

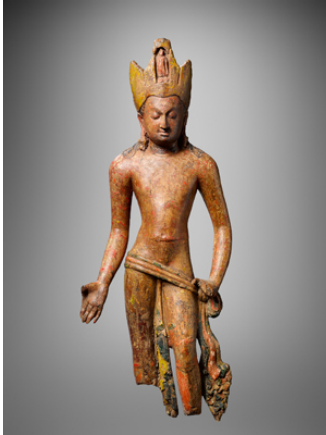
Prolegomena to the Study of an Early Wood Bodhisatva from the Himalayas

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Frontispiece

All conquering is the Savior of the World,
His lotus hand, stretched down in charity,
is dripping streams of nectar to assuage
the thirsty spirits of the dead.
His glorious face is bright with gathered moonlight,
and his glance is soft
with that deep pity that he bears within.

- Ratnakīrti (Date Unknown) [1]

1 — Introduction

Savoring the lyrical and spiritually moving verse by Ratnakīrti quoted above and visually engaging at the same time the masterpiece of woodcarving that is the principal subject of this essay (frontispiece), one can only wonder who inspired whom. The secret of the enormous aesthetic appeal of the sculpture is largely due to the material, which is wood. The sense of gentle warmth that emanates from it cannot be found either in stone or metal.

Wood has remained an important medium for the art and architecture of the Himalayan country of Nepal since antiquity. The earliest literary evidence for the use of wood for the temples and palaces in the country is preserved in Chinese literature of the Tang dynasty, though compiled later. It contains information about the Kathmandu Valley when it was ruled by the Licchavi dynasty (c. 350–850 CE). During the reign of the Licchavi king, Narendradeva (c. 645–85), China's ambassador, Wang Xuan Ze, was the first known foreigner to admire the timber architecture of Nepal. Preserved in the History of the Tang Dynasty, his observations (echoed since then by all visitors to Nepal) inform us that, "Their houses are constructed of wood. The walls are sculpted and painted... They adore five celestial spirits and sculpt their images..." [2] The accounts provide further information about the propensity of the metal sculptors to inlay their sculptures richly with semiprecious stones, a trait that was later enthusiastically followed by the Tibetans in their metal images.

To date, the earliest in situ wood sculpture created by Newar artists of Licchavi-era Nepal survive not in the Kathmandu Valley, but in distant Lhasa, the capital of the rulers of the powerful and contemporary Yarlung Dynasty. These timber reliefs preserved in the sacred Jo Khang temple in Lhasa are now well-known to scholars of Himalayan art, and have fortunately survived the recent turbulent history of Tibet and the wanton destruction of monuments during the Chinese Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 70s. [3]



Fig. 1

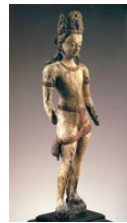


Fig. 2

Modern science has now contributed to pushing back the history of the Newar artist's innate genius with the medium of wood to the Licchavi period (ca. 200-879). In an important recent publication, the late Mary Slusser convincingly presented results of scientific examinations of many Nepalese wood sculptures, which revealed surprisingly early dates. [4] Apart from carved timber struts in Kathmandu Valley urban centers, she published at least two freestanding sculptures now in private collections in the west that, thanks to carbon-14 tests, can be dated to the Licchavi period (Figs. 1 & 2). [5] To these two we are happy to add a third, and certainly the earliest and most attractive example (Figs. 3–6), with this brief prolegomena. This third wood sculpture is in the collection of Chino Roncoroni: it was acquired in the 1960s by Jean Daridan (1906-2002), French ambassador to India (1965-1970) and Nepal (1965-1967); the sculpture was purchased by Mr. Roncoroni in a Christie's Arts d'Asie sale in Paris in June of 2008 ([see appendix](#)).

Like the two published sculptures, this example represents a bodhisatva of a generic type known from several other stone images surviving in the Kathmandu Valley from the Licchavi period, though only one at Gana Bahal, which will be mentioned later, is firmly dated by inscription (see note 10). Though the figures cannot always be identified precisely, the most popular was the bodhisatva of compassion, Avalokiteshvara. However, as will be noted below, the Roncoroni figure provides other iconographic features that are distinctive and intriguing.



All three wooden sculptures have undergone C-14 testing. The test of the Roncoroni sculpture provided the following pairs of dates: a) 530–640 CE (68.2% probability) and b) 430–650 CE (95.4% probability) (see appendix). Tests of the other two examples yielded the following calibrations: Turin figure: 531–672 CE (97.5% probability), Pritzker figure: 550–650 CE (95% probability) (see note 5)

Thus, while the upper limits for all three sculptures more or less coincide, the wider range of the “95% probability” for the Roncoroni figure suggests that it may be older. As will be discussed below, the art-historical evidence also confirms this scientific probability. If so, it will certainly push back the history of timber sculpture in Nepal to the 6th century. Together, the three figures are among the earliest surviving South Asian Buddhist wood images that were probably meant for ritual worship in shrines. Except in Japanese temples, no such ancient timber sculptures survive in tropical South and Southeast Asia apart from those crafted by Newar artists in Nepal and Tibet. The climate in Tibet is even more congenial for the survival of wood than that of the Kathmandu Valley.

2 — A Comparative Study of the Three Scientifically Examined Images

Of the three figures, the best preserved is certainly the Roncoroni example, as both its arms are extant which, together with the distinctive shape and features of the crown, are clear indicators of his precise identity. The right arm is extended towards the ground with the hand displaying the gesture known in Sanskrit as *varada*, which means boon, giving, or charity. Likely the same gesture was once displayed by the damaged outstretched hands of the other two figures. The left hand too is better preserved in the Roncoroni figure than in the Turin example, as is made clear from the two side views (Figs. 5-6). It should be mentioned that the left arm of the Pritzker figure moves slightly away from the body, and the hand was likely not turned inward to touch the sash as in the other two. There is no indication that any of the three figures held the stalk of the lotus flower, as may be seen in the Gana Bahal sculpture in situ in the Kathmandu Valley (Fig. 7). The Pritzker figure, however, may have held a thunderbolt with the left hand and possibly represented Vajrāpāṇi, as is seen in the Dhvaka Baha image and the bronze in Los Angeles (Figs. 8 and 9).

The Roncoroni statue has greater similarity to the Turin figure than the Pritzker example, which is stylistically a different cup of tea. Apart from its gesso-coated surface and better-preserved colors, the Pritzker bodhisatva has distinctly different proportions, evident in both the body and the face, which exhibits delicately articulated features; it is also more richly adorned with ornaments, including the crown. Moreover, the orientation of the sash is different in the Pritzker figure. It is noteworthy that in all three instances, the figure is not provided with any sacred cord (*upavīta*) descending from the left shoulder, as is found in the Gana Bahal Avalokiteshvara (Fig. 7) but absent in the Dhvaka Baha Vajrapāṇi (Fig. 8) and some other examples.^[6]



What is further notable is that the three figures have distinctly different crowns. The Pritzker crown is apparently of the conventional variety, with three oval crests but with a difference: the leonine face or *kīritimukha* (face of glory) motif adorning the central crest is more commonly encountered on crowns of the Hindu god Vishṇu than on that of a bodhisatva. In addition, he has a prominent red belt with hanging tassels hugging his hips which is absent in the other two. This is also a feature of Vishṇu images such as the two examples inscribed on the Vishṇu Vikrānta stele of 467 CE installed by the Licchavi monarch Mānadeva (464-505 CE); in both, the crowns have three crests but with damaged surfaces.^[7]

The tiara of the Turin bodhisatva presents us with yet another variation. Here, only a single crest tapers to a narrow summit whose earliest presence in Nepal was known hitherto from a small metal image of Vajrapāṇi now in the Heeramanek Collection in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (fig. 9). Here, of course, its shape is more mitre-like than in the wood figure. While this type of crown became a standard feature of Indra images in Nepal later on, its earliest use may be seen on the head of the malevolent serpent king, Kāliya, who is being subdued by the child Krishna in the 7th century tableau preserved in the Hanuman Dhoka palace in Kathmandu, perhaps the most dramatic representation of the theme in all Hindu art.^[8]

Even more fascinating is the design of the crown in the Roncoroni sculpture. Here, too, the crown has three crests, as in the Pritzker example (Fig. 2), but their shapes are strongly defined in two plain triangles flanking the taller central segment, forming a grotto or shallow niche within which stands a Buddha, like a miniature of the monumental Buddhas in early cave shrines in India and Afghanistan. By the Gupta period (320–450 CE) in India, it had become common to add a tiny effigy of a seated, meditating Buddha to the head of a bodhisatva as is also the case with Gana Bahal Buddha (Fig. 7), but the appearance of a standing Buddha in this context is rare as discussed below.

3 — Other Examples of Early Lokeśvaras

A sculpture has recently come to light at the obscure Kuleshvar Mahadev temple in Kathmandu which is a lithic duplicate of the timber Roncoroni Lokeśvara, though with some noteworthy differences (Figs. 10A-B). It has been published by Gautam Vajracharya and Ulrich von Schroeder; the former dates it to the 6th century, and Von Schroeder suggests 5th/6th century, but provides no reason for the earlier date. I have not seen the sculpture in situ, but based on the detailed and clear photographs, here are a few comments about it.^[9]



Fig. 10A



Fig. 10B

Unlike the Roncoroni wood, the right arm of the stone figure stretches close to the body with the hand rendered awkwardly which may well indicate inadequate repair in modern times. The manner in which the left hand grasps the long stem of the lotus is also unusual and differs from all other known examples of the period. Curiously, there is no indication of a bracelet on the right wrist as is the case on the left, but both arms bear armlets, absent in the Turin and Roncoroni figures.

What is most unusual, however, is the complexity of decoration of the crown, which is a single piece shaped like that of the metal Vajrapāṇī (Fig. 9). This similarity aside, the decoration of the stone bodhisatva's regal emblem is luxuriant compared to the Roncoroni figure. As mentioned above, while the Buddha in the central crest in the wood figure is seemingly enconced in a cave, in the stone example, he seems to be standing below a tree whose trunk rises along his left with the canopy above. The surface on both sides is filled with gems and swirling vegetal designs as if the artist wished to leave no doubt of the luxuriant ambiance. Noteworthy also is the rendering of the hair, which falls behind the ears in long braids instead of the horizontal bun on the wood figure.

The closest comparisons of these bodhisatvas by Newar artists are sculptures of the Sarnath school of the 5th century (Figs. 11-12). While the Sarnath figures are both represented as ascetics, in the Nepali examples we note a combination of the ascetic and the regal. In the stele of the Buddha from the Sarnath Museum where the bodhisatva is a celestial attendant (Fig. 12B), he has an ascetic hairdo with no Buddha effigy, but wears a strand of pearls around his neck. He is placed at the right shoulder of the larger Buddha like an angel and grasps the stem of the lotus with his left hand; the raised, damaged right hand would have displayed the gesture of adoration of the Buddha (*Tathāgata vandanā*). The corresponding figure on the other side of the stele is Maitreya, whose right arm is also broken and would have displayed the same gesture. Unusually, in neither instance is a miniature Buddha, either standing or seated, added to the hair, and each stands on an open lotus flower whose stems emanate from the Buddha's body.



Fig. 11



Fig. 12A



Fig. 12B

It may also be pointed out that in this angelic representation of Avalokitesvara we encounter the disposition of the lotus flower facing the bodhisatva exactly like that rendered by the sculptor of the Gana Bahal Avalokiteśvara (Fig. 7), which is unusual. The Gana Bahal sculpture has also been dated to the 6th century by most scholars who have published it, but here too, the Buddha in the crown is seated rather than standing.^[10]

No less interesting is a larger stele with a standing figure of the bodhisatva in the Indian Museum Kolkata (Fig. 11). Here, we encounter the perfect model of the Nepali bodhisatvas with important variations: first, it has simple serpentine armlets, and second, no crown on the head.^[11] Instead, a seated meditating Buddha is added against the matted hair, a carpet covers the Buddha's elaborate throne, and a halo appears behind his head. The throne back is carved like a liana or snakeheads. What, however, is most striking, is the design of the ascetic-style hair of the bodhisatva, partly rolled sausage-like on top with other strands falling elegantly down both shoulders. In my opinion, this is the source of the arrangement of the distinctive *jaṭā* that we encounter on the Roncoroni figure and in a more extended variation in the Phagga Lokeśvara image and its copies discussed below (Figs. 15A and B, below).^[12]

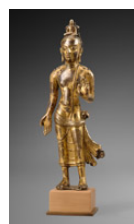


Fig. 13

It would be appropriate to introduce here another Avalokitesvara image once in the Roncoroni collection whose existence may be known only to a few, as it has been included recently in a privately published catalogue (Fig. 13).^[13] The only comments the authors make in the catalogue are that the bronze is from India and was cast in the Gupta period generally, and in the 6th century in particular, likely in a workshop near Sarnath.

Interestingly, the figure is strictly ascetic with no regal accoutrement, not even the string of pearls. The hairdo is almost completely invisible from the front, making the seated Buddha a more robustly modeled figure. However, he does sport a cord of the brahman caste and the sash, whose folds swing away from the body with great flourish. What is strange though, is the absence of the lotus attribute. Instead, the left hand forms the *abhaya* or the gesture of reassurance with a natural elegance. The body proportion and modeling are as suave as that of the Sarnath stone sculpture (Fig. 11), but with greater plasticity. Even though the absence of the lotus is inexplicable, that the figure represents Avalokiteśvara can be in no doubt because of the crowning Buddha Amitābha.

This fluid state of early Buddhist iconography is also evident when the Roncoroni wood (Fig. 3) and the Kuleshvar Mahadeva stone images (Fig. 10) are compared: not only in the designs and iconography of the crowns, but also in the additional armlets and bracelets given to the stone, and in the manner he clasps the stalk of the lotus, which the wood figure does not have. One must also keep in mind that even in the later periods when the descriptions were recorded in texts such as the *Sādhanaṃālā*, other variations of both iconography and style are not uncommon. No early texts with visualizations are extant in India or Nepal.

What is clear is that no other Avalokiteśvara with a standing Buddha in the tiara has yet been found in the subcontinent or anywhere else in the Buddhist world. The inclusion of a standing Buddha on the regal bodhisatva's crown is known only from these two sculptures - the Roncoroni wood and the Kuleshvar stone - and two others, also likely created by Newar artists of the Licchavi period. One is the famous Phagga (*Ārya*) Lokeśvara still in worship in the Potala shrine in Lhasa (Figs. 15A and B, below), the other is a portable bronze in the Walters Art Museum collection in Baltimore (Fig. 14).^[14] Probably cast late in the 9th century, the Walters bronze remains the only metal rendering of the bodhisatva with a standing Buddha in the middle crest of a crown of the typical Nepali design. Characteristic also is the rendering of the sacred string forming a loop over the diagonal sash across the thighs. No sacred thread is provided in the early Nepali bodhisatvas including Phagga Lokeśvara, but it is prominent in the Sarnath metal image (Fig. 13), demonstrating that by the Gupta period in India, the bodhisatvas were strangely recognized as "brahmans".^[15] In any event, the fold of the thread going over the sash in the Walters bronze is a distinctly Newar touch, while the absence of the lotus flower clearly continues the manner observed earlier in the Roncoroni bronze and the famous Phagga Lokeśvara of Tibet (Fig. 15A and B) discussed below.



Fig. 14

4 — The Standing Buddha in the Crown



The form of a Lokeśvara with a standing Buddha in the crown was the choice for the most celebrated and sacred bodhisatva image of Buddhist Tibet in the Potala in Lhasa, known as Phagpa Lokeśvara. The prefix *phagpa* is a translation of the Sanskrit *ārya*, meaning noble. Both this image and that known as Jobo or Śākyāmuni are generally not visible because they are covered with luxurious robes.[16] However, once the image of Phagpa was unveiled in 1992 to be repainted, the American scholar Ian Alsop was a witness and was able to provide photographic documentation of the conclusions of his revelatory article of 1990.[17]

As seen in the photographs reproduced here, the golden image with matted hair painted in indigo is closely related iconographically to the Roncoroni wood figure, but with some differences (Figs. 15A and B). Except for the ears, the torsos in both are without any ornaments. The left hand rests on the sash and grasps no lotus stalk as also observed in the Walters bronze (Fig. 14). The design of the tiara with the standing Buddha in the central panel differs, and the horizontal arrangement of the ascetic hairdo is given more prominence in the Lhasa figure. Noteworthy too is the difference in the disposition of the right arm in the two examples: somewhat awkward in the Potala figure, but in the Roncoroni example it is more elegantly extended as it displays the *varada* gesture.

The Phagpa Lokeśvara is said to have been installed by King Songtsen Gampo, which would make it a 7th century image. Stylistically, this date is not incompatible even though it is heavily painted. I do feel that even if we ignored the scientific data, both the Turin and Roncoroni figures are earlier, and the latter may well have served as the model for the Phagpa image. The differences in the design of the crown and the shape of the hair bun are probably due to artistic choice rather than iconographic imperative. The design of the crown is more robust in the Roncoroni figure than in the other, whereas the horizontal mass of hair is more prominent in the latter.

In the late Kushan period in the Indian subcontinent, we see triads with a central Buddha flanked by two bodhisattvas, one of whom is very likely Avalokiteśvara, with a seated meditating Buddha in his headdress both in Gandhara and at Mathura. By the 5th century, as is seen in the Gupta bronze (Fig. 13), the seated Buddha is the more common form and is identified as Amitābha, his spiritual father. No textual passage, however, has so far been found from any period in Sanskrit or Pali where the Buddha depicted in the crown is described as standing. None of the three texts of the early centuries of the Common Era—the Lotus Sutra, the *Prajñāpāramitā* Sutra or the *Kāraṇḍavyūha*, include precise iconographic visualizations of the bodhisatva. The *Kāraṇḍavyūha*, particularly, was of great importance to both Nepal and Tibet, where it is said to have dropped from the sky miraculously on the roof of the royal palace.[18]

As I continued my search and consulted the magisterial book by the eminent authority on East Asian art, Alexander C. Soper [1959], about the early literary evidence for Buddhist art in China, the answer popped up in a passage he quoted from Takakusu's 1895 translation. The text is the "Sūtra on Visualizing The Buddha Amitāyus", dating to the 5th century CE. As Soper writes, in the text, "the special relationship between Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta and this Earth is restated in a different sense" than it was in the earlier text on the Western Paradise.[19] Noted further by Soper, it is in this sutra that we get the first iconographic description of Avalokiteśvara that is entirely different from the later, but more familiar, *dhyāna* or visualization. I quote here the hyperbolic but relevant portion of the long text in Takakusu's translation:

"The Bodhisattva's body is eighty millions of *niyutas* of *yojanas* tall and is purplish gold in color. At the crown of His head is an *uṣṇiṣa*; at the nape of his neck is a round halo [...]. On his head is a celestial crown fashioned of wondrous gems, *within which is a standing magically-created Buddha, twenty-five yojanas tall...*" (italics added)

There is no doubt, therefore, that the Nepali and Tibetan images discussed here are not simply the whims of Newar artists, but follow this earliest visualization of an Indian Buddhist theologian in the above-mentioned sutra. Noteworthy further is the color of the bodhisattva which is described as "purplish gold." This is unusual for the generally described complexion is red (and hence *rāto* Lokesvara) as is the case with our wood figure. However, the Phagpa Lokeśvara has a coat of gold.

Soper cites another early text that mentions Avalokiteśvara but does not say anything about it containing any visualization. As he writes, "In 420 the Indian scholar Nandi rendered into Chinese a so-called *Dharanī* spell sutra that implores the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara to counteract evil influences." It is interesting to note that Nandi then goes on to describe when once while Buddha was preaching in Vaiśālī, "the city was suffering from a mysterious epidemic" (like the one we are struggling with now), and a delegation of citizens waited on him to seek aid. His answer was:

"Not far from here, due west, is a world honored Buddha Amitāyus. He has two Bodhisattvas called Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta, who because of Their great pity and sympathy for all are continually giving succour from sorrow and peril. Do you, therefore, prostrate yourselves in honor of these beings, burn incense, scatter flowers, and keep your thoughts fixed on them for the space of several breaths, not letting your minds wander while you invoke Them ten times. In this way should you implore that Buddha and his two Bodhisattvas on behalf of all creatures."

Interestingly, while Amitābha is the Buddha of Eternal Light, Amitāyus is the Buddha of Eternal life. Perhaps, therefore, Nandi's spell was meant as an antidote to the epidemic or pestilence that he may have experienced or that may have occurred in Vaiśālī during the Buddha's visit.[20]

What is certain is that in the 6th century, Buddhists in Nepal were familiar with the visualization in the Amitāyus Sutra mentioned above which then became the model for the Kuleswar Mahadeva and Roncoroni images, and in the following century for the palladium of the state as Phagpa Lokeśvara in Tibet. As the numerous subsequent copies demonstrate, the bodhisatva has remained extremely popular there ever since.[21] In Nepal, however, his popularity seems to have been limited to the Licchavi period, beginning at least since the 6th century demonstrated by the Kuleshwara stone and the Roncoroni wood figures.

5 — The Savior Deity

In solving the mystery of Avalokiteśvara with the standing Buddha in the crown, a few further comments on the nature and theology of the bodhisatva concept and iconography will not be out of place at this point. It is now well-known that, notwithstanding his other transformations—even of gender in East Asia—he remains the principal and most popular deity of the vast Buddhist pantheon after the Buddha himself.

It is sometimes stated that as his name contains the phrase *īśvara*, which is a common epithet of the Hindu god Shiva, he is somehow a Buddhist version of Maheśvara. However, functionally, as a savior par excellence, he is closer to Viṣṇu than Shiva. In fact, his function and iconography also indicate his benevolent nature; he is sometimes golden like Viṣṇu and wears a crown in front of his ascetic's matted hair and, most significantly, his principal attribute is the lotus, which is one of Viṣṇu's attributes and never of Shiva. Like Viṣṇu, he is the surveyor (*avalokita*) and is compassion personified, as is clear

from his distinctive epithet *mahākāruṇika* or the Great Compassionate One. This is not to deny that he does also sport the ascetic hairdo of Shiva, but otherwise he lacks most of Shiva's menacing characteristics, like the skull, the snake etc., or his destructive nature. If indeed the suffix *śvara* of Avalokitesvara is borrowed from Shiva, the function of looking over the world (*avalokita*) sounds similar to Vishṇu's role as the preserver of the cosmos. [22]

In his iconography, however, Avalokitesvara combines both the regal and ascetic ideals. His hair is worn matted, generally *jatāmukūṭa*, as is Shiva's, though in these instances and, especially in the Potala image most prominently, the matted locks do not rise like a crown (*mukūṭa*), but roll horizontally on either side, perhaps to distinguish him as a spiritual son of Amitūyus rather than Amitābha. At the same time, he is also given a tall crown imitating the *kirītamukūṭa* of Vishṇu, symbolizing both their regal nature and sovereignty.

It is not without significance that the theistic Hindu deity, Vāsudeva/Vishṇu, came into prominence around second century BC as the supreme deity of the Bhagavata/Pāñcarātra system of Brāhmanical/Hindu religion. The great text called the *Bhagavadgītā* was composed around then. Bhagavat is also a common epithet of the Buddha in early Buddhist literature just as the word *ārya*, meaning noble, is an honorific applied equally by followers of both orthodox and heterodox religionists.

The most important doctrine of avatar is announced in the *Bhagavadgītā*, but this had already been accepted in early Buddhism in the belief that the past Buddha, Dīpaṅkara, would reappear as Śākyamuni. The concept was familiar in the Jain faith as well in the succession of the twenty-four teachers beginning with Ādinātha or Rīṣabhanātha (Lord of the Bull, also applicable to Shiva), and ending in the historical Mahāvīra (5th century BCE).



Fig. 16

In the Buddha's life, another example of avatar theory is apparent in the story of his ascent to the heavens to preach his message to his deceased mother, and his subsequent descent (*avatīrṇa*) down three ladders escorted by Indra (Śakra) and Brahmā, two Vedic gods, rather than Brahmā and Viṣṇu/Shiva of the later Hindu triad. This episode of the Buddha's life had a particular resonance among the Buddhist Newars of the Kathmandu Valley as shown by the scholar Gautam Vajracharya. While writing about the inscribed gilt-bronze Buddha of the 7th century now in the Kimbell Art Museum in Texas, USA, he argued that the image represents the Devāvatāra of the Buddha (Fig. 16) [23] Interestingly, the brief inscription on the base of the image uses the Sanskrit expression *gaṇḍabimba* to characterize the figure, reminding us of the title of the well-known *Gaṇḍavyūha*. As far as I know, this is the only inscriptional reference of an image of a standing Buddha as a *gaṇḍabimba*. The first meaning of the word *gaṇḍa* is cheek, but it also means "large", so the expression may mean a "grand image." As we have seen in the above quoted passage of the *Amitāyus Sutra*, the bodhisatva's form is of colossal proportions, as is also the case with the images of the Buddha, a popular form of Indic euphemism. [24]

The idea of movement is inherent in the word avatar, derived from the verb *avatīrṇa*, meaning to descend. That the Newar Buddhists should consider the upright images as devāvatāra is not surprising, though unusual, since it is not familiar in any other Buddhist tradition. However, it should be noted that in Thailand, the image of the so-called walking Buddha, representing the scene of Buddha's descent from heaven, became very popular in art of the Lopburi period, while in the earlier period, there is the strange iconography of the Buddha standing or seated on a flying, mythical bird, just as Vishṇu descends on his *garuḍa* vehicle sometimes as a savior. The story of Māyā's conception of the future Buddha in the form of the auspicious elephant reflects the avatar trope as well.

6 — Conclusion

What is important is that, at present, we must assume that the magnificent sculpture of Avalokitesvara in the Roncoroni collection is the earliest known and the most splendid example of a carved timber image in South Asia, though the legends assert that the tradition of making wood images began in the life of the Buddha when King Udayana had a sandalwood portrait carved while Buddha went to preach to his mother in heaven. [25] This miracle has continued to resonate in the memory of the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley like so many other early Indian religious practices from Vedic times.

Aesthetically an outstanding product of the ancient Newar creative genius in woodcarving, the Roncoroni figure is a major discovery for South Asian art history, and indeed for the history of Buddhist art generally. It is also the earliest surviving example that could have served as the model for the Phagpa Lokeśvara image that was adopted by the seventh century Tibetan emperor, Songtsen Gampo, as a palladium of that nation.

We Indians who study the cultures and arts of the Himalayan communities, whether in Nepal or in Tibet, must remember that, while Buddhism originated in North India, in each region—and particularly in Tibet with a greater variety of Indigenous cultures and traditions—the ultimate mixture was a distinctive brew. The cult of Phagpa Lokeśvara is only one example of such assimilation. Nor should one forget the significant artistic contribution of the Newars as intermediaries in the process. No matter the importance of myths and texts, it is now clear that art played a compelling role in the transmission of spiritual and theological ideas from one region to another. The concept of the savior deity Lokeśvara or Avalokitesvara appealed both to the Newars in Nepal and to the imperial Yarlung dynasty of Tibet and inspired the most exalted expression in wood that has been the subject of this discussion.

It would be appropriate here to quote yet another passage from a Buddhist text contained in the Dunhuang Tibetan manuscripts, as we wallow in these troublesome times in the world:

"But, if perchance, you fear you might fall, there is a bodhisatva called the exalted Avalokiteśvara, who will protect you straight away from the great hell. Remember his name, pray to him... recite his mantra, beseech him for refuge and you will be freed from that awful place." [26]

Finally, the "gaṇḍabimba" or "grand image" of the Bodhisatva Avalokitesvara that has inspired this discussion may well have served as the principal deity in a temple dedicated to him. [27] Or, it may have been a companion along with Mahasthāmaprāpta (the one of enormous strength) flanking the central figure of Buddha Amitāyus (Infinite Life). In either case, it remains the earliest evidence from South Asia of the cult of the Western Paradise that played so important a role in the history of Buddhism in East Asia.

Acknowledgements:

The wood sculpture that is the subject of this preliminary study was first published in a Christie's auction catalogue in Paris in 2008. In 2016, the new owner, Chino Roncoroni, a prominent dealer and collector of Himalayan art, sent me the photographs of the object after it had been cleaned and scientifically examined with appropriate documentation and asked me to write a short report, which I was glad to do as it was one of the most exciting objects I had seen in a long time.

I am grateful to Chino Roncoroni for encouraging the research needed to write this preliminary study of this important discovery in the twilight of a long life devoted to exploring the history of the art of Nepal for over six decades. I also thank his associate Iwona Tenzing for her support of this project and help with finding images and citations. It is also a pleasure to thank Ian Alsop for many telephone discussions of the piece and for accepting the publication of this article in *Asianart.com*. My thanks are also due to his colleagues: Vajra Alsop and Sameer Tuladhar, for their technical cooperation with photography and the production of the article.

Among others who helped me mention must be made of my friend Rob Aft for diligently editing and polishing the text. Most of all, my gratitude to my able assistant Caroline Friedman for her unstinting cooperation in preparing this manuscript with remarkable patience, her skills in searching the internet for bibliographic and photographic references as well as all the computer related needs. Finally, I am happy to acknowledge my wife Chitralekha's contribution: notwithstanding her health problems; she took care of her "caretaker" cheerfully, while I concentrated on this task.



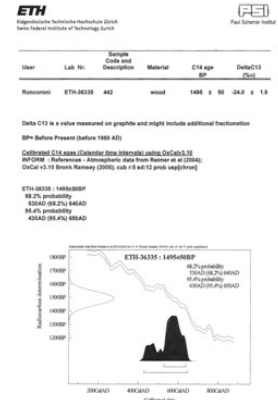
Dr. Pal in his office at LACMA, 1989
photo: Madan Mukhopadhyay

Dr. Pratapaditya Pal is a world-renowned Asian art scholar. He was born in Bangladesh and grew up in Kolkata. He was educated at the universities of Calcutta and Cambridge (U.K.). In 1967, Dr. Pal moved to the U.S. and took a curatorial position as the 'Keeper of the Indian Collection' at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. He has lived in the United States ever since. In 1970, he joined the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and worked there as the Senior Curator of Indian and Southeast Asian Art until retirement in 1995. He has also been Visiting Curator of Indian, Himalayan and Southeast Asian Art at the Art Institute of Chicago (1995–2003) and Fellow for Research at the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena (1995–2005). Dr. Pal was General Editor of *Marg* from 1993 to 2012. He has written over 70 books on Asian art, whose titles include, *Art of the Himalayas: Treasures from Nepal and Tibet* (1992), *The Peaceful Liberators: Jain Art from India* (1994) and *The Arts of Kashmir* (2008). A regular contributor to *Asianart.com* among other journals at the age of 87+, Dr. Pal has just published a biography of Coomaraswamy titled: *Quest for Coomaraswamy: A Life in the Arts* (2020).

Appendix: Provenance information and C-14 analysis
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1. Provenance statement from Christie's Paris



2. Calibrated C14 ages from ETH Zurich

Endnotes

1. Ingalls 1965, 64. The verse is quoted in the Buddhist abbot Vidyākara's treasury of Sanskrit poems. Vidyākara, according to Ingalls (p.30), lived in the second half of the 11th century and the works he compiled were composed by poets between the 5th century and his own time. According to the 17th c. Tibetan scholar, Taranath, Ratnakīrti may have been a disciple of Chandragomin, a celebrated Buddhist scholiast of the 7th century.
2. As quoted in Pal 1974: 6-7.
3. Von Schroeder 2001 V.1: 407-431.
4. Slusser 2010.
5. Slusser 2010: 226-229, and appendix 2, pp 264-265 (C-14 test results). As I was correcting the proofs of this article the announcement of a new book on wood carving arrived which I could not consult: Gutschow and Rajbansh 2023.
6. Pal 1974: Figs. 8 (Gana Baha), 14 (Dhvaka Baha Vajrapāni); but note the Avalokiteshvara in the Dhvaka baha caitya does appear to show a sacred thread. see von Schroeder 2019, 285E p. 921. Von Schroeder 2019. pl 319B. pp.1016-17 for Gana Bahal: images pl 285 (A,B,C,D & E), pp. 920-921 for Dhvaka Baha Shrine.
7. Pal 1974: Figs. 1-2. The earliest occurrences of a tiara with circular crests may be seen in a royal portrait (?) of ca. 300 CE now in the National Museum Kathmandu. See Pal 1974: Fig. 62 and Vajracharya 2016, Fig. 14.
8. Pal 1974: Fig. 90 and Slusser 1982.V.2: Fig. 404.
9. Von Schroeder 2019: 1016 and 1028 (Fig. VIII-1 [319A, 325E] and Vajracharya 2020, no. 2, 86-94 (Fig. 2). This obscurely situated sculpture was missed by me, Slusser and Alsop in all our surveys in the Valley.
10. See Vajracharya 2020 p 93. : "the well-known Avalokiteshvara image at Gana Bahal ... which can be securely dated to circa 550 on the basis of the inscription carved on the pedestal, now separated from the original image and reused on another Buddhist image a metre or so away" see also Slusser, 1982, appendix IV-1, no 40.
11. The *sarpavālaya*, however, is seen in the Dhvaka Baha bodhisatvas (Fig. 8) and/or in other images including Vishṇu in Nepal by the 6th century, and in Sarnath bodhisatvas a century earlier. Its relevance for Avalokiteshvara remains unexplained, but in Hindu images it is more common with Shiva than Vishṇu.
12. Within Nepal, see also the image at Chapagaon of Brahmā of the 6th century and/or the clear representation of the horizontal arrangement of the hair (Pal 1974: Fig. 11; von Schroeder 2019, vol. 1, pl 31A, p. 130). The further extension in a drooping manner beyond the head seems to be a Tibetan invention as seen in the Phagpa Lokeśvara of Lhasa. This idiosyncrasy is attributed by Roncoroni and Tenzing to the royal hairstyle of Tibetan rulers (2020:448).
13. Roncoroni and Tenzing 2020: 260-261.
14. Pal 2001: 186-187.

15. As far as I know, no explanation is available why the Buddhists introduced this caste sign in the Gupta period for Avalokitesvara (See Pal 1974: Fig. 22 for a 5th century Sarnath stone image). It is also found in images of Maitreya, who, however, is supposed to be born into a brahman family. (See Joshi and Jarrige 2007: Fig. 35, 198-199). The cord is not commonly seen in Deccani images of the bodhisatva.

16. Interestingly, in early Indian art of all religious persuasions from the Maurya period (324-187 BCE), all gods wear turbans. By the Kushan period, the crown or tiara becomes the norm for many deities, such as Indra and Vishnu in Hinduism. In Buddhist art of both Gandhara and Mathura, the bodhisatvas continue to wear the turban, but by the 5th-6th century CE the tiara begins to appear for bodhisatvas and even certain Buddha images. Almost certainly the tiara or crown is an import from Western Asia, as is the custom of clothing the images with real sumptuous robes and luxurious garments.

17. Alsop 1990 and 1999. When Alsop wrote about the Phagpa in 1990 on the basis of a visit to Lhasa in 1986, he had not yet seen the Phagpa without his robes. That opportunity came a few years later when he revisited the shrine and brought the gold for repainting the image, at which time he was permitted to photograph the naked deity. These are the photos that were published subsequently by Ulrich von Schroeder 2021 (as per Ian Alsop's email dated 18 October, 2022).

18. It should be stressed that these sort of miraculous stories were known in China as early as the 5th century. See Soper 1959: 93 for the story of a village of pious Buddhists who were about to be persecuted by the "barbarian ruler of Western Ch'in in Shansi, Ch'i-fu Mu-mo (r. 428-431)" when villagers all prayed fervently to "Avalokitesvara." Writes Soper, "to save them just at that moment, Mu-mo saw something fly down from the sky and circle a pillar of his dwelling. He watched in amazement and discovered that it was a copy of *Avalokitesvara Sūtra*. He had someone read it to him, and then, in his joy, cancelled the sentence of execution."

This is obviously the source of the story that Tibetan scholars refer to regarding the *Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra*, along with other texts, arriving in a casket from the sky, landing on the roof of the palace of the 28th king of Tibet in the pre-historic line. We would have to believe in "drones" having been created in ancient times to drop such sutras in Shensi and Lhasa.

19. Soper 1959: 150-151 both for this reference and the following citations about Nandi's narrative of the Buddha, and the pestilence in Vaiśālī.

20. This is how the famous *Pañcarakṣā* (Five Protections) spells or *dhāraṇī* were created as well. As also is believed Avalokitesvara is well-known as the protector par excellence from the eight great calamities both on land and water.

21. See Alsop 1990 and von Schroeder 2001 for reproductions of numerous copies through the ages among Tibetans and Newars in a variety of media.

22. A popular epithet of the bodhisatva is Lokanātha, which is similar to the famous Jagannātha of Puri in Orissa whose annual chariot festival has given the English language the term "juggernaut." Jagannātha means: *nātha* (lord) of the *jagat* (world) which makes it a synonym of Lokanātha. The confused later equation of the saints of the apparently Shaiva Nātha cult with Lokeśvara/Lokanātha in the valley is interesting. Incidentally, though not as famous, the annual chariot festival of Macchendranāth enjoys great popularity in Nepal. Both these festivals, as well as others elsewhere in India, related to Vishṇu, continue the many different and ancient Buddhist *rathayātrā* or chariot festivals mentioned by Chinese pilgrims in India and Khotan in Central Asia.

23. Vajracharya 2016: 162-164.

24. For a variant explanation of the word *ganḍa*, see Vajracharya 2016: 164, where he says that in Pali and Sanskrit dictionaries, the word also denotes a woman's breasts and bubble. Certainly in the Indic sculptural tradition, no one can deny the preoccupation with large and globular breasts and hips of women in expressions such as *stana-kalaśa* (pot-breasted) or *gurubhāra nitamba* (weighty-hip).

25. For a brilliant and comprehensive discussion of Indian images in timber and other material in Chinese literature which can be dated, see Soper 1959: 259-273. The title of this long appendix is "The Best Known Indian Images."

26. Kapstein 2000: 8.

27. Temples with Lokeśvara images do exist in both Nepal and Tibet, that of Phagpa Lokeśvara in Lhasa being the the most important in Tibet. For Nepal, see Slusser 1982 and Vajracharya 2016. In fact, Nepal has preserved paintings (paubhā) of shrines of Avalokitesvara where he is the principal deity (Vajracharya 2016: 110-114). See also Alsop, 2023. Interestingly, while the two forms of Avalokitesvara in Nepal are painted Red (Rāto) and White (Sveto), the Noble Avalokitesvara of Potala is painted in gold.

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