

Bust Of Maitreya

2nd - 3rd Century A.D.

Schist

H: 67.8cm

In private collections since at least 1955, the present schist sculpture of a bodhisattva is of exceptional size and quality. It is likely he would have held a water vessel in the left hand, identifying him as the bodhisattva Maitreya. This identification is reinforced by the hairstyle, which is generally reserved for this bodhisattva. Maitreya is considered the Buddha of the future - when the dharma is forgotten on Earth, he will descend from the Tushita Heaven to be born in our realm as the next Buddha. His iconic water vessel, the kumbha, is found in many different contexts within Indian sculpture, but is almost always a symbol of fertility and life. It is an apt visual icon, therefore, for Maitreya's role as a progenitor of future peace and order. When he is born on Earth, Maitreya will be of brahmin stock. He is dressed, therefore, in the rich garb similar to that of the historical Buddha, prior to his renunciation of worldly life. His vestments include a foliate collar, a rope-work necklace with a makara-head pendant, and a cord with cylindrical amulet boxes, of a type still in use in South Asia. He is robed in a dhoti, secured around the waist with a knotted rope with pendant ties, with a heavier sanghati draped over the shoulders, open at the front to expose his muscular chest. Both display the naturalistic attention to drapery characteristic of the Gandharan period that is held over from the earlier Greco-Roman influence in the region. The current works bears a striking similarity to a third-century schist figure of Maitreya, also from the ancient region of Gandhara, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (acc. no. 1991.75), illustrated in "Recent Acquisitions: A Selection, 1990–1991": The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, v. 49, no. 2 (Fall, 1991). Compare the exuberant modeling of the hair and hair ornaments, the lush mustaches with curled ends, the precise style of necklaces, amulets, armlets and jewelry, and powerful masculine form. The elegant drapery of the upper robe is also comparable in both works, wherein the robe is looped around the proper left shoulder. Note a slight bulge in the drapery on the proper left upper arms of both works, where the upper robes are presumably covering the matching armlets. This sensitivity to rendering is a hallmark of Gandharan masterworks.

Literature:

Indian & Southeast Asian Art, Christie’s, New York, 21 March 2008, Lot 552.