



## A Painted Wooden Nanhai “South Seas” Guanyin Shrine

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Height: 45.8 cm. (17 7/8 in.)

Width: 28.0 cm. (11 3/8 in.)

Depth: 24.1 cm. (9 1/2 in.)

Ming dynasty

17th century

The devotional shrine is comprised of several pieces of carved and painted wood, predominantly red, black and a powdery green. The central figure, produced from one piece, is seated on a low, wide, three-tiered lotus cushion, possibly an independent piece or carved as part of the cave-like enclosure where the figure is placed in front of a curved wall and beneath a high canopy of leaves above. The back of the shrine is smooth, a central inverted U-shaped area colored black over red. A bottle-shaped vase with two willow branches is mounted on a trunk-stand on one side; a parrot is perched on the other, with lotus buds rising and stylized waves splashing at the bottom on the two sides. The figure is composed, sedate, and placid in manner and symmetrical in posture aside from the hood of the cloak sweeping sideways across the hair, with a hair ornament on one side, and the wrap tucked to one side below the scooped neck. A short wrap over the shoulders is fashioned with scalloped edges, indicating the folds of the fabric, and below a longer garment draped sinuously over the arms and past the delicate hands folded in the lap. The garments are subtly carved to suggest they simply flowed around the figure, whereas the leaves above are more boldly and sharply carved. The oval-shaped face is sensitively modelled with closed eyes, a narrow nose and small mouth, with relatively large ears and characteristically elongated lobes.

In contrast to the matte reds, greens, black and white, many a number of zones were also painted in a reflective gold. The layering of colors is more evident in some areas than others, with the gold always applied over a deep red base. During the Ming dynasty, the more naturalistic tones used to simulate the color of flesh were abandoned as craftsman working in ceramic, stucco and wood sought to make their economical materials appear like more precious gilt metalware, as seems was the intention here.

This figure is identifiable as a Nanhai or South Sea Guanyin through the distinctive environment and the vase and bird attributes. This particular avatar of Avalokiteshvara, or Guanyin, is often seen in a relaxed posture with one leg flexed and the

other pendant with an arm resting on the knee of the flexed leg, a common posture since the Song dynasty when this form of Guanyin, given birth in China, gained particular popularity. By the Ming dynasty this deity became fully feminized, perhaps a reflection of the family-oriented Chinese society and the present posture common in votive constructs produced for her numerous devotees. The South Seas Guanyin's home was on Putuoshan, an island located off the coast of Zhejiang province, where she lived within the dense tropical woods where birds such as the parrot seen here abounded. That such spiritual beings were denizens of the woods long before humankind found its place there is clear from what we believe we know of the existence of Buddhist and Daoist beings, and Shinto ones as well.