



Tanjō butsu: The Buddha at Birth

On display

Title/Description: Tanjō butsu: The Buddha at Birth

Born: 0729 - 0749

Object Type: Sculpture

Materials: Bronze

Measurements: h. 97 mm

Accession Number: 1205

Historic Period: Tenpyō era (8th Century), Nara period (8th Century)

Production Place: Asia, East Asia, Japan

Buddha at Birth (J. *Tanjō butsu* 胎生佛) is a small devotional icon rendered in gilt bronze. The statue's gesture is conventional for this theme, and depicts Buddha with right arm raised pointing to the sky,

and with left arm hanging by his side pointing to the earth.

Tanjō butsu refers to the story of the birth of Prince Siddhattha, the Historical Buddha (Skt. Siddhartha Gautama; J. Shaka 釈迦), who was born to Queen Maya, wife of King Suddhona of the city of Kapilavaatthu. The birth of Siddhattha is counted as one of the eight important events in the life of the Buddha (J. *Shaka hassō* 釈迦八事). After Maya gave birth from her right side, Siddhattha stood up straight, took seven steps and pronounced the words: 'I alone am honoured in heaven and on earth'. [1] The infant Buddha's first steps were on lotus blossoms, a flower associated with purity of mind and enlightenment. [2] This moment of self-revelation is captured in the figure of *Tanjō butsu*.

Prefiguring Prince Siddhattha's decision to adopt an ascetic existence and reject the riches of his birthright, the infant Buddha is dressed in a simple loincloth. The elongated earlobes also suggest that the Prince will renounce the heavy jewels that will be hung from his ears. The stretched earlobes are a general characteristic of the Buddha and signal his rejection of a material life and the physical world. [3]

Figures of *Tanjō butsu* are commonly found in Japan and Korea, and the Sainsbury Collection contains examples from both countries. [4] In Japan, the diminutive figure of the *Buddha at Birth* becomes the central icon in the religious rite of sprinkling the Buddha (J. *Kanbutsu-e* 灌仏会), which is performed every year on the 8th April to commemorate the birthday of Gautama Buddha. [5] In this ceremony, the figure of the infant Buddha is stood in a wide, shallow basin and washed with scented water or hydrangea tea (J. *amacha* 甘茶). It is said that when the Buddha was born, he was sprinkled with perfume or sweet rain by the dragon kings. [6] *Kanbutsu-e* recreates this legend and invites temple visitors to perform these lustrations using a small ceremonial ladle.

Kanbutsu-e was brought to Japan from China around the 7th century. The first recorded enactment of this rite took place at Gangōji temple in Nara in 606. [7] A *tanjō butsu* statue and its engraved metal basin (J. *kanbutsuban* 灌仏盆), made for *Kanbutsu-e* and dating from the Nara period (710-784), are preserved at Tōdaiji temple in Nara. [8] The Sainsbury Centre's *Tanjō butsu* figure is from the same period.

In *Kanbutsu-e* a small shrine decorated with flowers (J. *hanamidō* 花満道) is set up in front of one of the temple's main halls to house the *tanjōbutsu* statue. [9] In Japan, Guatama Buddha's birthday is also celebrated with the Flower Festival (J. *Hanamatsuri* 花まつり). This festival was invented in the 20th century and links celebrations held for the birth of the Buddha with the cherry blossom season in Japan. [10]

Lady Sainsbury purchased this figure of the Buddha from Mitsuru Tajima, owner of London Gallery.

Vanessa Tothill, January 2023

[1] The Japanese phrase is *Tenjō tenga yuiga dokuson* 天降天下有為獨尊.
<https://www.aisf.or.jp/~jaanus/deta/k/kanbutsue.htm> [accessed 27/1/23]. This is sometimes translated as, 'I am the chief of the world'. Jana Igunma, and San San May (eds), *Buddhism: Origins, Traditions and Contemporary Life* (London: The British Library, 2019), p. 37.

[2] Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich, *The World of Buddhism: Buddhist Monks and Nuns in Society and Culture* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 1984, reprinted 2007), pp. 20-21.

[3] <https://www.buddha-heads.com/buddha-head-statues/ears-of-the-buddha/>

[accessed 27/1/23].

[4] 'The Figure of the Infant Buddha' from the Korean peninsular (object number 911).
<https://www.sainsburycentre.ac.uk/art-and-objects/911-figure-of-the-infant-buddha/> [accessed 27/1/23]

[5] Buddha's birthday is celebrated through East and Southeast Asia on the eighth day of the fourth lunar month. In Japan, the fixed date of the 8th April was decided during the Meiji period (1868-1912) with the adoption of the Gregorian calendar.

<https://www.kanpai-japan.com/lifestyle/hana-matsuri-kanbutsue> [accessed 27/1/23]

[6] <https://www.aisf.or.jp/~jaanus/deta/k/kanbutsue.htm> [accessed 27/1/23]

[7] <https://www.aisf.or.jp/~jaanus/deta/k/kanbutsue.htm> [accessed 27/1/23]

[8] <https://www.aisf.or.jp/~jaanus/deta/k/kanbutsue.htm> [accessed 27/1/23]

These two objects have been designated National Treasures:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shaka_at_Birth_\(T%C5%8Ddai-ji\)#/media/File:Shaka_at_birth_basin.JPG](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shaka_at_Birth_(T%C5%8Ddai-ji)#/media/File:Shaka_at_birth_basin.JPG) [accessed 27/1/23]; Penelope Mason, *History of Japanese Art*, Second Edition (New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005), pp. 93-4.

[9] <https://www.kanpai-japan.com/lifestyle/hana-matsuri-kanbutsue> [accessed 27/1/23]

[10] <https://www.kanpai-japan.com/lifestyle/hana-matsuri-kanbutsue> [accessed 27/1/23]

Further Reading

Bechert, Heinz and Richard Gombrich, *The World of Buddhism: Buddhist Monks and Nuns in Society and Culture* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 1984, reprinted 2007)

Igunma, Jana and San San May (eds), *Buddhism: Origins, Traditions and Contemporary Life* (London: The British Library, 2019)

Mason, Penelope, *History of Japanese Art*, Second Edition (New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005)

Tajima Mitsuru, *The Pleasure of Buddhist Art/ Bukkyō bijutsu no yorokobi* (Tokyo: London Art Gallery, 2014)
