



Late 7th century

Sandstone

Height: 5 feet 9 3/4 inches (177.2 cm)

Cambodian, Khmer Empire

Purchased with the W. P. Wiltach Fund,  
1965, W1965-1-1

### LET'S LOOK

Who could this be?

Do you think this statue is of a male or a female? Why?

What details do you notice about the statue's hair, eyes, ears, and mouth?

Describe the statue's clothing. How did the artist make us see it?

Which parts are broken?

What is this sculpture made of?

## AVALOKITESHVARA

This is a Cambodian statue of Avalokiteshvara, which is Sanskrit for "The Lord Who Looks Down." Avalokiteshvara is a bodhisattva (bo-dee-SAHT-vah) in the Buddhist belief system. A bodhisattva is a saintlike being who devotes himself to helping others reach a state of peaceful awareness called enlightenment. There are two aspects of the statue that help us identify who it represents. The hair is fashioned into a style called *jatamukuta* (jah-tah-moo-koo-tah), with dreadlocks that loop and rise up in a cylindrical (tube-like) crown shape. Nestled in the hair is a small figure of the Amitabha Buddha—Avalokiteshvara's spiritual father—meditating on a throne of lotus petals. Amitabha (ah-mee-TAH-bah) means "boundless light."

This sculpture was close to seven feet tall—larger than life!—before the legs were broken. It is over 1,200 years old, and when the Museum acquired it in 1965, the head and body were in two pieces. You can still see the line where the Museum conservators rejoined them. Because the back of the sculpture is unfinished, we know that it was probably set in a temple niche (space in a wall), facing out in a frontal pose.

Sometimes Avalokiteshvara is shown with one thousand arms and eleven faces, but this sculpture has simple, subtle shapes, which were carved from a large block of sandstone. The rounded rectangle of the face, the delicately outlined, curving eyes, and the broad, slightly smiling mouth reflect the features of people from Southeast Asia. Have you noticed the small creases incised (carved) at the base of the neck? They were considered to be signs of beauty. One of Avalokiteshvara's missing arms and hands probably held a rosary or a bottle of holy water, symbols of wandering monks. The other hand probably held a lotus flower, the symbol of purity. His

smooth, perfectly proportioned body is wrapped in a short, plain piece of cloth held in place by a string indicated by shallow, incised lines. This basic garment is similar to the sarongs that people in Southeast Asia wear today.

Although many details of the body are left out, parts of the sculpture are so naturalistic, or lifelike, that you might be tempted to touch them to find out if they are as soft and fleshy as they look! Repeating, curved lines create the illusion of thin fabric that reveals the solid shapes of his hips and thighs. His abdomen is carved so skillfully that he almost appears to be breathing. This is important to both Hindus and Buddhists, who believe in the spiritual nature of breath, or prana (life force). Standing straight and tall, Avalokiteshvara seems strong and solid, yet his downward gaze and his graceful young body also convey feelings of friendly calm, forgiveness, and quiet power.

## ABOUT BUDDHA AND AVALOKITESHVARA

Avalokiteshvara embodies the two basic qualities of the Buddha, founder of Buddhism: limitless wisdom and compassion (a feeling of deep kindness and sympathy). Avalokiteshvara relieves the suffering of others, protects people from danger, and grants blessings to children. This statue of Avalokiteshvara looks similar to statues of the Buddha—especially his downcast eyes, gentle smile, long earlobes (now broken), and soft, smooth body. The eleventh-century Buddhist poet Ratnakirti described Avalokiteshvara this way:

*His glorious face is bright with gathered moonlight  
and his glance is soft  
with that deep pity that he bears within.*

The story of the Buddha explains how Buddhism started. In the sixth century BCE, Prince Siddhartha (sid-DAHR-ta) was born to a wealthy king in India and grew up in total comfort and luxury. He was twenty-nine years old when he went out of his palace for the first time, and was surprised to see that not everyone lived the life of leisure that he enjoyed. He wondered why human beings experience suffering, such as sickness and old age, and eventually die. Greatly disturbed, Siddhartha took off his fancy clothes and jewelry and left his family and his kingdom in order to search for answers to these difficult questions. He wandered throughout his kingdom for six years, listening to wise men and begging for his food. Then he decided to remain completely still in one spot, underneath a *bodhi* (BO-dee) tree. After sitting for forty days and nights through sun and rain and storms, Siddhartha

reached a state of deep understanding called enlightenment. He realized that the causes of human suffering are desire and attachment to the world and that it is possible to overcome suffering through meditation and good deeds. This understanding also made him free from the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth known as samsara. Siddhartha was recognized for his revelations, and he became known and worshiped as the Buddha, which means “enlightened” or “awakened” one.

Like the Buddha, Avalokiteshvara gave up worldly pleasures and attained enlightenment. However, he postponed his entry into *nirvana* (the final release from samsara) to stay in the world and help others. There are many Buddhist bodhisattvas, but Avalokiteshvara has been the most popular throughout Asia. Some bodhisattvas are female, and all are recognized by the different attributes that they hold or wear, like the small Amitabha Buddha in Avalokiteshvara’s hair.

## LET’S LOOK AGAIN

The name Avalokiteshvara is fun to say once you have practiced it: Ah-vah-lo kih-**TESH** vah-rah!

What parts of this sculpture look most realistic? Why?

Close your eyes gently and feel yourself breathing for several minutes. Then open your eyes and look at the statue for two minutes without speaking or writing. What thoughts and feelings do you have about it?

## RELATED ART PROJECT

Create a small sculpture of a person or an animal by carving a bar of unscented soap with plastic knives or craft sticks. This is a subtractive process because you are taking away pieces of the soap. To begin, study and sketch some possible subjects. Look for solid forms, like a cat curled up in a ball, a bright-eyed bird with folded wings, or the head of a sleeping baby. Try to visualize your sculpture from all sides and then create simple forms with rounded contours and smooth surfaces. Work slowly and carefully because what you have carved away cannot be replaced!



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*Avalokiteshvara,  
Bodhisattva of Compassion*  
c. Third quarter of 5th century

Sandstone

Height: 48 1/2 inches (123.2 cm)

Indian

Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994,  
1994-148-1

## CONNECT AND COMPARE

Compare the two Avalokiteshvaras to the left. How are they standing? What are they wearing?

Look for mysterious smiles in other works of art (Buddhas, Madonnas, Greek *kouros*, the *Mona Lisa*).

Tibetan Buddhists believe that the Dalai Lama is a present-day reincarnation of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. Read about his life and work.

*This sculpture is included in The Arts of Asia, a set of teaching posters and resource book produced by the Division of Education and made possible by a generous grant from Delphi Financial Group and Reliance Standard Life Insurance Company.*