

## Educator Guide

### FEATURED WORK OF ART



#### HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

This resource includes factual information, cultural context, glossary of terms, as well as prompts and discussion questions related to *Bodhisattva Guanyin, 25.256*.

This resource is recommended for High School audiences and Social Studies subjects. Students will learn about the historical and religious context of this object to be able to relate it to the spread of information and ideas, as well as their own culture and identity. These suggestions were informed by the Maryland State Department of Education 2024 standards.

#### [Bodhisattva Guanyin](#)

Unidentified artist

China, late 14th–15th century

Bulked lacquer, gold, and paint

Gift from Doris Duke Charitable Foundation's

Southeast Asian Art Collection, 2006, acc. no. 25.256

## BACKGROUND CONTEXT

### Facts About the Work of Art

- Guanyin is a Chinese reinterpretation of the bodhisattva that originated in India known as Avalokiteshvara.
- A **bodhisattva** is a divine being who has attained enlightenment but chooses to stay in the world to help others.
- Guanyin can appear in any form in order to provide compassion and aid to others, including appearing as any gender.
- Expecting mothers will pray to Guanyin for healthy sons; fishermen and sailors will pray to Guanyin for protection from the sea. According to Buddhist belief, Guanyin has a “sweet dew” with healing powers that comes from their fingertips.
- Different variations of Avalokiteshvara existed across regions practicing Buddhism, where depictions varied depending upon unique cultural and religious beliefs.
- During the early Meiji period (1868–1912), there was overlap in portrayals and beliefs between the figures of Buddhist Guanyin and Christian Mary, as seen in the image of *Kannon and Child* below.

## Cultural Context

- There is evidence that Christianity was introduced to China as early as the 1st century, but began to take root much later in Japan with the arrival of Portuguese ships there in the mid-16th century.
- Christianity has influenced interpretations of Guanyin, most notably in their Chinese and Japanese form as “giver or bestower of children.” In the sculpture of *Kannon and Child* at the Walters, she is depicted wearing a robe covering her head and holding a baby, which parallels depictions of the Virgin Mary holding Christ as a baby.



### [Kannon and Child](#)

Miyagawa Kozan (Japanese, 1842–1916)

Japan, 1886

Porcelain

Museum purchase with funds provided by the  
W. Alton Jones Foundation Acquisition Fund ,  
2002, acc. no. 49.2793

- Guanyin is a divine being who transcends gender and has been represented in artwork in masculine or feminine form, as well as in forms that are open to interpretation by devotees. Traits such as long hair and long fingernails were not necessarily seen as feminine, as we might view them in the United States. Hair changed meaning depending on religion, the dynastic period, status, and other identifiers, rather than gender. Long fingernails were perceived as a sign of status as well; those with long fingernails were not doing hard labor.

## GLOSSARY

**Bodhisattva:** Someone who is able to achieve enlightenment but delays it in order to focus on helping others.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[National Geographic Mapmaker](#)

## PROMPTS AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. Look closely at this artwork. Describe what you notice about this figure.
2. Paying attention to the figure's posture and facial expression, describe the emotions you observe.
3. Develop 3 questions you would want to ask them if you were to meet this figure on the street. Explain why you chose the questions you did.
4. Critique how our Western context on gender impacts the way someone might view this artwork.
5. Looking at multiple images of Bodhisattva Guanyin, including Japan's Kannon and the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, compare and contrast the ways that different cultures portray the same figure.
6. Guanyin is a bodhisattva, a divine being who helps others. Create a sketch of a person who has helped you in your life and describe the ways in which they have helped you.