

6. A Marble Bodhisattva

Height: 19.8 cm. (7 3/4 in.)

Sui dynasty

Late 6th century-early 7th century A.D.

Published: Saburo Matsubara, *Chugoku Bukkyo Chokoku Shiron*, vol. 2, Tokyo, 1995, pl. 532b.

Formerly in a Japanese collection.

The Buddhist deity is seated on a waisted lotus pedestal in a pose of contemplation with the right leg crossed over the left knee. The figure is carved in the round in a compact manner from a block of white marble. A halo of lotus petal lappets enclosed by scrolling budded vines forms the mandorla in soft relief behind the head. The oval face is carved in a meditative expression with the eyes cast down beneath arched brows, the hair parted in the middle and the headdress carved with a central trefoil and three small circular apertures to receive inlaid jewels flanked by swags of cloth. Wearing thick robes that are carved with asymmetrical folds delineated by line borders, the *bodhisattva* is further adorned with a thick sash-like necklace strung with large beads and with three strands of smaller beads pendant above the hem and bare left foot that is supported on a lotus. Long undercut scarves extend down from the shoulder while the left hand loosely clasps the scrolled stem of a lotus. Only the forearm section of the right arm remains. A slightly roughened spot on the cheek above marks the spot where the right hand, which is now missing, might originally have touched the face, or that missing hand might have held some attribute or a scarf. A roughly carved rectangular block on the base was intended to fit into a socket.



The abundance of drapery and jewelry adorning the *bodhisattva* is generally understood as a reflection of the enriched spiritual status of those beings. They have attained the penultimate spiritual state—enlightenment—but have elected to remain on the wheel of rebirth, recycled into the sentient world in order to enable others to achieve enlightenment. When all have succeeded in reaching that goal, the *bodhisattva* will then flow with them into the vast and endless stream of *nirvana*, nothingness. The seated posture of the figure, with one leg pendent, the other crossed over and one hand resting on the leg, is a characteristic pose of Guanyin, the *bodhisattva* of compassion. A hand gently resting against the cheek, possibly depicted in the original image here, is a gesture indicating a contemplative state and often characterizes images of Sakyamuni or Maitreya as exemplified in a mid-6th century A.D., marble stele in the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco (fig. 1).

The physiognomy and physique of the present figure, however, suggest a date of production later in the sixth century, during the Sui dynasty. The important features to note are the strongly geometric head, the thick neck and arms, and gargantuan foot and hand, as well as the disproportionately long appendages. A late 6th-century A.D. image produced under the northern Zhou dynasty excavated in Xi'an (the upper part of the figure illustrated here) exhibits such features (fig. 2). Heavy bejeweled garlands and multiple pendants weigh heavily on the blocky figure while the left hand grasps the end of a scarf. Floral medallions, braided and beaded tassels, chest collars, and multiple garlands are typical of the mainstream Sui sculptural style, but more subdued figures also of Sui dynasty vintage relate closely in facial type and expression to the present figure. These include a standing *bodhisattva* with left hand raised, excavated in Xi'an (fig. 3), and another in the Shaanxi Provincial Museum which interestingly is quite free of ornamental raiment, perhaps indicating its close derivation from a precedent Northern Qi style (fig. 4).

Despite its relatively short duration, the Sui was an enormously complex period in the world of sculptural expressions. While the political reunification of China had depended upon the strength of the first emperor of the Sui, Wendi, the effusive support of Buddhism which opened a fertile ground for stylistic play depended upon the faith of the second emperor, Yangdi. But, ironically, the predominant sculptural style in which the holy figures became dressing horses for extravagant garb might be attributed in part to the particular fashion sense of that emperor, which was hardly a spiritual matter. It may have in fact been a purely secular concern on the one hand, the pleasure derived from beholding a beautifully adorned human figure and, on the other hand, the desire to associate the highest social circle with gods and saintly beings that dictated in large measure the particular Sui Buddhist "look." And although the short Sui dynasty was clearly more than a bridge between two great eras of sculpture, Sui styles are still most conveniently understood when the earlier and later styles are presented as foils. On the one side, leading up to the Sui, is a complexity of styles, the most breathtaking that of the Northern Qi characterized by smooth clean surfaces, simplicity of detail, a buoyant ethereality of the figures and their transcendent grace and beauty. On the other, following in the footsteps of the Sui styles, is that of the Tang characterized by a super naturalism; the human-gods of Tang sculpture look as if they could move among us and show us up in every way. Although the features of the present figure are to a great degree geometricized, they do not approach the abstraction of their predecessors. Nor, despite the solidity and bulk of the figure, do we see the same sense of weightiness, portliness, or musculature of the following Tang period. Our figure here occupies its own space and if that space is transitional, it is one between the human heart and the spiritual.



Fig. 1: Marble votive stele (detail), Northern Qi dynasty, dated A.D. 551, Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, after Rene-Yvon Lefebvre d'Argence, editor-in-charge, *The Avery Brundage Collection: Chinese, Korean and Japanese Sculpture*, San Francisco, 1974, no. 56.



Fig. 2: Marble *bodhisattva* (detail), Sui dynasty, late 6th-early 7th century A.D., excavated in Xi'an, Shaanxi province, Xi'an Municipal Institute of Archaeology and Preservation of Cultural Relics, after *Treasures of Ancient China*, Tokyo, 2004, no. 113. p. 145.



Fig. 3: Marble *bodhisattva* (detail), Sui dynasty, late 6th-early 7th century A.D., after *Choan no Hibo*, Tokyo, 1992, no. 30:2, p. 40.



Fig. 4: Marble *bodhisattva* (detail), Sui dynasty, late 6th-early 7th century A.D., excavated in Xi'an, Shaanxi province, Shaanxi Provincial Museum, after *Foujiao diaosu mingpin tulu*, Beijing, 1995, no. 253, p. 273.