

DAVID AARON



The Alsdorf Bodhisattva

H: 157.5 cm, W: 51 cm, H with stand: 203.5

Grey Schist

Gandhara

3rd-4th century A.D.

A large grey schist figure of a bodhisattva, standing on a plinth. His left hand, which rests by his side, holds a lotus flower. His right is missing from above the elbow, but was most likely raised in the Abhayamudrā, the gesture of reassurance. His head and shoulders are framed by a large disc-shaped halo, indicating his divinity. The body is solidly conceived, with a muscular torso and broad shoulders. His facial features are articulately rendered and strong, and embellished by curling moustaches.

His attire marks him as specifically Gandharan, particularly his sandalled feet (rarely encountered in other schools of Buddhist art) and necklace of charms suspended from a cord. The cord terminates in a makara, a legendary sea creature. This charm, presumably designed to protect the wearer, adds a touchingly human element to so regal a figure. He wears a dhoti and shawl and is richly adorned with jewellery, including bracelets, armlets, a heavy collar, a corded belt and hooped earrings in his long-lobed ears. He wears a jewelled headdress featuring a small stupa, and his hair falls in rich waves down his neck.

Both his headdress and the lotus flower in his hand identify him as the bodhisattva, Avalokiteshvara. Alongside the Buddha and the bodhisattva Maitreya, Avalokiteshvara is considered one of the principle deities of early Gandharan Buddhism. Avalokiteshvara translates as “Lord who looks down with compassion”.

The base of the figure bears a frieze depicting a homa, or fire ritual, performed by a monk with three participants, one of whom (far right) is female. During such rituals, the priest would pour ghee, or clarified butter, and various ointments onto the blaze lit within the cauldron. These fire rituals have their roots in the ancient Vedic religion, were adopted by ancient Buddhism and Jainism and are now found throughout the Asian subcontinent. The practice of offering symbolic objects to the gods by casting them into the fire had a votive function.

Exhibitions

A Collecting Odyssey: Indian, Himalayan, and Southeast Asian Art from the James and Marilyn Alsdorf Collection, The Art Institute of Chicago, 2 August – 26 October 1997, cat. no. 154.

Literature:

Indian and Islamic Art, Parke Bernet Galleries, New York, 3 April 1971, Lot 65.

P. Pal, A Collecting Odyssey: Indian, Himalayan, and Southeast Asian Art from the James and Marilyn Alsdorf Collection (Chicago, 1997), pp. 125, 307, cat. no. 154.