

Sacred Dedication: A Korean Buddhist Masterpiece

On view September 21, 2019–March 22, 2020, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery

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A single object—a beautiful gilt wood sculpture of Gwaneum, the most popular deity in Korean Buddhism—is the focus of this loan exhibition from the National Museum of Korea. Carved in the late Goryeo period (918–1392), this crowned image is now known to be the oldest surviving gilded wood figure in an informal pose. Sacred texts and potent symbolic objects were sealed inside this hollow sculpture to transform it into a living body before it was placed on a Buddhist altar. Recent research provides new information about the history of this sculpture, its hidden contents, and the special rituals that surrounded image consecration in Korea centuries ago.

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Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (Gwaneum)

Korea, Goryeo dynasty, ca. 1220–1285

Gilt wood and gilt copper and iron with crystal inlays

National Museum of Korea, Seoul *duk* 953-1, 2



Crown

Korea, Goryeo dynasty, ca. 1220–1285

Gilt wood and gilt copper and iron

National Museum of Korea, Seoul *duk* 953-2

Metal crowns such as this one rarely survive with the carved wood sculptures for which they were made. Bodhisattvas wear elaborate crowns and jewelry to show they have not yet escaped the human world for a purely spiritual realm.



Dedication materials found inside the sculpture

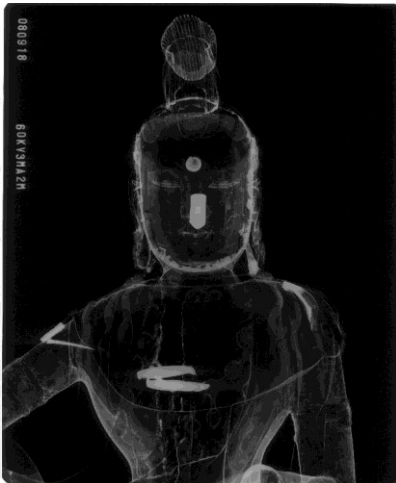
Korea, Goryeo dynasty and Joseon period, ca. 1220–1500
National Museum of Korea, Seoul

Researchers at the National Museum of Korea found the hollow recess inside the wooden sculpture contained important objects, including the reliquary, religious texts, and symbols of the five Buddhist directions shown here.



Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (Gwaneum)

Korea, Goryeo dynasty, mid-14th century
Hanging scroll mounted as a panel; ink, color, and gold on silk
Gift of Charles Lang Freer
Freer Gallery of Art, F1904.13



X-ray of the head and torso

National Museum of Korea, Seoul

This x-ray of the head shows a round crystal inlay above a metal cylinder that was placed inside the sculpture to bring it to life spiritually. X-rays reveal how this sculpture was formed from multiple pieces of fir wood. Two staples span the chest and back, and a nail at the shoulder secures the right arm.



3D model of Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara

National Museum of Korea, Seoul

A valuable tool for studying this hollow thirteenth-century sculpture is 3D imaging. This model was created on the Smithsonian imaging platform using data gathered by a team at the National Museum of Korea.

<https://play.autodesk.com/pub/si-si-default-v5?cid=3143845>



Composite image with sculpture photograph, x-ray, and measurement diagram

Images from National Museum of Korea, Seoul

Design by Reid Hoffman

This composite image of an x-ray, scaled line drawing, and high-resolution digital photo shows the range of images researchers at the National Museum of Korea used in their study.