

OBJECT IN FOCUS

## Standing figure of Guanyin as Buddha



China

Qing dynasty, ca. 1700–ca. 1750

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

### Describe

The large 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. A smooth bump (*usnisa*) is exposed through the hair. The deity looks down and smiles and has a small circle (*urna*) in relief on his forehead. A prominent *wan* 卐 symbol (a symbol of countless blessings) 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, and 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. Each seed can independently rotate within the socket that it fits. Another stalk is topped by a lotus supporting a box of Buddhist sutras (books). Both figures' garments are covered with decorations of floral and cloud patterns.

### Analyze

This ivory statue presents an interesting aspect of Buddhism. The raised bump on top of both the large and small figure's 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: Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) people believed 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 to confirm that this figure is Guanyin.

### Interpret

Ivory is a hard, white material that typically comes from elephant tusks, but also from some other animals, including from the extinct woolly mammoth (such as this statue). Like jade, it was carved by workers from some of China's earliest cultures. This work of art shows extreme attention to decorative details, such as the independently rotating seeds in the carved lotus flower's seedpod. In addition, the incised patterns on the garments are meticulously filled with ink and gold so that the linear designs can stand out. It is likely that the ivory sculpture was not only made to be worshiped as a deity but also to be appreciated as a work of art.



## Inquire

- Look carefully at this intricate sculpture using the [zoom feature](#). List as many details as you can while looking at it for three minutes.
- Examine the figure's body language and facial expressions. What adjectives would you use to describe them? What mood or emotions does this sculpture convey?
- How can a sculpture both depict a Buddha and a bodhisattva at the same time? Research other depictions of the Buddha and Guanyin in Buddhist art, and find similarities and differences with this sculpture.

## Resources

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

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

