

Norton Simon Museum For Immediate Release

411 West Colorado Boulevard, Pasadena, California 91105 www.nortonsimon.org

External Affairs Department 626.844.6900 media@nortonsimon.org

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Media Contacts:

Leslie Denk | ldenk@nortonsimon.org | (626) 844-6941

Emma Jacobson-Sive | emma@ejs-media.com | (323) 842-2064

Benevolent Beings: Buddhas and Bodhisattvas from South and Southeast Asia

October 13, 2023–February 19, 2024

Pasadena, CA—The Norton Simon Museum presents *Benevolent Beings: Buddhas and Bodhisattvas from South and Southeast Asia*, an exhibition that explores how representations of protective deities have been seen to offer blessings, guidance and security to their devotees. Through 44 artworks drawn solely from the Norton Simon's extensive collections—many of them being exhibited for the very first time—the exhibition examines the original context and evidence of use of these works, which range from utilitarian and instructive votive objects, to stone and bronze sculpture of bodhisattvas and merciful gods, to highly ornate gilt bronze buddhas. As such, the objects are organized in accordance with the general layout of a Buddhist temple from 13th- to 18th-century South Asia, where the innermost chambers were devoted to the most sacred works.



Buddha Shakyamuni (detail), 12th century
Nepal or Tibet
Gilt-copper alloy with traces of pigment
27-1/2 in. (69.9 cm)
The Norton Simon Foundation

In a nod to the experience of approaching a Buddhist temple, *Benevolent Beings: Buddhas and Bodhisattvas from South and Southeast Asia* begins with a collection of votive objects. In addition to illuminated palm-leaf manuscripts and a mythical bird-shaped incense burner, a highlight of this introductory room is a cotton scroll with Nepali stupas. Though the textile was manufactured in India around 1800, the iconography of the reliquaries and aquatic images showcase Nepali influence. Similarly, the winged angels possibly attest to the artistic exchange between India and

Persia, indicating the culturally diverse and cosmopolitan approach to design and production that informs multiple aspects of this work. Furthermore, the production of this textile, like many of the objects in this exhibition, facilitated merit-making, a core practice that is common to all Buddhist traditions (and that continues to this day in South and Southeast Asia): through commissioning a work of art, the patron acquires merit and an abundance of blessings and protection.

The arrangement of figurative art in the exhibition evokes the multiple levels of the Buddhist pantheon. A selection of bodhisattvas and merciful gods are placed in the first and second galleries to indicate their role as occupiers of both earthly and divine realms. A 10th-century limestone sculpture of Ganesha, the elephant-headed Hindu god known as the “remover of obstacles,” is placed near the entrance to the second gallery. Similarly, the Hindu god Vishnu, who is seated on a column to Ganesha’s left in this sculpture, often appears in Buddhist temples as a guardian figure. In sacred spaces, it is not unusual for Hindu gods to be placed in close proximity to the buddha, allowing worshippers to seek blessings in earthly matters. The hierarchy of the Buddhist heavens is reinforced in the artistic program of temples, as the buddha occupies a central space, while the bodhisattvas and gods occupy the periphery of the temple and main shrine.

Elsewhere in this section, a 9th-century grey-brown gneiss Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, also known as the bodhisattva of infinite compassion, is seen cradling a small, seated buddha on his highly stylized coiffure. A bejeweled headband and locks of hair frame his serene face. As the quintessential bodhisattva of compassion, he looks at devotees with downcast eyes and a hint of a smile. These features are meant to ensure the protection and comfort offered by this sentient being.

The variety of buddhas included in the exhibition, depicted in a range of styles and media, indicate various gestures of blessing and guidance. Sculptures of seated, standing or reclining buddhas adorn the central shrines of Buddhist temples, offering devotees their most sacred encounters. One of the highlights in this section, a 12th-century Buddha Shakyamuni from the Himalayan region, is among the largest gilt bronzes in the Museum’s collection. It illustrates the most recognizable iconography of the buddha: snail-shell curls, a top knot, downcast eyes, elongated earlobes, a gentle smile and three skinfolds on his neck. Draped in a minimalist robe, he stands in a perfect contrapposto, a gentle S curve in which a slightly bent knee sways his hip to the right. The open right palm, decorated with a lotus motif, signifies generosity and the granting of blessings. The left hand clutches the end of the garment with an undulating hemline.

The final gallery features a solitary buddha dated to 5th–6th century Sri Lanka. Despite its timeworn state, possibly due to weathering, the radiance of the dolomite stone flickers and glimmers in the light, offering a sense of the visual encounter that devotees would have had upon seeing such sculptures within a sacred space. To emphasize the buddha’s deep meditative state, the artisan has skillfully rendered a face of tranquility and ethereal composure. Offering a space for rest and contemplation, this gallery invokes mindfulness and detachment, concepts that were consequential to the patrons who brought such works into being. Although the art in this exhibition was created in a religious context, the various symbols and iconography that convey the figures’ benevolence embody qualities of humanity that transcend cultural boundaries and continue to resonate with museum visitors today.

Benevolent Beings: Buddhas and Bodhisattvas from South and Southeast Asia is organized by Assistant Curator Lakshika Senarath Gamage. It will be on view in the Museum’s lower-level exhibition wing from Friday, October 13, 2023, through Monday, February 19, 2024. A series of special programs, including lectures, a performance, an opening weekend celebration, a meditative audio tour, guided tours, talks, family programs, and more, will be offered. Details can be found at nortonsimon.org.

About the Norton Simon Museum

The Norton Simon Museum is known around the world as one of the most remarkable private art collections ever assembled. Over a 30-year period, industrialist Norton Simon (1907–1993) amassed an astonishing collection of European art from the Renaissance to the 20th century, and a stellar collection of South and Southeast Asian art spanning 2,000 years. Modern and Contemporary Art from Europe and the United States, acquired by the former Pasadena Art Museum, also occupies an important place in the Museum’s collections. The Museum houses more than 12,000 objects, roughly 1,000 of which are on view in the galleries and gardens.

Location: The Norton Simon Museum is located at 411 W. Colorado Blvd. at Orange Grove Boulevard in Pasadena, Calif., at the intersection of the Foothill (210) and Ventura (134) freeways. For general Museum information, please call (626) 449-6840 or visit nortonsimon.org. **Hours:** The Museum is open Thursday through Monday, 12 p.m. to 5 p.m. (Fridays and Saturday to 7 p.m.). It is closed on Tuesday and Wednesday. **Admission:** General admission is \$20 for adults and \$15 for seniors. Members, students with I.D., and patrons age 18 and under are admitted free of charge. The Museum provides free admission to all from 4-7 p.m. on the first Friday of each month. The Museum is wheelchair accessible. **Parking:** Parking is free but limited, and no reservations are necessary. **Public Transportation:** Pasadena Transit stops directly in front of the Museum. Please visit <http://pasadenatransit.net> for schedules. The MTA bus line #180/181 stops in front of the Museum. The Memorial Park Station on the MTA Gold Line, the closest Metro Rail station to the Museum, is located at 125 E. Holly St. at Arroyo Parkway. Please visit www.metro.net for schedules. **Planning your Visit:** For up-to-date information on our guidelines and protocols, please visit nortonsimon.org/visit.