

LESSON PLAN

Diving Deeper into Buddhism: Guanyin



Subjects: Social Studies, Visual Arts

Grade Level: Middle School/Junior High, High School

Duration: 45 minutes

Dynasty: Qing (1644–1911)

Object Type: Sculpture

Themes: Traditions and Belief Systems; Cultural Interactions

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Standing Figure of Guanyin as a Buddha

China

Late Ming or early Qing dynasty, 17th–18th century

Ivory (fossil mammoth ivory) with traces of gilding, ink, and lacquer

18 x 5 1/8 in

Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment. Freer Gallery of Art, F1957.25a-b

Objective

Students who are already familiar with Siddhartha Gautama, or Shakyamuni, the Historical Buddha, will deepen their understanding of Buddhist beliefs and artwork. They will analyze and interpret works of art that reveal how people live around the world and what they value. They will identify how works of art reflect times, places, cultures, and beliefs.

Essential Questions

- What other stories are told in Buddhism beyond Shakyamuni, the Historical Buddha?
- How are other Buddhas and bodhisattvas portrayed artistically in comparison to Shakyamuni, the Historical Buddha?
- How do works of art capture and communicate the development of Buddhist beliefs in China?
- How has art inspired Buddhist believers and scholars throughout history?

Background Information

This sculpture is identified as the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, known in China as Guanyin. The standing Buddhist figure appears with a large head and elongated body. The arms and hands are extremely long. The hair is in snail-shell locks. The deity looks down and smiles. A smooth bump, or *usnisa*, protrudes through the hair, and a small circle, or *urna*, is in relief on his forehead. A prominent “wan” 卐 symbol (a symbol of auspiciousness) appears on the chest. The right arm is bent, and a jewel is held between the thumb and middle finger. A string of beads hangs from the wrist. The left arm points straight down. A dragon stands on the deity’s bare feet. A multistalked lotus grows out of the dragon’s mouth. The central stalk supports a miniature version of the deity holding a lotus with a seed pod. The seeds can even independently rotate within the openings! The garments of both figures are decorated with beautiful floral and cloud patterns.

This ivory figure presents an interesting aspect of Buddhism. The *usnisa* on top of his head is one of the special body features of a Buddha. However, the clothing, jewelry, and Buddhist prayer beads suggest a bodhisattva, or enlightened being. A popular belief might help solve this conflict: many Chinese Buddhists believe that Guanyin, the bodhisattva of compassion, can take the form of a Buddha to help other beings. The attributes of a dragon and a miniature Buddha help confirm that this figure is Guanyin.

Ivory is a hard, white material that typically comes from elephant tusks; however, ivory can also come from extinct mammoth tusks, such as this example. Ivory, like jade, was carved by some of China’s earliest cultures. This amazing sculpture demonstrates the continuation of this tradition. It shows extreme attention to decorative details, such as the independently rotating seeds in the carved lotus flower. The incised patterns on the garments are meticulously filled with ink and traces of missing gold to make the linear designs stand out. It is possible that the ivory sculpture was not only made to be worshiped as a deity but also to be appreciated as an individual work of art.

Vocabulary

Amitabha: literally, “Infinite Light”; the Buddha of the Western Paradise. Widely revered in Mahayana Buddhist traditions, Amitabha enables his followers to be born into his paradise and attain Buddhahood in one lifetime.

bodhisattva: an enlightened being who chooses not to proceed to Nirvana but instead remains on earth to guide others in their paths toward Enlightenment.

Buddha: literally, “Awakened One”; a being who has awakened to the true reality of existence and is thereby liberated from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. A Buddha teaches others the path to Enlightenment.

Dalai Lama: the spiritual leader of one of four major sects of Tibetan Buddhism.

Enlightenment: a moment of great wisdom and understanding; the highest level of consciousness believed to be achieved through meditation and adhering to the basic moral teachings of Buddhism.

Guanyin: also known as Guan-shi-yin; in Sanskrit, Avalokiteshvara, literally “The Lord who Looks Down [from on High]”; the widely worshiped bodhisattva of compassion who protects and saves all beings.

Guan-shi-yin Sutra: twenty-fifth chapter of the Lotus Sutra that is devoted to the bodhisattva Guanyin and details his ability to rescue the faithful from various dangers.

Lotus Sutra: one of the most influential texts of Mahayana Buddhism, the form of Buddhism predominant in East Asia. It contains the words and teachings of Shakyamuni, the Historical Buddha.

Nirvana: a spiritual state of perfect peace beyond selfish attachments to worldly possessions; reaching Nirvana frees one’s soul from the Buddhist cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

reincarnation: rebirth in a new body or form of life.

Siddhartha Gautama: the given name of the Shakyamuni, literally “Sage of the Shakya Clan,” the Historical Buddha. He lived in northeastern India sometime after the fifth century BCE.

urna: a dot on the Buddha’s forehead that indicates his special wisdom.

usnisa: a bump on the top of the Buddha’s head that symbolizes his superior knowledge.

Procedure

1. Show or distribute an image of the sculpture Standing Figure of Guanyin as a Buddha. Ask students to describe the artwork using the **Describe** questions below.
2. Distribute the Compare and Contrast charts and have students write down their initial observations and analysis of this first artwork. Offer the **Analyze** questions below as prompts for the Analysis section.
3. Offer information from the Object Description such as date created and material. Draw attention to specific details of the artwork if they are not mentioned by students.
4. Project or read the facts from the sheet “Guanyin, Bodhisattva of Infinite Compassion and Mercy.”
5. Distribute and have students read the story “Escape from Fire” (Middle School/Junior High) or the primary resource “The Gateway to Every Direction” (High School).
6. Ask students to add to their Analysis sections based on these sources of information. Offer the **Interpret** questions to deepen the discussion.
7. Show or distribute images of the sculpture Gautama Buddha, available by clicking on the Download the Worksheet PDF button. Ask students to again describe the artwork using the questions below and record their observations and analysis on the Compare and Contrast chart.
8. Have students answer the **Inquire** questions as a concluding activity, either individually for assessment or in groups. Have them generate a list of their own lingering questions that will require further inquiry.

Discussion Questions

Describe

- What type of artwork is this?
- What colors, shapes, lines, or human and animal figures do you see?
- What details stand out to you?
- What do you imagine this sculpture feels like? What makes you imagine that?

Analyze

- What identifies this artwork as Buddhist?
- What do you recognize? What don't you recognize?
- Who do you think created this artwork and for what purpose? How might that have influenced their choices?
- What processes do you think were used to craft this piece from mammoth ivory?

Interpret

- What role does Guanyin play in Chinese Buddhist beliefs?
- What symbols on the artwork connect to Guanyin's identity as the bodhisattva of compassion and mercy?
- How are these symbols different from ones used to identify Shakyamuni, the Historical Buddha?
- How does this image connect to, extend, and challenge your current understanding of Buddhism?

Inquire

- Why are Buddhas and bodhisattvas other than Shakyamuni, the Historical Buddha, worshiped by Buddhist practitioners?
- Why is Guanyin sometimes portrayed as male and sometimes portrayed as female? In what contexts might gender matter?
- What other faith traditions have figures especially designated as “compassionate”?
- How does being familiar with Guanyin help us understand Buddhist beliefs about this life and the afterlife?

Extensions

Visual Arts

- Research and compare Guanyin images across cultures and mediums. What is similar? What is different? What holds meaning for believers aesthetically? What objects would they want in their homes or sacred spaces?

English Language Arts

- Work with students to create a shared definition of compassion. Then have students write “compassion” poetry. Where do they see compassion in the world? Where do they find it in their lives?

Social Studies

- Research the history and beliefs around another Buddha or bodhisattva. Present your findings orally, visually, or in written form.

Resources

Buswell, Robert E., and Donald S. Lopez Jr. *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*. Princeton: Princeton Reference, 2014. Pp. 313, 687, 730.

Paths to Perfection: Buddhist art at the Freer|Sackler. Washington, DC: Freer|Sackler, the Smithsonian's museum of Asian art, 2017. P. 223.

Kubo, Tsugunari and Akira Yuyama, trans. *The Lotus Sutra (Taishō, Volume 9, Number 262)*. Berkley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2007. Pp. 295–98.

http://www.bdk.or.jp/document/dgtl-dl/DBET_T0262_LotusSutra_2007.pdf

Yü, Chün-fang. *Kuan-yin: the Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

The Art of Buddhism. A Teacher's Guide. Smithsonian Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery.

<https://asia.si.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/ArtofBuddhism1.pdf>

Encountering the Buddha: Beyond Death and Desire—The Historical Buddha.

<https://asia.si.edu/exhibition/beyond-death-and-desire/>

Buddhas Across Borders. <https://asia.si.edu/exhibition/buddhas-across-borders/>

Buddhism and Buddhist Art, Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/budd/hd_budd.htm

An Introduction to Buddhism. Asian Art Museum, San Francisco.

<https://education.asianart.org/resources/an-introduction-to-buddhism/>

View this object online at <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1957.25a-b/>

Learn more at <https://asia.si.edu/teachingchina>

Guanyin: Bodhisattva of Infinite Compassion and Mercy

- Guanyin is the most famous and influential bodhisattva in all of East Asia.
- Guanyin is said to have achieved Enlightenment and become a Buddha but then returned to earth as a bodhisattva to help other people achieve Enlightenment.
- The identity of Guanyin is different across cultures and sects of Buddhism. According to legend, Guanyin was created by a ray of light that shined from the forehead of the Buddha Amitabha while he meditated. Sometimes, Guanyin is portrayed as a woman instead of a masculine figure. In Japan Guanyin is known as “Kannon.”
- Guanyin means “perceiver of sounds.” It is said that if anyone in danger calls his name, Guanyin will hear and rescue that person.
- In China, Guanyin may be prayed to by those who want a child. In Japan, Kannon was invoked to protect travelers from dangers such as fire, storms, attackers, and demons.
- The primary instruction for worshiping Guanyin can be found in a famous and important Buddhist text, the Lotus Sutra.
- The Dalai Lama is considered to be a reincarnation of Guanyin.

Escape from Fire

Zhu Changshu's ancestors were originally from the Western Regions. They had accumulated much property over generations and were very wealthy. During the Yuan-k'ang era (291–299) of the Chin, he moved to Loyang. He was a devout believer of the Buddha and particularly loved to recite the *Guan-shi-yin Sutra*.

One day, Zhu Changshu's neighbor's house caught fire. His own house was made of thatch and was situated downwind. He thought to himself that because the fire was so near, even if they could manage to save some possessions, it would not be much. Remembering what the *Guan-shi-yin Sutra* says, "If one encounters fire, one should call [the bodhisattva]," single-mindedly, he told his family members not to try to carry things out of the house nor to try to put out the fire with water, but just to chant the sutra with sincerity. The fire soon consumed the neighbor's house. When it reached the fence outside his own house, the wind suddenly turned back and the fire then stopped. Everyone took this to be an intervention from Guanyin. But there were four or five bullies living in the neighborhood who ridiculed it, saying that because the wind happened to change directions, there was nothing miraculous about it. They decided to wait for a warm and dry night and then they would burn the house. If it still did not burn, only then would they agree it was a miracle.

Sometime later the weather did indeed become very dry and hot and the wind was also blowing hard. The youths secretly got hold of some torches and threw them onto the roof. They did this three times and each time the torches died out. They became very frightened and ran home. The next morning, they came to Changshu's house and told him what had happened the previous night. They begged him for forgiveness. He said to them, "I have no divine power. I just called on Guan-shi-yin and meditated on him. It must be the protection given by his majestic mercy. You should repent and believe in him." Everyone in the neighborhood marveled with amazement about this.

(See Yü 2001, pp. 163–64)

The Gateway to Every Direction (a fragment of the Lotus Sutra)

Bodhisattva Aksayamati faced the Buddha with his palms pressed together, and spoke thus to him: “For what reason is Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (Hearer of the Sounds of the World) called Avalokiteśvara?” The Buddha answered Bodhisattva Aksayamati, saying: “O son of a virtuous family! If innumerable hundreds of thousands of myriads of kotis of sentient beings who experience suffering hear of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara and wholeheartedly chant his name, Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara will immediately perceive their voices and free them from their suffering. Even if those who hold to the name of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara were to enter a great fire, because of this bodhisattva’s transcendent power, the fire would not be able to burn them. If they were adrift on the great waters, by chanting his name they would reach the shallows.

“. . . If anyone who is about to be beaten chants the name of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, the sticks and swords will immediately be broken into pieces and he will be delivered. . . . If anyone, whether guilty or innocent, is bound with fetters or chains, such bonds will be broken into pieces; and those who have been bound will become free by chanting the name of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara.

“. . . If there is anyone who often become angry, if they contemplate Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara with respect, they will become free from anger. If there is anyone who are greatly confused, if they contemplate Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara with respect, they will become free from their confusion.

“. . . If any woman wanting to have a baby boy pays homage and makes offerings to Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, she will bear a baby boy endowed with good merit and wisdom. If she wants to have a baby girl, she will bear a beautiful and handsome baby girl who has planted roots of good merit and will have the love of all beings.”

(Lotus Sutra, Chapter 25, pp. 295–96)

