

[Back to Exhibition Index](#)***Shakyamuni with two hundred Buddhas*** ([Image](#))

Thangka, painting

Cotton support with opaque mineral pigments in waterbased (collagen) binder

23.0 x 27.0 inches

Ca. 15th or 16th century

Folk tradition

Museum #: 94.007

By Wei Lin

3 June, 1998

In Mahayana and Tantric traditions, every being has the potential of enlightenment within him or herself. It is commonly stated that there are as many Buddhas as there are stars in the sky. Various Buddhas preside over specific periods of time as well. There are the Buddhas of the past, the Buddha of the present, and the Buddha of the future. The figure in the center of this painting is possibly Shakyamuni, the Buddha of the present time.

Shakyamuni is seated in meditative posture upon a lotus pedestal that rests on an elaborate throne. The Buddha wears a red robe covering his left shoulder. The aura and halo behind him are decorated with floral motifs. His right hand makes the *bhumisparsha*, or earth-touching, gesture and his left hand holds a begging bowl on his lap.

Flanking the central Buddha are two Bodhisattvas standing on pedestals. The Bodhisattva to the right of the Buddha possibly makes the *dharmachakra*, or teaching, gesture, and the one to the left makes the *anjali*, or devotion, gesture. The Bodhisattvas face the central figure and show respect to the Buddha. As the Bodhisattvas possess no distinguishable attributes, their specific identification is not possible.

The top section of the throne is marked with a semicircular *prabha*, or radiant light. Depicted in the top center of the throne is a Garuda who is the solar bird controlling the *nagas*, or water serpents. Two *hamsas*, or geese, are represented one on each side of the throne, and their tails turn into the swirling patterns. The middle section of the throne bears representations of two *shardulas*, or lion-like mythical creatures, standing on elephants. A lion is also depicted on each side of the base of the throne.

Two seated figures are depicted on each side above the central Buddha. The proper right figure has four arms. In his upper right and left hands he holds a rosary and possibly a lotus respectively. His lower right hand displays the *vitarka*, or bestowal, gesture. The lower left hand is placed on the lap. The identity of the figure is unclear. The proper left figure is the Buddha Amitabha who displays the *dhyana*, or meditation, gesture while supporting a bowl. Amitabha is the Buddha who presides over this *kalpa*, or eon.

Surrounding the central group are two hundred Buddha figures. They appear identical with the central Buddha. The multiplicity of Buddhas demonstrates the universality of Buddhahood. It also

symbolizes that all Buddhas are essentially identical. The Aryabhadrakalpa-sutra records that there will be One Thousand Buddhas during a particular auspicious era. Each of the Buddhas in the text is identified by specific names, characteristics and mantras, or recitations. This represents a promise of future enlightenment for every individual being. Thus, the two hundred Buddhas depicted here are possibly intended as a reference to the One Thousand Buddhas of the Aryabhadrakalpa-sutra. The painting may have belonged to a set of five works. If this is the case, the main figure in this painting may not necessarily be the Buddha Shakyamuni, but the Buddha Akshobya, one of the five jina, or victor, Buddhas of the jina mandala. The other four paintings in the set would have had representations of the four remaining jina Buddhas surrounded by two hundred Buddhas each.

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