

1. BASE WITH FIGURE OF A LION

Wood with traces of polychrome pigments and gilding
China / Yunnan, Dali Kingdom
Ca. 12th / 13th century
Height 20.2 cm (7.95 in.)

Although not a native species, the lion – considered to be the king of beasts – is an ancient Indian symbol of sovereignty and protection. Early Buddhism associated the lion with the historic Buddha Shakyamuni, who is also known as *Shakyasimha* (Tib. *ShA kya seng ge*), the “Lion of the Shakya clan”¹. From India the image of the lion eventually spread to all of Asia and was frequently depicted in Buddhist art.

Like other animals such as the elephant or horse, the lion is the vehicle of a number of Vajrayana deities, but most commonly that of Manjushri. In Chinese art the pairing of a lion and Manjushri is frequently found and various sculptures with this subject are recorded². Such icons do not appear independently, but as part of triads consisting of images with the Buddha in the center, with Manjushri and Samantabhadra at either side³. The lion is normally depicted standing on its four legs (sometimes on a base) with a large lotus flower on his back on which the Bodhisattva is seated.

This figure shows a slightly different iconography in that the boldly carved animal is crouching rather than standing, in this case on top of a decorated octagonal throne which in turn rests on a plain base of the same form. The expressive head with wide open eyes, thick brows, broad muzzle and snarling mouth with exposed teeth is turned to one side at a right angle to the body. The mane of large curls, the paws and the furry tail are all executed with care. Unusual are the scales running down the back which supports a large lotus flower in the middle. The cavity within the lotus suggests that the lion served as a sculptural base supporting a figure – probably Manjushri – seated on top of it. Traces of polychrome pigments and gilding indicate that the image was originally painted and partially gilt. Minor fire damage may have resulted from burning incense too near to it. An image on the famous “Long Scroll” of a manifestation of Manjushri seated on a crouching lion⁴, a small gilt bronze cover of a censer in the shape of a seated lion and the decorated octagonal base of a wooden miniature image of the Acuoye Guanyin – both among the finds discovered during the renovation of the Qianxun Pagoda in 1978 – appear to support an attribution of this figure to Yunnan and the Dali Kingdom⁵.

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NOTES:

1. Beer 2004, p.78.
2. Howard 2006, p. 370-372, fig.4.13: For example the group of Buddhist figures in painted clay from the Tang dynasty in the Nanchan temple, Wutai Shan, Shanxi or the triad of Shakyamuni in the Shizhong temple at Jianchuan, Yunnan; see Li Kunsheng 1999, p.64, no.41 and Lutz 1991a, p.42-45.
3. A fine triad of Buddha Shakyamuni with attendant Bodhisattvas in painted and gilt mammoth ivory from the Song or Yuan period is preserved at the Metropolitan Museum, New York; see Leidy 2010, p.132-133, no.30.
4. Chapin 1971, pl.26, frame 64.
5. See Lutz 1991a, p.223, cat.no.86 and p.185, 189, cat.no.59.

