

*The Art of Pāla India (8th-12th centuries)
and Its International Legacy*

LEAVES FROM THE *BODHI* TREE





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1990

Published by The Dayton Art Institute
in Association with the University of Washington Press,
Seattle and London





49.
Maitreya Bodhisattva. Probably India, Bihar. Ca.
twelfth century.

MAITREYA BODHISATTVA (TUṢITA MAITREYA)

Probably India, Bihar

Ca. twelfth century, Pāla period

Copper alloy (untested) with silver and copper inlay

H: 7 1/4" W: 5 5/8" D: 3 1/4"

Mr. and Mrs. John Gilmore Ford

Illustrated in color

The Bodhisattva Maitreya, the future Buddha, may be recognized by the small *stūpa* that appears in his headdress and the flower (presumably the *nāgakesara* flower) that he holds in his left hand. Upon the flower is another of Maitreya's attributes, a vase (*kamaṇḍalu* or *kuṇḍikā*), which is considered to be a receptacle of knowledge (*jñānabhāṇḍa*). The heir-apparent to Śākyamuni Buddha, Maitreya is the embodiment of love, friendliness, and benevolence. Popular throughout the Buddhist realms, he appears in art both as a Bodhisattva, as in this example, and as a Buddha (cat. no. 72).

Maitreya is seated in *rājalilāsana*, a posture of royal ease (literally, "king's 'playing' posture") in which both legs are bent, with one knee resting on the seat and the other raised and the feet close together. The Bodhisattva supports his body by leaning against his left arm, while his right arm is bent and rests on his right leg. The angular appearance of his posture is accentuated by the broad shoulders, narrow waist, and flattened torso. The figure is adorned with necklaces, armbands, anklets, earrings, and a tiara. His hair is piled into an elaborate, high *jaṭāmukūṭa* (crown of matted hair). His upper torso is bare, but he wears a lower garment that is decorated with a circle motif that may reflect a textile design current when the image was made.

Maitreya's facial features display typical features of late Pāla period images. His face is flat and broad and his eyebrows and eyes have curvaceous outlines. The upper lids are drooping and heavy and cover the upper half of the eyeball. The eyeball has a drilled center, giving the

Bodhisattva's gaze a directional look.

The Bodhisattva sits atop a highly ornate pedestal. While a few examples of such elaborate pedestals survive in the Pāla repertoire, this one is unusual in its diamond-shaped base, which contrasts with the more common rectangular, round, or rounded triangular bases seen in Pāla metal images. The lower edge of the base is decorated with a bead motif that is common in Pāla metal images and is characterized by fully rounded beads. In contrast, emulations of the Pāla style produced elsewhere in Asia, particularly in Tibet, often render the beaded edge simply by using slashes to demarcate the beads. Above the beaded edge is a geometric band, followed by a row of lotus petals, above which is a foliate scroll motif. The double lotus pedestal that serves as the Bodhisattva's seat is above the scroll and is edged by another row of beading.

An unusual feature of this work is that the figure and the small cushion upon which he sits are detachable from the base. In turn, the base itself was created by joining at least three separate sections. The reason for keeping the figure and the pedestal separate is unknown.

This image was sculpted completely in the round, and the back is as beautifully finished as the front. The absence of a tenon on the back makes it unlikely that a halo had been attached to the piece.

This sculpture was probably the product of a twelfth-century workshop, as suggested by the style and technique of the image, as well as the paleography of its inscription. In particular, the elaborate detailing of the pedestal, the high headdress and elaborate jewelry worn by the figure, and the extensive use of copper and silver inlay are characteristic of the late phase of Pāla metal sculpture. The refined workmanship, visible in the detailing and expressiveness of the work and the precision of the metal inlay, indicates that Pāla metalworking was at an apogee during the twelfth century.

It is likely that this image was made in Bihar. However, because it resembles works found in both the ancient Magadha and Aṅga regions, it is difficult to pinpoint the place of manufacture precisely. The elaborate base, including the vinescroll motif, bears a strong resemblance to similar elements in images that were found at Fatehpur in southern Magadha,¹ while the lower elements in the pedestal and the figure are closely related to examples found further east in Aṅga at Pātharghāṭa.²

An extremely rare feature present in this image is the fact that it has been sealed across the bottom with a baseplate (fig. 13). Pāla period metal images usually have open bases, but here, a flat metal plate was fitted across the open bottom after the pedestal had been cast.

The sealed base is also notable because it bears a Sanskrit inscription. While inscriptions are commonplace on Buddhist images of the Pāla period, they are usually placed on the front face of the pedestal of an image or

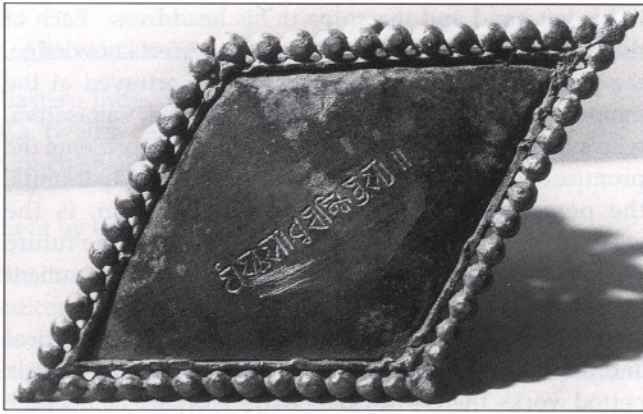


Figure 13. Inscribed base of cat. no. 49.

around the halo, as may be seen from many examples in this catalogue. Dr. B. N. Mukherjee has identified the script as proto-Bengali or Gaudī of about the twelfth century and provided the following transliteration and translation: *Paṁsthasādhū Chamvivrasya* (Of [i.e., given by] the Chamviv(r)a, the saint staying at Paṁ [or the saint belonging to {a sect called} Paṁstha?]).³

The practice of adding a baseplate as part of the dedication and vivification of an image is known primarily in the metal imagery of Tibet; indeed, it is a virtually ubiquitous feature of Tibetan metal images. However, sealed bases occur only in a handful of metal sculptures from Pāla period India, and therefore it has been difficult to determine whether there was an Indic origin for this practice.⁴ The presence of the baseplate here suggests that the piece had been given a formal consecration that may have included the insertion of precious objects into the piece prior to the closure of the bottom. In Tibet, the contents of such dedicatory materials include written or printed religious verses (usually *mantras* or *dhāraṇīs*), coins, shells, gemstones, and other precious or symbolic items, but since the practice is so little known in India, it is difficult to know what might have constituted a typical consecration in the Indic context.

Despite the apparent similarities between the Tibetan and Pāla examples that have sealed bases, there are striking differences as well. For the most part, Tibetan baseplates are made of copper, regardless of the metal used for the image. The copper sheets are flattened by hammering and are then hammered in place, often in a fairly crude manner. Many Tibetan examples are decorated with the design of a crossed *vajra* (*viśvavajra*) created through chasing. The few Tibetan examples that have Sanskrit inscriptions on the baseplates are clearly copies of Indic prototypes (see cat. no. 134). In contrast, the baseplates of the Indian examples, like this one, are made of the same metal as the images themselves. Although these plates are flat like their Tibetan counterparts, the metal is much thicker, and the plates are cast rather than hammered metal sheets.

Further, they are inserted into the base in a much more refined manner. Finally, none of the known Indian examples has the *viśvavajra* design.

The issue of whether the practice of sealing the bases of Buddhist metal images originated in India is complicated by a number of factors. If the practice were Indian, one would expect to find it in Buddhist artistic traditions elsewhere in India, such as Orissa, Kashmir, or south India, yet apparently it is known only from these few Pāla examples. If the practice began in the Pāla regions, it is difficult to explain why only a few examples survive in such an extensive corpus of metal images. Further, if the practice was distinctively Pāla, it is puzzling that it is seen only in Tibet and not in other regions that drew on the Pāla school of art, such as Nepal, Indonesia, and Myanmar. On the other hand, if the Tibetans were the originators of the practice, and such dedications were introduced into India from Tibet, it is difficult to explain the existence of several Tibetan examples that are closely modeled on the Indian style, as in the case of the baseplate in cat. no. 134, which is inscribed in the Indian manner.

The transformation of images into sacred repositories, thereby necessitating the addition of baseplates, may represent a conflation between practices associated with *stūpa* worship (for *stūpas* are by nature containers for sacred objects) and other practices associated with the consecration of images. However, much more research needs to be done before this phenomenon can be understood, because the seemingly simple innovation of the baseplate is probably a manifestation of a complex doctrinal and ritual transformation within the Buddhist tradition.

PUBLISHED:

Susan L. Huntington and John C. Huntington, "Leaves from the *Bodhi* Tree: The Art of Pāla India (8th-12th Centuries) and Its International Legacy" *Oriental Art* 20, no. 10 (Oct. 1989), 34-35, fig. 10. (In this article, the provenance of the piece was given as India or Bangladesh; however, subsequent research has allowed the more precise attribution to the Bihar region, as presented here.)

1. See S. Huntington, *The "Pāla-Sena" Schools of Sculpture*, figs. 190-191. Two hoards of metal images have been found at Fatehpur in Nawada (formerly Gaya) District in the ancient southern Magadha region of Bihar. See also Susan L. Huntington, "Some Bronzes from Fatehpur, Gaya" *Oriental Art*, n.s., 25, no. 2 (Summer 1979): 240-247; Bhagwant Sahai, "The Bronzes from Fatehpur," *Journal of the Bihar Purāvid Parishad* 1 (1977): 173-186.
2. See S. Huntington, *The "Pāla-Sena" Schools of Sculpture*, fig. 196, for a piece that has similar treatment of the details of the base of the pedestal. Especially comparable are the beaded rim and geometric motif directly above in each example.
3. Dr. B. N. Mukherjee, personal correspondence.
4. Until recently, only a single example of a Pāla metal image with a sealed base plate had been identified. See Rakhil Das Banerji, *Eastern Indian School of Mediaeval Sculpture*, Archaeological Survey of India, New Imperial Series, vol. 47 (Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1933), pl. 66c.

The whereabouts of that piece, which was found at Gayā, is unknown, and I have not been able to examine it firsthand. In my extensive examination of Pāla metal images, including handling most of the examples from sites like Nālandā and Kurkihār and others in Indian collections, I had never come across an example having a sealed baseplate until recently. I have now seen about three Pāla pieces with baseplates.