

## Standing Kannon



Object Title	Standing Kannon (pronounced KAH-nown)
Creation Place	Japan
Artist	Unknown
Date	7th century
Medium	Gilt bronze
Classification	Sculpture
Dimensions	12"
Accession #	56.44
Gallery	G220

### Questions/Activities:

- Welcome to the Japanese galleries. Here we are going to look at this sculpture, the Standing Kannon. Take a moment to study this sculpture and identify one feature that you find most interesting or confusing. Who would like to share their features?
- Buddhism came to Japan from China by way of the Korean Peninsula in the sixth century CE. The emperor advocated Buddhism and required Buddhist altars in all official residences. Along with the Buddha, one of the sculptures on these altars was Kannon, a Bodhisattva/Bosatsu, an enlightened being who postponed his own nirvana to assist humankind on the path to salvation. How would you describe the emotion you see expressed by this Standing Kannon? What do you see that makes you say that?

### Historical/social context:

Like China, Japan is an old civilization. There is evidence that suggests people were living on the islands of Japan since the upper Paleolithic period. Following the last ice-age, around 12,000 BCE, the rich

ecosystem of the Japanese Archipelago fostered human development. In fact, the Jomon fire-flame vessel in the next gallery is from 2500-1500 BCE.

This sculpture was created during the 7th century CE during the Nara period lasting from 538 - 710 CE. The Nara period is distinguished by two major events, the beginning of the great passion for all things Chinese (especially Tang Dynasty) by the imperial court and the formal introduction of Buddhism from China via the Korean Peninsula.

The Nara period is the first period in Japanese history when the Emperor of Japan ruled relatively uncontested from modern-day Nara Prefecture. Based on Chinese models which included the adoption of the Chinese written language, the Japanese developed a central administration and imperial court. Most people were farmers; others were fishers, weavers, potters, artisans, armorers, and ritual specialists.

As the Nara period opened, the country was united in its belief in the imperial house's descent from the sun goddess Amaterasu, the supreme deity, in a belief system that came to be characterized as Shinto Way (Way of the Gods). Furthermore, there were spirits of a more local variety, associated with a part of the landscape or with a particular village; these spirits are called kami.

In the 7th century the emperor openly advocated Buddhism as an instrument of the state. The power and wealth of the court were accordingly mobilized for the construction of large and elaborate Buddhist temples. In addition, all official residences were required by imperial edict to have a Buddhist altar with an image and appropriate sutras, and Buddhist institutions were established in each province.

#### **Art history context:**

Korean envoys introduced Buddhism to Japan in 552 CE. Empress Suiko and the prince-regent Shotoku championed the new religion. In less than 100 years it became firmly established, sharing the Japanese spiritual psyche with the indigenous belief system known as Shinto, or Way of the Gods. Monks and craftsmen from Korea and China were invited to immigrate to provide the objects of worship necessary for the new religion. Buddhist establishments became major art patrons, and from the 7th through the 11th centuries, there are few surviving works of art that are not Buddhist in inspiration. Painting and sculpture of the Nara Period are patterned largely on Korean and Chinese prototypes.

#### **Object:**

In Japan, Kannon is the most widely worshipped of all bodhisattvas, divine beings who forestall their own passage into nirvana to help others achieve salvation. This work, in its serene simplicity, typifies an early style of Buddhist sculpture in Japan after the religion was introduced in the 6th century. The full, oval face and child-like proportions are related to both Chinese and Korean prototypes. Such small gilt bronzes were easily transported, thus helping to spread Buddhism and Buddhist iconography throughout Asia.

#### **Buddhism:**

Buddhism, a religion that more than 300 million people currently practice, was founded in northeastern India by Prince Siddhartha in the sixth century BCE. Having achieved enlightenment, he became known as Shakyamuni and preached a path of salvation to his followers.

The Four Noble Truths were the first teaching of Gautama Buddha after attaining Nirvana. They are sometimes considered to contain the essence of the Buddha's teachings:

- Life as we know it ultimately is or leads to suffering/uneasiness in one way or another.
- Suffering is caused by craving. This is often expressed as a deluded clinging to a certain sense of existence, to selfhood, or to the things or phenomena that we consider the cause of happiness or unhappiness. Craving also has its negative aspect, i.e., one craves that a certain state of affairs not exist.
- Suffering ends when craving ends.
- This is achieved by eliminating delusion, thereby reaching a state of Enlightenment.

Reaching this liberated state is achieved by following the path laid out by the Buddha.

Buddhism denies a supreme deity. Its earliest form was based on Shakyamuni's teaching and moral code and stressed that everyone, through concerted individual effort and action, could achieve enlightenment. In the first century CE Buddhism expanded the pantheon with past and future Buddhas and attendant bodhisattvas.

Bodhisattvas are enlightened beings who postponed their own nirvana to assist humankind on the path to salvation. Still tied to the material world in this manner, they are usually represented in sumptuous garments and adorned with jewelry and crowns (a reference to Shakyamuni's earthly existence). Bodhisattvas are usually represented as extremely calm and benevolent beings.

Buddhism spread from India along the trade routes to Central Asia and was especially popular in the Far East, including China, Korea, and Japan.

### **Kannon (Japan)/Kuan-yin (China):**

Kannon is the most popular of all bodhisattvas/bosatus (Japanese), beloved for his infinite compassion and mercy. He is one of the most widely worshipped divinities in Asia and Japan in both ancient and modern times. Kannon worship is believed to have begun in India around the first or second century CE and then spread to Southeast Asia, China, Korea, and Japan. Veneration of Kannon in Japan began in the late sixth century, soon after Buddhism reached Japan. Many Kannon statues from Japan's Nara period are still extant. Originally male in form, Kannon is now often portrayed as female in China, Japan, and other East Asian countries. Each of these nations dressed Kannon in different forms to suit their own temperments and spiritual concepts.

The Sino-Japanese term Kannon literally means watchful listening and is often translated as "one who sees/hears all." This is indeed the task of the compassionate Kannon -- to witness and listen to the prayers and cries of those in difficulty in the earthly real and to help them achieve salvation. Kannon is the patron of motherhood and children.

Kannon is often shown as an attendant to the Amida Buddha along with Seishi Bosatsu. (Note our sculpture of the Amida Buddha in the next gallery.)

Kannon is considered male in the Buddhist traditions of India, Tibet, and Southeast Asia. But in China and Japan (less so in Japan), starting around the 11th - 12th centuries, Kannon was commonly portrayed as female (for reasons not easily explained or understood). In Japan, the male form predominates in sculpture and art, although female manifestations of Kannon are nonetheless plentiful. Indeed, a persistent femininity clings to Kannon imagery in both pre-modern and modern Japan.

Kannon's feminine forms in Japan are clearly compatible with Japanese religious sensibilities. Unlike Buddhism, whose deities are generally genderless or male, Japan's Shinto tradition has long revered the female element. The emperor of Japan, even today, claims direct decent from Amaterasu (the supreme Shintō Sun Goddess), so it seems only natural that Kannon was given feminine attributes.

In early Japanese Buddhism, the concept of venerating a female statue would have been unthinkable. But by the 11th or 12th century, in both China and Japan, statues of Kannon clearly portray the male deity as female. Note: Among Buddhist art historians, gender is not typically an issue. Statues are primarily portrayed as asexual or genderless. The artisans of Japan's classical Buddhist statuary carved the faces, bodies, and robes in ways that transcended male and female forms. Nonetheless, the orthodox view (much weakened) is that all Buddha and Bodhisattva are male.

New forms of Kannon have emerged in modern Japan to deal with contemporary issues such as Alzheimers (dementia), with abortion, and with caring for deceased pets. Additionally, in recent decades, many giant effigies of Kannon have been erected to pray for world peace and to honor war veterans.