bound together; the tiny crescent moon on the left side of his headdress; and the river goddess, Ganga, high up in his dreadlocks to the right.

On this device, as well as on the tablet nearby, you can see enlarged images of the crescent moon and the river goddess.

Around the perimeter of the gallery you'll notice stone sculptures of several Hindu deities, including Shiva. These heavy pieces would have been permanently displayed in a place of worship.

FORREST MCGILL:

And that's part of their symbolism, that they are eternal and unmoving inside the shrine of the temple.

NARRATOR:

But the sculpture before you had a different purpose. Senior Curator Forrest McGill.

FORREST MCGILL:

Bronze images like the one of Shiva that you're looking at now were made to be carried in procession. You can't really see it, but underneath the lotus, there's a bronze extension that has holes in it that would have allowed it to be attached to a ceremonial chariot that would be either pulled or carried through the streets in procession. This is the mobile form of the deity that comes out into our world and can communicate with us, and we can see the deity and feel close to it.

NARRATOR:

Shiva would be elaborately decorated in silk textiles, gold jewelry and flowers for such events. The video playing nearby will give you a better sense of what these decorations and a traditional procession look like.

Continue listening to hear an audio description of this artwork.

This bronze sculpture of the Hindu deity Shiva stands in bold greeting near the entrance of the gallery. The sculpture is approximately three feet tall with a greenish-grey patina, which is the result of hundreds of years of exposure to the air and other elements. It was made in southern India, about six to seven-hundred years ago.

The sculptor, following the trend of the time, has exaggerated the broadness of Shiva's shoulders and the narrowness of the waist. Shiva stands on a lotus flower as if arrested in the swaying motion of his gait. His weight is on his right leg, with his right hip curving out. His left foot is also planted on the lotus flower, knee slightly bent.

Shiva's arms extend out from his body in an L-shape, elbows bent. His thumbs and middle fingers nearly touch on both hands.

A low crown encircles Shiva's head. His dreadlocked hair rises above it, piled high in a conical arrangement. Nestled in the top left of the mound of hair is a tiny crescent moon, a reminder of Shiva's power over the universe and time. A minute, indistinctly cast image of Ganga, the goddess of the great River Ganges, blends in with Shiva's flowing locks on the opposite side.

Shiva has an oval-shaped face. All of his facial features are slightly exaggerated into elegant shapes. His earlobes are elongated and hang a few inches above his shoulders. They are punctured with large, oblong holes, signifying that he once wore heavy earrings. His almond-shaped eyes gaze straight ahead. His nose is long and narrow. He has bow-shaped lips, which are slightly parted and upturned. Shiva wears a sheer, almost invisible, loin cloth that extends to several inches above his knees; its lower hem is marked by an undulating raised line. A thin sacred thread snakes across his bare chest from his upper left shoulder to a wide, elaborately decorated belt enriched with geometric patterns.

He wears jeweled bracelets on his upper arms and wrists, and a necklace with square and circular jewels. Additional chains of jewelry adorn his right calf and the tops of his feet.

In the nearby video, similar bronze and stone sculptures are shown in rituals of being dressed and bathed. Shiva's counterpart in the video is barely visible under layers of richly appointed garments, jewels and flowers, while being carried through the streets in a towering processional cart.

Cup with calligraphic inscriptions, 1440-1460

NARRATOR: Cup with calligraphic inscriptions, created about 1440 to 1460. Our audio begins with an overview, followed by an audio description.

A calligraphic inscription surrounds the body of this jade cup, dating to the 15th century Timurid Dynasty.

Associate Curator Qamar Adamjee reads a translation of this Arabic script:

QAMAR ADAMJEE:

The sultan son of the sultan, Ala ud-Daulah Bahadur Khan, may God perpetuate his kingdom, ordered the completion of this container.

NARRATOR:

The Timurid family of rulers controlled an extensive region across Central Asia. Founded by Amir Timur, the Timurids were known for their political power, but also for being refined patrons of the arts. That legacy continued after their rule ended and was still felt from Turkey to India.

It was in India, 175 years later, that a second inscription was added in Persian around the cup's rim by a descendent of the Timurids, the Mughal emperor Jahangir, which has been translated as follows:

QAMAR ADAMJEE:

This life-prolonging jade container belongs to Jahangir Shah, son of Akbar Shah. For as long as the angels' celestial sphere revolves, may the world remember Jahangir Shah.

NARRATOR:

Jade, a very hard and brittle stone, is not carved. Instead, it is ground down using a rotary tool and wet abrasive paste.

This second inscription is delicate, minute, and difficult to see with the naked eye. It would have been a challenging to create.

Why risk damaging an existing artwork made from a rare material like white jade?

QAMAR ADAMJEE:

The Mughals, at many periods of their history, kept looking back to their Timurid ancestry. And one way of doing that, especially for Emperor Jahangir, was by collecting artworks and objects that once belonged to a member of the Timurid family. It becomes a historical document of sorts.

Continue listening to hear an audio description of this artwork.

This tiny round cup is only slightly larger than a thimble. It measures just over an inch in both height and width. The cup is a translucent white jade, with an off-white, pearly sheen. Dramatic lighting makes it appear as if it's glowing.

The cup's surface is covered with intricate designs and calligraphy, all ground into the jade with manual rotary tools and abrasives. Elegant Arabic calligraphy with long, looping strokes wraps around its midsection. It is hard to imagine how such flowing lines could be painstakingly abraded into the extremely hard jade. Above and below the calligraphy, horizontal bands contain scrolling, leafy vines.

At the very top rim of the cup, there is another inscription in calligraphy. It is written in Persian and is so small that it is very challenging to read.

Tap “More” to hear a reading of the inscriptions in Arabic and Persian.

The Hindu deity Vishnu, 940-965

NARRATOR: The Hindu deity Vishnu, created about 940 to 965. Our audio begins with an overview, followed by an audio description.

This is Vishnu, one of the three supreme Hindu deities. He is identified here by the crown and four arms. He holds a round shape in his right hand representing the earth. The handle remains of what was once a club in his left, symbolizing might in battle. A video on the nearby monitor and on this device depicts a full reconstruction of the figure.

Vishnu, the preserver, protects humans and restores order to the world. Senior Curator Forrest McGill.

FORREST MCGILL:

He's also associated with kingship, because kings have the same role, at least theoretically, of establishing and maintaining order so that the rest of the world can proceed in an orderly, prosperous, healthy way.

This sculpture would have been in the center of a royally-sponsored temple. He's got his shoulders back, his forearms arrayed in this very symmetrical way. His face is very stern-looking. Notice his very straight, horizontal brow ridge. Everything about this sculpture reinforces the idea of stability, order, reliability, permanence.

NARRATOR:

Walk around this sculpture and look at the back of the elaborate crown. It copies a real ancient crown, which would have been assembled of components made of sheet gold. Around the tiered headdress there would have been a sort of tiara, which was tied at the back. By looking at how crowns are designed and decorated, scholars are able to determine the relative age of sculptures from the Cambodian kingdom of Angkor.

Continue listening to hear an audio description of this artwork.

The grey sandstone statue depicts the imposing upper body of the Hindu deity Vishnu. It originates from Cambodia. Vishnu has four arms—one set in front of the other—broad shoulders, and a narrow waist.

He holds a small spherical object about the size of a small plum in his front right hand. It represents the earth. His left hand rests on top of a carved club. Only the handle of the club remains, the rest has broken away. The left side of the body has broken away from about the waist down. Many ancient statues were broken in the centuries after their creation. In this instance, we don't know when or how this sculpture was broken.

Vishnu's two rear arms reach toward the sky. In his hands, now broken away, he would have held a war discus, associated with the sun, and a conch shell, associated with the world's waters. These attributes emphasized how Vishnu encompasses fundamental natural forces.

He is bare-chested and wears a lower garment with pleats, depicted by intricately carved, thin vertical lines. The garment is secured by a wide belt and reaches almost to where his knees would have been.

Vishnu has a squarish face. His eyebrows form a straight, horizontal line across his brow. He gazes ahead with almond-shaped eyes. His broad nostrils almost touch a pencil thin mustache above his plump lips, which are upturned in a gentle smile. Vishnu's long earlobes hang to below his jawline and are punctured with large, oblong holes. A closely trimmed beard traces his jawline and connects with his hairline near the tops of his ears.

He wears an ornate, two-piece headdress: A low crown encircles the head and is tied in the back. Above it rises another component in approximately the shape of a four-tiered cone. Both are covered with leafy scrolling designs and enriched with rows of little bumps representing jewels.

Crowned and bejeweled Buddha image and throne, approx. 1860-1880

NARRATOR: Crowned and bejeweled Buddha image and throne, created about 1860 to 1880. Our audio begins with an overview of the artwork, followed by an audio description.

This elaborate wood and gilded lacquer shrine is a masterpiece among the Asian Art Museum's collection. It is a throne, but not for an earthly king. Senior Curator Forrest McGill.

FORREST MCGILL:

It's a mountain symbolically. And it's the vertical axis that connects the underworld to the world we live on, to the heavens above.

NARRATOR:

Like the heavens, this throne shrine appears to float above the ground. This was achieved by setting the legs further back under the skirt of the structure. If you look closely at the carving on either side of the Buddha and throne, you'll discover at least four crowned celestial figures worshipping the Buddha, hidden among the intricate floral carvings.

The Buddha sits at the center on a throne reminiscent of Burmese royalty. He's adorned in a crown and royal jewelry... the Buddha in the form of a king. But why?

FORREST MCGILL:

At one point, when the Buddha was living on earth, a very arrogant earthly king came to him and was boasting and bragging about being the greatest king, the greatest power on earth. And so the Buddha did a magical manifestation of himself in a royal palace in a royal capital in the greatest grandeur and royal pomp and circumstance to awe this king. Then the Buddha favored the king with a sermon about uselessness of earthly riches and power, and the superiority of the Buddha's way of renunciation and spiritual quest.

NARRATOR:

The throne shrine, and the grouping of sacred objects around it, suggest what you would have seen walking into a Southeast Asian Buddhist temple 150 years ago. We invite you to spend some time with this rare masterpiece ... the only one of its kind in the United States.

Continue listening to hear an audio description of this artwork.

This enormous golden shrine holds a crowned Buddha sitting on a throne at its upper third. The shrine is over eleven feet tall, nearly seven feet wide, and about five and a half feet deep at the base. It was made in the late eighteenth hundreds in what was then Burma, now Myanmar. The shrine is created from gilded, red-lacquered wood that has been embedded with jewel-like mirrored glass in various hues, including emerald-green and ruby-red.

The entire shrine sits on a red lacquered base. The bottom resembles a golden tapestry. Small carved, U-shaped patterns and jeweled flowers in green and red hues adorn the billowing skirt, which appears to hover off the ground. The edges of the skirt undulate and point upwards. It's as if the shrine has been captured in mid-motion, elevated by a strong gust of wind.

Let's move to the very top of the shrine and work our way down. A miniature parasol, which is an ancient royal symbol, forms the highest point of the shrine. Under it, a dizzying lattice of gold, swirling leaves and flowers cascades toward the ground, framing the outside of the Buddha's throne. Embedded on either side towards the bottom are two small, celestial beings with conical crowns, kneeling with their hands together in a pose of worship. Teeth-baring dragons with

jeweled scales frame the bottom of the cascade. They appear as if they were caught in dynamic movement, with their tails higher than their heads.

In the upper half, above eye level, sits a golden, bejeweled Buddha. He is quite small compared to the rest of the shrine, only about twenty inches tall. He gazes downward. The bridge of his triangular-shaped nose almost touches the inner corners of his eyes. His bow-shaped lips are slightly upturned in a serene expression, and his elongated earlobes are adorned with circular, jeweled earrings with ornaments hanging from them. He wears a tall, conical, tiered crown that sparkles with glass jewels in emerald-green, ruby-red, sky-blue, and opalescent hues. The numerous tiers of the crown culminate in a pointed finial at the top. Jeweled wings frame the crown and extend down to his shoulders.

The Buddha holds his left hand in his lap, palm facing the sky. His right hand reaches downward, symbolizing the moment of his enlightenment. He sits in front of an orange-red lacquered backdrop, which contrasts with the sparkling jewels that he wears. Jewels also appear on his royal garment and on a large, diamond-shaped medallion at his sternum. His feet are placed on opposite thighs, known as the lotus position. He sits on a carved throne with jeweled flowers on its base.

Like royal thrones of Myanmar, the central part of the shrine base has multiple tiers that step inward then outward again, creating a silhouette similar to an hour glass. Underneath the Buddha's throne, the gold upper tiers, representing the heavens, are adorned with U-shaped patterns. They resemble upside-down rainbows in emerald-green, ruby-red, and opalescent glass jewels. Between the upper and lower tiers are two rows of a starburst-like pattern: A large opalescent jewel is at the center of each starburst, with other jewels encircling it. The bottom tiers refer to mountain ranges and resemble the patterns dotting the upper tiers, but in reverse.

The Buddhist deity Simhavaktra, a dakini, 1736-1795

NARRATOR: The Buddhist deity Simhavaktra, a dakini, created about 1736 to 1795. Our audio begins with an overview of the artwork, followed by an audio description.

JEFF DURHAM:

This is Simhavaktra Dakini. Simhavaktra means lion faced or lion headed, and a Dakini is a sky walker. She's an inhabitant of the realm of the sky in the mind.

NARRATOR:

Though this figure comes from 18th century China, it is rendered in Tibetan style, reflecting cross-cultural and religious influences. To fully appreciate the sculpture's stunning details, it helps to understand a bit about Tibetan Buddhism. Jeff Durham, Assistant Curator of Himalayan Art.

JEFF DURHAM:

In Tibetan Buddhism, there are two forces that lead towards enlightenment. And they must be in proper balance. One is wisdom or knowledge of reality, and the other is compassion. And one of the things that impresses me most about this object is that balance of compassion and ferocity is reflected in the posture that the dakini takes, balanced perfectly on her left leg while she raises her right arm towards her flaming hair.

It can look frightening, it can look ferocious, but we have to remember what that ferociousness is directed towards in the Tibetan tradition. And these are obstacles to enlightenment such as lust, anger, ignorance, this kind of thing.

NARRATOR:

Every aspect of the statue contains deep meaning. For example, the intricate garment that she wears.

JEFF DURHAM:

The garment is actually the flayed skin of a human being. This is a symbolic device that indicates the stripping away of the veil of illusion from perception.

NARRATOR:

In other words, she has transcended the limitations of the human condition. She also wears bracelets, armbands, anklets and a necklace representing the five different elements and the five Buddhas. Taken together, they symbolize both the cardinal directions of the cosmos - four directions plus central axis - and the components of ordinary human psychology: lust, hatred, delusion, pride, and jealousy.

JEFF DURHAM:

And if you'll look right on Simhavaktra's forehead, you'll see a wonderful, gleaming third eye that indicates that she's able to see past the illusion of lust, hatred and delusion.

NARRATOR: Continue listening to hear an audio description of this artwork.

Simhavaktra is made from dry lacquer and stands approximately four and a half feet tall. The overall color is a dark brick-red with swaths of gold, which remains after centuries of wear, especially around the face.

She balances on her left foot, which is slightly bent at the knee. Her right foot rests on her inner left thigh, evoking classical Indian dance. She holds her right arm up at a ninety-degree angle, elbow bent. Her thumb and middle fingers touch where she once held a flaying knife. In her left hand, which hovers in front of her chest, palm up, she once held a skull bowl, symbolizing transcendent wisdom.

Fire rises from Simhavaktra's head like a crown, with finely carved, undulating lines accentuating the flames. Simhavaktra has the face of a lion, with floppy ears and a short, muzzle-like nose. Her mouth is open, baring sharp, pointed teeth. The tip of her long tongue juts out, then points upwards. Her fierce, wide eyes squint with intensity below thick, curly eyebrows. Above her furrowed brow, an oblong third eye is inset into the middle of her forehead. A curly, beard-like mane frames her jowls, then juts out from her chin.

She wears a cloak of flayed human skin around her shoulders, which is a symbol of the stripping away of illusion. The cloak is tied at the neck, with a hand and a foot dangling from the tie over her bare chest. The other hand and foot dangle down her back. A flayed tiger skin, symbolizing victory over harmful emotions, is wrapped around her waist and tied below her belly. The tiger's face sits on her upper right thigh. Its tail snakes below her front left knee, a paw dangling behind it.

Simhavaktra is also draped in bead-like bone jewelry, including bracelets, armlets and anklets. The jewelry is inlaid with semiprecious stones, such as coral and turquoise. The bone beads form an X across her chest, meeting below her sternum at a circular adornment resembling an eight-petaled flower. The bones then hang down below her belly button in three swinging strands with inlaid turquoise at their ends. Additional strands hang on either side of her waist. Her bone jewelry symbolizes that she has passed beyond the cycles of birth and death.

Ritual vessel in the shape of a rhinoceros, approx. 1100-1050 BCE

NARRATOR: Ritual vessel in the shape of a rhinoceros, created about 1100 to 1050 BCE. Our audio begins with an overview of the artwork, followed by an audio description.

Jay Xu, Director of the Asian Art Museum.

JAY XU:

We are looking at an ancient Chinese bronze vessel dating from around, early 11th Century BCE, and it is extraordinary. No other museum or private collections that I know of has such a wonderful work of art in the shape of a rhino.

NARRATOR:

This ritual vessel may have held a fermented beverage and the oval opening may have been covered with a now missing lid that would conform to the contours of the animal.

Very few Chinese vessels made during the Bronze Age were in the form of animals, and those that were, featured surface decorations of linear patterns and other animals, like tigers or dragons. This one is rare for its undecorated surface. Please look at the sculpture as Jay Xu describes some details of this figure.

JAY XU:

This rhino is the only one depicted entirely in its own natural state. One may even notice the folds of the very thick skin, and it gives you a sense of what the real rhino's hide looks like. The rhino's snout looks very powerful. It has two horns. The ears stand up and expand outwards, indicating a state of alertness. Each foot has three toes. And the belly of the rhino droops down to give you a sense of the weight of the real rhino.

Another important piece of information about the rhino is the inscription in the bottom.

Cast at the same time as the rhino itself, it records a Lesser Minister by the name of Yu, who received a royal gift in the form of cowry shells.

NARRATOR:

The inscription notes that this honor took place during the fifteenth year of the king, the same year that he embarked on a campaign against one of his enemies, named Renfang.

JAY XU:

Because of this information, the scholar could date the vessel to the last king of the Shang dynasty. The next vessel, which happens to be in the shape of a rhino, was made in China one thousand years later.

NARRATOR:

In other words, this ritual vessel is one of a kind.

Continue listening to hear an audio description of this artwork.

NARRATOR:

This rare rhinoceros-shaped bronze vessel has a large, round opening across the animal's back that opens to a hollow, which is not visible unless one views the vessel from overhead. Inside are four rows of incised ancient Chinese characters. Even though the vessel measures only about nine inches tall and about fourteen inches long, the rhino is quite sturdy. It stands alert on four stocky legs. Its body is plump, with a round, drooping belly. Vertical folds appear from the top of the shoulders to the rhino's upper thighs. Upside-down U-shapes articulate the three toes on each foot.

The rhino looks straight ahead with wide, round eyes, its pupil a small circle within the larger iris. Its flat, circular ears stick out sideways. The rhino has two horns, one between its eyes, and the other at the end of his snout. If you walk all the way around it you will also find a thin, short tail on its backside.

The vessel's surface has a greyish-green patina. It is pitted and pocked with variations of greens, tans, and copper hues due to thousands of years of being buried underground.

Buddha dated 338

NARRATOR: Buddha dated 338. Our audio begins with an overview, followed by an audio description.

Senior Associate Curator of Chinese Art, Fan Jeremy Zhang.

FAN ZHANG:

This gilded bronze Buddha is my favorite piece at the museum.

NARRATOR:

It is the earliest known dated Buddha object produced in China. The inscription mentions the date 338, a time when rulers from Central Asia used Buddhism, transmitted from the Indian subcontinent, to consolidate their rule in China.

FAN ZHANG:

The early date of 338 inscribed on the back of this piece marks a crucial moment when India-imported Buddhism became a state-sponsored widespread religion, after being a minority practice for nearly 400 years in China.

NARRATOR:

With legs crossed beneath a draping robe, this depiction of the Buddha Shakyamuni in meditation resembles Buddhist objects from the ancient region of Gandhara, which included parts of present-day India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. These images made their way to China via the Silk Road.

You can view a Buddhist sculpture from Gandhara on your screen now.

Yet this Buddha dated 338 also demonstrates adaptations made by artists of the time to attract local believers. For instance, the facial features are stylistically different than that of Gandharan sculptures; and the overlapping, inward-facing palms reflect a Chinese Daoist gesture of reverence. Fan Jeremy Zhang.

FAN ZHANG:

The stylistic adaptations seen on this statue also make it an important historical milestone in the development of Chinese Buddhist art. And with a very crucial date. This helps us to understand by that time, the Chinese already started to make innovations in Buddhist art.

NARRATOR:

Among the largest found of its kind, this sculpture would have been placed on an altar for personal devotion.

Continue listening to hear an audio description of this artwork.

This gilded bronze statue of the Buddha measures approximately sixteen inches tall and nine and a half inches wide. Its gold surface shines softly.

The Buddha sits on a rectangular pedestal with legs crossed under an evenly draped, flowing robe, articulated by rows of enlarging U-shapes that drape from the cowl neckline to the pedestal. He folds his hands in front of his waist, right hand over left, with palms facing inward toward his body. The creases in his knuckles and fingernails are indicated by incised lines. His robe gently hangs from his wrists to the tops of his thighs.

His eyes are the shape of willow leaves, extending from the bridge of his nose to the far edges of his face. They are half-mast in an introspective gaze. His slender lips are upturned in a gentle smile. He wears his hair in a topknot. Each strand is articulated by parallel grooves of thin lines.

When viewed from above, a square hole is visible in the topknot, which may have held a parasol. There is a square protrusion at the back of the head that may have supported a halo.

The facade of the bronze pedestal under the Buddha is punctured by three round holes, each about the size of a dime, which may have held metal decorations, such as a pair of guardian lions or a lotus flower. At the back, most of the pedestal has broken away. One fragment remains that contains an incised inscription in ancient Chinese, which indicates the year it was made, making it the earliest known dated Buddha figure from China.

The Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (Guanyin), 1100-1200

NARRATOR: The Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (Guanyin in Chinese), created about 1100 to 1200. Our audio begins with an overview, followed by an audio description.

Fan Jeremy Zhang, Senior Associate Curator of Chinese Art.

FAN ZHANG:

This 12th century Chinese sculpture portrays Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion.

NARRATOR:

A bodhisattva is a spiritual being who vows to delay Buddhahood in favor of easing suffering for people on Earth.

This Water-Moon Avalokiteshvara, or *Shuiyue Guanyin* in Chinese, is dressed as an Indian prince in a long, fluidly carved garment. His chest is crisscrossed with sashes, scarves, and delicately rendered jewels. His right hand rests on a bent knee and the left extends in a gift-granting gesture as he gazes downwards. He sits in contemplation of the moon reflected in the water, which illustrates the illusory and temporal nature of all phenomena in the human world—a subject upon which Buddhist believers meditate.

This impressive wooden sculpture of the compassionate bodhisattva would have originally been placed high in a temple, where worshipers could see him gazing down at them from above.

FAN ZHANG:

It is very important to have some kind of a gaze exchange with the bodhisattva. So, if you can look at the statue at the front in a lower position, you are going to feel this kind of calmness, confidence, benevolence, and also get some kind of religious impression to believe the almighty of this Buddhist deity, which was believed to be more approachable than the Buddha. That's why there were so many believers who came to this //deity and ask for help and blessings.

NARRATOR:

Beginning in the middle Tang dynasty, spanning the years 618 to 907, portrayals of Guanyin—from physical attributes to clothing—suggest compassionate qualities that, in some interpretations of Chinese thought, were considered feminine. This artistic treatment may have led to prevalent worship among female devotees who sought Guanyin's blessings in their efforts to become mothers, as well as for safety and prosperity for themselves and their children.

Continue listening to hear an audio description of this artwork.

This large wooden sculpture of the seated Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara is about four feet tall and five feet wide. It was carved in China sometime in the twelfth Century. The overall color is a warm brown that is mottled from the weathering of colored pigments on the wood.

The Bodhisattva sits in an imposing yet relaxed manner, leaning to his left. His left leg is folded in front of him. The knee, flat on the floor, is bent in a half-lotus position; part of his broken-off foot is aligned with his right hip. His left arm is bent and his left hand hovers above his left knee, with its palm turned towards his body. His right knee is bent at an acute angle, forming a triangle. His right foot was once flat on the floor, but it has broken off. He rests his right arm across the top of his right knee, palm facing the floor.

He gazes downward in contemplation. He has wide, rounded cheeks and gently pursed, bow-shaped lips. Elongated earlobes hang to his jawline, punctured by large earrings that are shaped like flowers. His hair, articulated by incised lines, is tied into a topknot that hangs loose above his head. Two stylized tresses are tucked behind his ears and fall over his shoulders in a knot. He wears a low crown with a carved jeweled medallion at its center.

The Bodhisattva has a broad chest and shoulders. A stylized necklace hangs to the middle of the bare chest. Scarves are draped over the shoulders, flowing around both forearms. A sash drapes from the left shoulder to the right hip with a knot at the center of the chest. A skirt is tied with a sash at the waist, then drapes down to the ankles. The garments are fluid and carved in high relief.

Upon close inspection, gilding is visible on the upper left eyelid and eyebrow. Faint patina-green, brick-red, and white pigments can also be detected throughout the sculpture—particularly on the garments—which are remnants of its once brilliant coloration.

Lidded jar with design of a lotus pond, 1368-1644

NARRATOR: Lidded jar with design of a lotus pond, created about 1368 to 1644. Our audio begins with an overview of the artwork, followed by an audio description.

On this large lidded jar, vibrant gold carp swim among a variety of aquatic plants, including lotus, caltrop, hornwort, and duckweed.

The brilliant coloration of this piece bucked the trend of subdued décor at the time. In fact, scholars and collectors shunned the ware when it was first made. This vibrant style only became popular through imperial support during subsequent eras.

This bold jar was probably commissioned by Emperor Jiajing's court in the first half of the 16th century for his palace in Beijing. It was made in an imperial workshop in Jingdezhen, the capital of Chinese ceramics production in southeast China.

Li He, Associate Curator of Chinese Art.

LI HE:

This is one of the most important porcelain pieces of the Ming dynasty.

A great innovation by the Ming Imperial Workshop was to decorate porcelain with polychrome multicolor enamels, known as '*wuca*' in Chinese.

NARRATOR:

The multicolor decoration on this jar required multiple firings. First, cobalt-infused color pigments were painted directly on the clay body. The entire surface was then coated with clear glaze and fired. Additional colors were added over the glazed surface, before the piece was fired again. This process was extremely time-consuming and costly.

The size of this jar is also noteworthy. It would have been impossible to make this from a single piece. The seam between the upper and lower sections of the body indicates where the two halves were joined together.

During the mid-to-late Ming dynasty, the court ordered the Imperial Workshop to produce similar large jars that could be placed in royal palaces and resorts. Only perfect pieces that passed inspections were sent to the court—the number of jars that failed due to flaws was exceptionally high.

LI HE:

The huge pot required a superb quality of clay, while potting and shaping and high control of firing; otherwise pieces would be cracking out of shape or broken during the firing process. Even for a modern factory, this is a challenge.

NARRATOR: Continue listening to hear an audio description of this artwork.

This vibrant, glazed porcelain jar was made in China sometime in the first half of the sixteenth century. The jar has a rounded body and a raised, flat lid. It stands almost twenty inches tall and sixteen inches in diameter.

Throughout the jar, a multi-colored underwater scene unfolds on a white background. Brilliant orange fish of various sizes twist and curl, diving between undulating aquatic plants. Some swim up, while others swim down and horizontally. Some fish are almost half the diameter of the jar, while others are about a third the size. The scales, fins, and round eyes of the fish are outlined in an orange-red and black. The petals and leaves of the plants are also outlined with a thin brush.

The plants are captured in shades of various colors such as powder-green, cobalt-blue, orange-red, and golden yellow. Some plants are feathery, some are spiky, and some resemble tiny flowers, floating throughout the scene. At the bottom of the jar, red and yellow lotus flowers poke-up above their clam-shaped green leaves between long stalks of grass.

Golden yellow beaded strings strung with auspicious treasures such as horns, three cobalt-blue flaming pearls, and scrolls circle the top of the lid. It is capped by a whimsical knob that's been painted with bold bands of color. The knob is in the shape of a lotus flower bud, poised to bloom over the whimsical scene.

Ewer with lotus-shaped lid, 1050-1150

NARRATOR: Ewer with lotus-shaped lid, created about 1050 to 1150. Our audio begins with an overview, followed by an audio description.

Celadons, as a medium, reached their pinnacle during the Goryeo Dynasty, which lasted from 918 to 1392. The term 'celadon' refers to the color of the glaze, a range of hues combining very subtle greens, grays, and blues.

The exquisite workmanship here suggests the ewer was made for a royal family or a very important Buddhist temple. Designed to hold liquid, this ewer could have been used for a tea ceremony or in a religious ritual. Look closely at how beautifully balanced it is. Hyonjeong Kim Han, Associate Curator of Korean Art.

HYONJEONG KIM HAN:

The body, with its sharply-angled shoulder, the handle with its crisp lines, and the slender mouth . . . They are all not decorated, and all very simple, but in contrast, the double lotus leaves decorating the top of the lid are soft and voluminous. I can see and feel the harmony between sharpness and softness; the harmony between yin and yang . . . the two basic energies and forces in the world.

NARRATOR:

The pieces produced during this period are revered as the finest and most elegant pottery ever made.

HYONJEONG KIM HAN:

An eminent poet of the Goryeo dynasty, Yi Gyubo, when praising the celadon wares of his time, described the lustrous hue of the celadon as being the color of 'pure jade.' In another poem, he describes the celadon as being the color of "clear water." Chinese connoisseurs of the time also highly valued Goryeo celadons, especially because of its color. One Chinese connoisseur, Taiping Laoren, in the 13th century, even said. 'Although potters of other areas imitate Goryeo celadons, none can achieve the same qualities.' And he described Goryeo celadon the best under heaven.

NARRATOR: Continue listening to hear an audio description of this artwork.

This exceptional ewer, or pitcher, stands about ten inches tall and six and a half inches at its widest point, if you include its looping handle. It was made in Korea between the mid-eleventh and early twelfth centuries. It represents the height of Goryeo-dynasty celadon production. The purest clay, perfect firing environment, and thin, transparent application of glaze covering the entire ewer give it a lustrous, smooth surface and an even, subtle, greyish, blue-green hue. On careful inspection, fine cracks on the glazed surface are visible; these are the result of the firing process and are typical, even desirable.

The ewer has a clean-lined silhouette. The cylindrical body is about five inches wide and sits on a slim foot ring, then juts up about four and a half inches to a sharp-angled flat shoulder around a narrower, cylindrical neck, which is about two inches in width and two and a half inches in height. A gently curved spout juts out from the edge of the shoulder to near the top of the neck. Flowing out from the opposite side of the neck is a flat, looping handle, which is about an eighth

of an inch wide. The uppermost part of the handle is aligned with the top of the spout. The ribbon-like handle attaches to the edge of the shoulder, then runs down the body, culminating in a spade-like point towards the bottom. The handle is accented with a crisp outline.

The bottom of the lid overlaps the neck, extending mid-way down, then blooms into a lotus flower cap. It features two rows of dense, identical petals surrounding a protruding point. Each petal, at the outermost point of its tip, curves towards the sky.

Moon jar, 1650-1750

NARRATOR: Moon jar, created about 1650 to 1750. Our audio begins with an overview of the artwork, followed by an audio description.

Hyonjeong Kim Han.

HYONJEONG KIM HAN:

Moon jars share the same round shape and white color, but each jar has its own distinctive characteristics. They were produced from the late 17th century until the early 19th century in Korea.

NARRATOR:

Known in Korean as *dal hang-ari*, these roughly spherical porcelain jars were revered for their white color and simplicity, suggesting Confucian virtues of purity, honesty and modesty. Moon jars do not have surface decorations, though there are color variations. Some have bluish-white surfaces, while others are translucent white.

Though their specific function during the Joseon Dynasty has not clearly been identified, they may have been used to store grain, such as rice, or liquid, including soy sauce or alcohol. Some could have been used as flower vases and others as objects purely for aesthetic appreciation.

Due to their size, moon jars could not be made in one piece on a potter's wheel. The clay, unable to sustain the height and width of the jar, would have collapsed. The upper and lower halves would have been created separately, then joined together in the middle. As a result, none are perfect spheres, and no two are exactly alike.

HYONJEONG KIM HAN:

They are so natural, sometimes look defected. But somehow, the potters during the Joseon dynasty, transcended or freed themselves in producing ceramics. Contemporary artists are fascinated by these freedoms, naturalism and transcended stage in art-making. When the artworks of the past talk to today's people, it's always interesting and meaningful.

NARRATOR: Continue listening to hear an audio description of this artwork.

A large, white voluminous sphere, dramatically lit from above, gleams and casts a shadow inside a recessed wall case in the shape of a half-moon. The sphere sits slightly right of center, towards the bottom of the case, below eye level, on a raw, blond wood shelf. The graininess of the wood contrasts with the sphere and the matte, off-white and tan mulberry paper pasted behind and below it, respectively.

From a distance, the overall effect resembles a moonrise. The "moon" in this case is a globe-like porcelain jar that tapers at the top and bottom. It measures eighteen inches tall. At its widest point, the midsection, it is eighteen inch wide. Although the jar may look quite contemporary in this context, it was made between the late seventeenth to the early eighteenth centuries in Korea.

Moon jars were—and are—praised for their naturalism and spontaneity. The surface of this jar has a subtle white sheen, with a delicate hint of blue. Upon close inspection, tiny brown flecks are scattered throughout the glaze. The jar is slightly asymmetrical: At its midsection a horizontal line is visible, showing that the upper and lower halves were made separately.

The combination of the jar's broad silhouette and luminous coloring gives it both a solid heft and a soft airiness.

Standing Brahma (Bonten) and standing Indra (Taishakuten), 730-750

NARRATOR:

Standing Brahma and Standing Indra, created about 730 to 750. Our audio begins with an overview of the artwork, followed by an audio description.

LAURA ALLEN:

These two figures represent Brahma and Indra, which are known in Japanese as Bonten and Taishakuten. They're originally Hindu deities that //were incorporated into Buddhism fairly early on.

NARRATOR:

Laura Allen, Curator of Japanese Art.

LAURA ALLEN:

The figures date to the mid-eighth century, so they're extremely early for Japanese sculpture, so they're important for their early date. But they're also very precious remnants of a rare technique, hollow dry lacquer that was used in Japan for only about 100 years.

NARRATOR:

The hollow dry lacquer technique involved creating a clay core, which was then layered with lacquer-coated fabric. Once that outer shell hardened, the clay was removed through an opening in the back, leaving a lightweight, hollow figure.

LAURA ALLEN:

You can see how effective this technique is for modeling natural drapery folds.

The surface was then painted with mineral pigments. And these figures were probably restored more than once, but if you look at the back of Indra, on the left, you can see the traces of the kind of circular floral patterns that decorated costumes at the time for the elite.

NARRATOR:

In addition to dry lacquer, the typical sculptural mediums of this period were wood and bronze. Japanese temples were also made of wood, and both the temples and the heavy wooden sculptures within were regularly destroyed by fire.

The museum's Bonten and Taishakuten were originally commissioned for Kofukuji, one of the most important temples in Nara. Being lightweight, the pair could easily be carried - a fact that enabled them to escape being destroyed several times. Today, sculptures made with this technique are rare, and in Japan most have been designated as National Treasures or Important Cultural Properties.

NARRATOR: Continue listening to hear an audio description of this artwork.

A pair of statues, both a little over five feet tall, stand side by side with about a foot of space between them. These are two Hindu deities—Indra on the left, and Brahma on the right. They were considered protective figures, attendants to the Buddha. The statues date to the eighth century in Japan, and were made using a dry lacquer technique. Due to their age, each is

roughly textured, with visible cracks and discolorations. Their overall coloration is tannish-grey with faded remnants of various pigments such as crimson-red, emerald-green, and gold, particularly on their garments.

The statues are almost mirror images of each other, with just slight differences in dress and stance. They are depicted as young men. Their bearing is upright and focused. Their slender bodies and rounded cheeks have a youthful quality. They gaze straight ahead. Their nostrils are about the same width as their bow-shaped lips, which are slightly downturned. Elongated earlobes hang almost to their jawlines. Hair is articulated by parallel grooves of incised lines, piled at the top of their heads in high buns.

Both deities hold their hands in front of their bodies, palms facing upward. Indra lifts his right hand higher than his left. Brahma does the opposite, lifting his left hand higher than his right. Now empty, they probably once held symbolic attributes such as a scroll or lotus.

These statues were made at a time of close cultural and diplomatic ties between China and Japan. As a result, many Japanese religious sculptures from this period reflect styles popular in China at that time. The costume and style of these statues, for example, were likely based on Chinese models.

Brahma, standing to your right, wears layered robes loosely modeled on the attire of high-ranking Chinese officials of the Tang dynasty, dating from 618 to 907. The outer garment is worn open to the waist, with soft, cowl-like lapels. It is secured at the waist with a sash tied in a bow and dangling, long ribbons. The sleeves are gathered above the elbow then hang in soft folds to knee length. The inner robe crosses to form a V-shape that leaves his chest visible, then is secured by a high-waisted, wide belt. Below the waist, the figure wears a long apron over a narrow, pleated skirt.

On the left, a Tang-style armored breastplate covers Indra's chest, depicted as two half circles that join at the center of the chest and extend from below the neck to below the ribcage. A monk's robe drapes over the left shoulder to under his right ribcage, then drapes to a few inches above the ankles. The folds of the robe are palpable, forming U-shapes from the chest to the waist, then vertical lines that slightly curve between the legs. The monk's robe is draped over a long-sleeved garment with a pleated skirt, which becomes visible where the robe stops around the ankles, hanging to the shoes.

Their shoes, modern replacements, have the upturned toes characteristic of the footwear worn by Tang Chinese officials.

Each deity stands on an octagonal three-tiered platform, decorated at the edges in geometric patterns in various hues of green red, and yellow, further underscoring their elevated status.