



## Guanyin Seated in a Grotto

### Date

960–1279, late Song Dynasty (1200s–1300s)

### Primary Maker

Chinese

### Medium

granite, greenish color

### Description

The Monkey King is a highly popular and mischievous character widely known in China from the 16th century to today. Famous for his superhuman strength and speed, ability to fly, command of magical spells, and his 72 transformations into various animals and objects, he has been popularized since the 1590s Chinese publication of the classic *Journey to the West* in which he plays the protagonist. Based on a real pilgrimage in the early 600s by a Chinese Buddhist monk named Xuanzang who travelled to India to find and bring back Buddhist scriptures, in *Journey to the West* the Monkey King accompanies Xuanzang on his quest. For centuries even before the publication of *Journey to the West* the Chinese monk's journey to India had been immortalized in oral tales and embellished. This sculpture offers a rare early artistic representation of the Monkey King tradition. The top portion of this sculpture depicts the Monkey King accompanying the monk with a horse. Unknown to them below in a rocky grotto the Buddhist deity of mercy and compassion, Guanyin, sits on her lotus throne

encircled by a dragon. Guanyin served as their guardian on the trip, often offering divine intervention. After the tenth century, one of the more prominent representations of Guanyin shows her seated with her right knee raised and her left leg crossed before the body, as seen here. Guanyin is also commonly identified by the image of Buddha in her crown, which can also be seen here. She usually carries a jar of pure water in her right hand, but here the hand is missing. Guanyin had released the Monkey King from his 500-year imprisonment under a mountain specifically to enlist him to protect Xuanzang on his journey. The Monkey King had earlier attained immortality, but became arrogant of his immortality and powers and so the gods contained him under a mountain. *Journey to the West* therefore narrates the transformation of the Monkey King from an arrogant trickster to a selfless friend through the relationships he forms on the journey with the monk. The Monkey King's story also conveys that a person can be better changed through friendship and empathy rather than punishment and violence. Monkeys in general are prominent figures in Asian literature. In addition to the Monkey King, another monkey king, Hanuman, is a hero in the classical Indian story the *Ramayana*. It is unclear, though, if there is a relationship between the Monkey King in Chinese literature and Hanuman.

### Dimensions

59.7 cm (23 1/2 in.)