



Guanyin China

(Yuan Dynasty, 1271–1368)

*Wood with traces of painted and
gilt decoration*

Height 49 inches (124.5 cm)

This wooden sculpture depicts the Buddhist figure Guanyin (KWAN-in), an enlightened being called a bodhisattva (bo-dee-SAHT-vah). Bodhisattvas put off entering paradise in order to help mortals attain enlightenment. A tiny sculpture of the Amitabha (ah-mee-TAH-bah) Buddha—the Buddha of the Western Paradise—in the figure’s headdress identifies it as Guanyin. In a Buddhist temple, a sculpture like this one often sits to the side of a central sculpture of Buddha, usually with another bodhisattva flanking the other side.

Guanyin, the most beloved bodhisattva in China, is the embodiment of compassion. Guanyin can appear in many different forms, taking whichever one a devotee might especially need at the moment: male or female, gentle or wrathful, rich or poor. Local tales about the enlightened being inspired imaginative figures such as Water-Moon Guanyin, White-Robed Guanyin, Child-Giving Guanyin, Fish Basket Guanyin, and Thousand-Armed and Thousand-Eyed Guanyin.

This sculpture portrays the “Guanyin of the South Sea” seated on a rocky cliff overlooking the sea in a posture known as “royal ease.” One leg hangs down while the other is drawn to the body, the bent knee supporting the right arm. The full-moon face, downcast eyes, perfectly arched eyebrows, delicate nose, and small mouth reflect a sense of calm and elegance. A long scarf drapes over the shoulders, and intricate jewelry, including a headdress, necklaces, and arm bracelets, decorates the figure. The hole in the forehead, which once held a precious jewel (now missing), symbolizes Guanyin’s ray of light that illuminates the world. Traces of pigment and gold leaf testify that this sculpture was once vibrantly painted.

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