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MASTERPIECE

Poised Between Two Worlds

This representation of Avalokiteshvara, known as Gwaneum in Korea, is a way station between tension and repose, between petitioners and gods

By Lee Lawrence

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On loan from the National Museum of Korea and on view at the Smithsonian's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington through March 22, the lithe figure sits on a pedestal, left leg dangling over the edge, right leg drawn up. Effortlessly, its arm drapes over the raised knee, wrist bowing to gravity. But there is a small but telling point of tension in that hand, as middle finger curls to meet thumb. The man portrayed may be at "royal ease," as this pose is described, but he is neither lax nor disengaged.

In such details does the power of this relatively small statue reside—though what first catches our eye is the gilt. It covers skin, robes, earrings, bracelets, armlets, strands of ornaments and the confection of floral and flame motifs that forms a crown encircling the only non-gilded feature: the topknot of hair whose loose strands flow like streams over the shoulders. Such lavish adornment identifies him as a bodhisattva, a being committed to helping others reach spiritual enlightenment. The pose further tells us he is the Water-Moon representation of Avalokiteshvara, known as Gwaneum in Korea (Guanyin in China, Kannon in Japan).

Extensive analysis and conservation conducted by the National Museum of Korea from 2008 to 2014 reveal that artists created this 2.2-foot-high statue by stapling and nailing together 15 pieces of wood, adapting a woodblock construction technique used in China for large-scale works. They also carved the individual pieces before assembly, allowing them to place crystal disks behind the lowered eyelids, a technique artists may have developed locally or possibly imported from Japan. This also created a hollow interior where monks placed sacred texts and symbolic objects. These, too, were examined and they show that the statue underwent two dedication ceremonies. The first took place at its completion; the second, sometime after the mid-15th century. Together, they might yield insights into the evolution of rituals, especially since tests



show the statue to be a century or more older than previously thought.

Avalokiteshvara, known as Gwaneum (c. 1220-85) PHOTO: NATIONAL MUSEUM OF KOREA

With 95% certainty, carbon testing determined that the figure was made between 1220 and 1285, during a particularly turbulent period in the Goryeo dynasty (918-1392). A military faction was in power; Mongols repeatedly attacked, with devastating effects; and when in 1270 Goryeo scholar-officials reclaimed the reins, Korea became a Mongol vassal state in exchange for peace. Little wonder the ever-compassionate Gwaneum was widely popular. But while numerous Goryeo-period paintings and bronzes of the bodhisattva in the royal ease pose survive, its revised age makes this sculpture the only such work in wood that's been identified. It remarkably withstood subsequent wars. It even kept its crown. The only significant losses were the left hand, which conservators replaced, and possibly a small Buddha from the crown, a standard feature of Avalokiteshvara.

By placing such an emphasis on recent findings, however, this presentation borders on the clinical. X-rays and 3-D scans fill an introductory video screen. Cases with all the dedicatory objects duly explained fill the space around the statue. And the figure itself sits on a white, boxy pedestal under a strong light, inviting scrutiny and questions. Why do those fingers come together? Probably to hold a rosary. Might the left hand have originally been different? Conservators studied contemporaneous paintings and sculptures as well as a photograph taken during the Japanese occupation (1910-45), but guesses, even highly educated ones, remain guesses. Thankfully, conservators today ensure all such interventions are reversible, which means they can change it should future scholarship unearth new information.

Lest we miss this statue's greatest gift, however, we need to switch off the fact-finding mission and experience the work. It helps to imagine it in its original setting: It was probably ensconced inside a diorama that conjured a mountain scene based on a Buddhist scripture: sitting on a ledge at the mouth of a cave, one elbow resting on a rock, his dangling foot supported by a lotus rising from the waters below while the moon shines in the sky. The setting would impart scale, making the figure look larger, and the naturalistic backdrop would emphasize the otherworldliness of Gwaneum's idealized features and proportions. Yet, at the same time, this depiction accurately mimics the mechanics of the human body assuming this posture. To keep the unsupported back straight and head slightly forward, the right shoulder drops, the belly tightens, and the torso leans left, shifting the weight away from that right arm so that it can elegantly and effortlessly stretch out. But maintaining this "royal ease" requires effort; the pose is inherently unstable. It won't be long before Gwaneum has to move.

In a 2004 essay on the development of Avalokiteshvara imagery in India, Claudine Bautze-Picron, until recently a research fellow at the French National Centre for Scientific Research, alerts us to look beyond iconographic details and pay close attention to depictions of the body itself. She points out that asymmetrically structured images indicate that a figure is "in a transitional position," choosing whether to move or act, "shifting continuously between two worlds." The statue's foot would have most likely telegraphed this by breaching the confines of a large halo as it does in Water-Moon paintings. But Gwaneum's entire body also communicates this. By coupling divine perfection with what we intuitively recognize as our own physical dynamics, it stirs in us a faint echo of the bodhisattva's cosmic shuttle between petitioners and gods.

—*Ms. Lawrence writes about Asian and Islamic art for the Journal.*

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