

Buddhist statues

觀音

Guanyin

one who hears sounds

觀世音

Guanshiyin

one who hears the sounds or prayers of the world

千手千眼觀音

qian shou qian yan

Guanyin with a thousand arms or hands and a thousand eyes

Mahayana Buddhism was introduced to China from India via Central Asian trade routes as early as the first century AD. It brought with it a complete religious system: holy scriptures, sacred images, monks and ritual observances, all new to the Chinese. Initially, Buddhism was interpreted in terms of its affinities with Daoism, the Chinese philosophy that deals with humanity's harmony with nature.

Guanyin 觀音 (one who hears sounds) is a short form of Guanshiyin 觀世音 (one who hears the sounds or prayers of the world). Guanyin and Guanshiyin are the Chinese names for the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, Lord of Compassionate Glances. Bodhisattva is a being who has attained enlightenment but delays his own salvation (*nirvana*, meaning ending the cycle of rebirth) in order to help others (all sentient or living beings, including humans, animals, insects) into attaining theirs.

As an image of worship in a Chinese Buddhist temple, Guanyin is here portrayed with Chinese features, but wears the sumptuous costume of an Indian prince (fig. a). In its original state, this statue was painted in gold and bright colours of red and green lacquer, and his left foot was resting on a lotus flower. Gentle, calm and approachable, he is seated in the elegant pose of 'royal ease', a lifelike figure that seems ready to rise to comfort his worshippers.¹

Buddhism was introduced to Tibet from Nepal and China no later than the seventh century, and a specific school of Buddhism, known as Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhism, developed within Tibet. This type of Buddhism incorporated Indian tantric beliefs and practices, including the use of sacred symbols or diagrams (*yantra*) and chants (*mantra*), with the Mahayana Buddhist pantheon that included bodhisattvas and celestial Buddhas. Other gods were added to this pantheon, including fierce, protective deities, and multi-armed and multi-headed versions of existing sacred beings. Within China, Mongol rulers embraced this type of Buddhism, during the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) and by Manchu rulers during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911).

This sculpture of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara was made during the Qing dynasty (fig. b). In this period, the Emperor and his court commissioned numerous Buddhist paintings, sculptures and ritual objects, which blended Tibetan Buddhist iconography with Chinese, Tibetan and Nepalese artistic styles. The sculpture illustrates this composite style of Buddhist art. Its many arms and heads are characteristic of tantric iconography, the elegant drapery and hands reflect Chinese sculptural conventions and the facial features and body shape are derived from Nepalese and ultimately Indian sculpture.

Avalokiteshvara is the Lord of Compassion and patron deity of Tibet. When Avalokiteshvara beheld the suffering of the world he was filled with such compassion that his head burst into eleven heads, and from his body sprang a thousand helping arms and hands, like an aura of brilliant lights. In the palm of each hand appeared an eye of infinite vision, seeking and assisting those in need. In Chinese, this deity is called Qianshou 千手 (thousand hands) Qianyan 千眼 (thousand eyes) Guanyin 觀音, meaning Guanyin with a thousand arms or hands and a thousand eyes. The topmost head represents Avalokiteshvara's spiritual father, the Buddha Amitabha, Buddha of the Western Paradise. The central pair of hands is in the 'prayer' gesture; the lowest pair is in the 'charity of gift-bestowing' gesture, with an eye in the right palm. Like the uppermost right hand holding a rosary, the other main hands once held various symbols of Buddhist virtues and ideals, which are now missing.

(fig. a)

CHINESE

Avalokiteshvara (Guanyin 觀音)
Jin dynasty 金朝 (1115–1234),
Shanxi province, North China
wood, pigments
110.7 x 77.6 x 57.4 cm
Felton Bequest 1939 (4645-D3)

(fig. b)

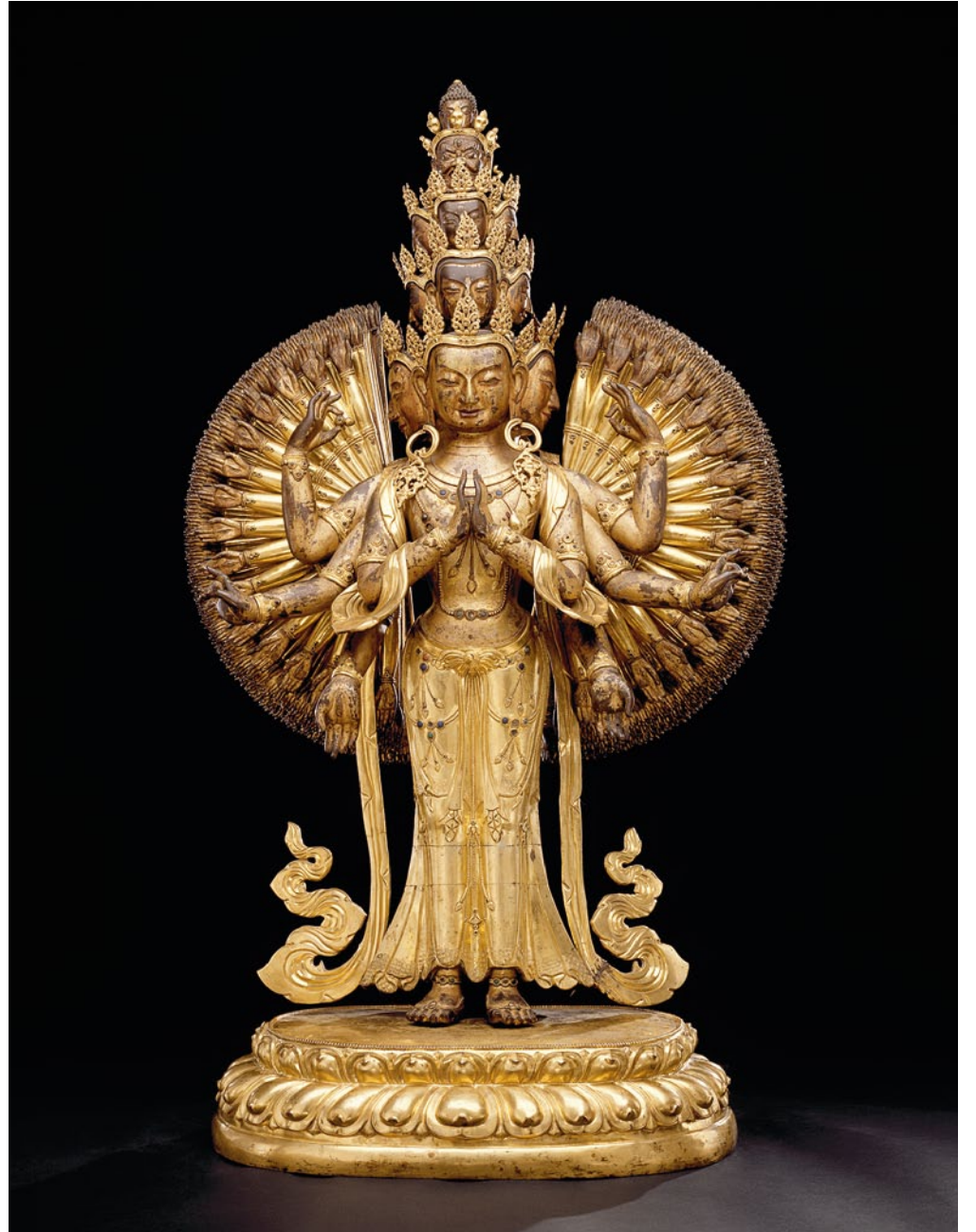
TIBETO-CHINESE

Avalokiteshvara 千手千眼觀音
17th – 18th century China
gilt-bronze, semi-precious stone,
pigments
115.0 x 72.5 x 45.4 cm
Felton Bequest, 1966 (1485-D5)

¹ In China, Guanyin took the female form from the Song dynasty (960–1279) onwards. This statue at the NGV is often thought of as female, probably because of its gentle features, but if one looks closely, there are traces of a moustache.



(fig. a)



(fig. b)