

Cambodia

The countries of Southeast Asia conjure up exotic cultures, multisyllabic languages, tinkling bells and names familiar down through the ages especially since a war in recent memory: we do not soon forget names like Saigon, Phnom Penh, the Mekong Delta and Bangkok as part of the Vietnam War - or legendary names like Siam and Angkor Wat. This is the setting of the art from what is today known as Thailand and Cambodia.

The culture of India was a major influence on the beginnings of art in these countries. With time, the borders of the countries blurred and changed names as invasions and wars changed power in the area. What was attributed to the Thais might have been from Cambodia earlier, and vice versa. A current map of the area shows Vietnam occupying what was once the coast of Cambodia, above it Laos which was not part of the equation at the time we shall discuss.

Parts of Cambodia were originally settled by the Khmers and Mons, of Tibetan origin. The kingdom of Cambodia, Cochin China and Southern Siam was known as Funan, and, as the story goes, got leadership from an Indian Brahman, Kaundinya, who landed there around the first century CE from a merchant vessel, married a princess named Soma and so became master of the country.

Purely Indian art in Cambodia disappeared just at the time when permanent building materials were first found. The wars of the 8th century resulted in the establishment of a Khmer autonomy. Classic Khmer art is a unified style and fully developed when it appears for the first time in the sandstone buildings of the Prah Khan and it preserves its essential character for at least three centuries. In sculpture a national formula is evolved, characterized by the straight line of the hair, the level brows, the scarcely sloping eyes, full and wide lips and impassible serenity, often by an exotic smile and a peculiar sweetness. Here at SBMA we have in our collection a head of a Bodhisattva, Lokesvara, created in the 13th century in sandstone. By the 13th century there is an influence of the Thai formula seen here - the now more elongated ushinisha and almond eyes. Lokesvara is represented as the main aspect of Avalokitesvara, spiritual salvation. He is known as the Buddhist divinity of healing power and to the Chinese as Guanyin. This head is of the Bayon type, the great Siviastic Temple in the center of Khmer civilization surrounding Angkor Wat.

First came the building of Angkor Thom and its central temple, the Bayon, in the last quarter of the 9th century. And the last great monument of Khmer architecture, Angkor Wat, was begun early in the 12th century. These vast temples featured moats, outer walls, paved causeways, inner concentric galleries forming a terraced pyramid and central shrine, surmounted by a high tower with rich decorations on all wall surfaces. With Angkor Wat the history of Cambodian art was almost at an end. Angkor was overrun and sacked by its subject neighbors in south Vietnam during the 1170s.

Thailand

Siam stirs our memories as the home of the romantic tale of "Anna and the King of Siam", the story of a monarch steeped in his country's traditions but wanting to be part of the modern world as well. The country's official name was **Siam** until 1939. Today the country is called Thailand.

The simplest possible statement of Siamese history would be to the effect that at the beginning of the Christian era the greater part of the Menam valley was in the hands of the Mon-Khmers whose sway extended from Cambodia to Southern Burma. Their kingdom, Dvaravati, is known chiefly by the large quantities of superlative Buddhist sculpture which have been excavated. It is most likely that Buddhism was the state religion, associated with all the ceremonial and magic of government. During the later 11th century, while the southern territory of the Mon was being annexed by the Khmer, a race of hill people called the Thai were seizing the north. They took over the whole country, intermarrying with the Mon, and the Khmer empire finally collapsed in the 13th century. In 1287 the first major Thai confederacy was formed. The Thai were animists, believers in a multitude of invisible spirits. Even today Thai homes, shops and offices have their small decorated spirit-houses beside them.

Thai's major art has been sculpture, especially bronze casting, representing the Buddha alone. The Thai adhere closely to the idea that each major Buddha image is imbued with its own magical power and it was thought that something of the power of the original Buddha could be absorbed by a copy which imitated the original as exactly as possible. For this reason large numbers of barely distinguishable Buddha images were manufactured down through the centuries. However, after a Burmese invasion in the 17th century, Bangkok became the capitol in 1797 and the arts took on a strong tinge of late Burmese gaudiness.

Standing Buddhas



The two Buddha figures in the Santa Barbara Museum collection were created in the 17th and 18th centuries. "**The Adorned Buddha**" (1946.2), a bronze figure done in the Ayuthya period of the 17th and 18th centuries, depicts a popular image, emphasizing the symbolism of Buddha as the Universal King. Unlike the usual Buddha shown in a simple monastic robe, our Buddha wears a robe covered with jewels and ornaments. Because their religion was based on the exemplary life of Buddha Sakyamuni, most Thai images depict the historical figure rather than the complex pantheon of deities associated with Mahayana Buddhism. The curly hair is represented in small sharp spikes that fill the dome shaped head. The top of the ushinisha is broken off. The position of the remaining arms suggest that the missing forearms and hands may have held the gestures of bestowing and reassurance usually held by Buddha figures.

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The second Buddha, a "**Standing Buddha**" (1983.27.3), was done in the 17th century in lacquered wood. Unlike his companion, he is clothed in simple robes. Unfortunately his hands and arms are missing; however, we are able to see the holes in the upper torso and see how the arms were joined. The face is oval, the eyes half closed and there is an expression of peaceful serenity, with an enigmatic smile. This smile appears over and over in art history, starting in the early days of Greece. The Buddha's hair is like a close-fitting cap with a pattern of knobs for curls, topped by the ushinisha and a lotus bud finial. The figure stands straight in simplicity of line. The whole figure was covered with lacquer, using a black prime coat, followed by another of red lacquer which was then decorated with gold leaf. Unfortunately the gilding on our figure has disappeared with time.

Stone Buddha Heads

A major departure from the usual medium of Thai sculpture is stone, as shown in these two sandstone "**Head of Buddhas**". Lopburi in Central Siam, a summer residence of the Thai kings by the early 15th century, had a long history of stone work. The area of Lopburi contained plentiful stone and became a center for the "School of Lopburi" stonework which lasted for a thousand years.

One head (1948.1.1) is a gift of Mrs. Otto Jeidels and illustrates the Thai artist's interpretation of the Indian metaphorical description of Buddha's features - the nose like a parrot's beak, and a chin like a mango stone, lotus eyes and mouth. The ushinisha (cranial bump) could have been topped by a flame finial, a Thai feature. In addition, the figure could have been gilded to relate to the Indian description, "his skin is the color of gold." Traces of black paint still remain on the hair as well as the ushinisha. The mystic smile on the face symbolizes Buddha's attainment of profound wisdom and inner peace through meditation. This inward calm is called Nirvana and is somewhat similar to the western idea of Heaven. The figure was created in the 16th century.

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The other head, a gift of Wright S. Ludington in memory of his father, Charles Henry Ludington, (1983.27.63), features the so-called Thai style of oval face, arched eyebrows, thin long nose with a sharp ridge, the half-closed eyes turning upward. The hair has a pattern of knobs for curls and is crowned by a simple ushinisha which has been broken off.

Bronze Seated Buddhas

The Museum's collection includes two Seated Buddhas. Although they seem quite similar, they are not identical. Remember, Thais felt that copies of Buddhas retained some of its magical power. During most of its history, Thailand was divided into two fairly distinct regions, a northern and a southern. Between the two lay the great trade-route city of Sukhothai, possession of which fluctuated between the two

regions. These two gilt bronze Buddhas have been created in what is known as the Sukhothai style, a canon which was an attempt to capture the early-medieval Ceylonese images and elements from Dvaravati sculpture. They are marked by an extremely smooth, rounded modelling of the body and face, without any clearly defined planes. The outlines of hair, eyebrows, lips and fingers are elegantly recurved, and the head is crowned by a tall, pointed flame finial. The entire figure gives the impression of great elegance. The hands of both figures are shown in the "Buddha Calling the Earth To Witness" mudra position, and both are seated in the lotus position of meditation. One (1991.150.8) is positioned on an elaborate pedestal, while the other figure's original pedestal has probably been lost.

With these various versions of Buddha, we have seen Thai art, which represents an abstract ideal. It soon became conventional and its period lasted briefly. Decadence began to set in by the early 17th century.

Prepared for the Santa Barbara Museum of Art Docent Council by Terry David, September, 1995.

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(list of holdings follows)

Head of Lokeshvara

Cambodia, 18th Century Sandstone

Gift of William S. Ludington, in memory of Charles Henry Ludington
1983.27.1

Adorned Buddha

Thailand, Ayuthya Period (17th-18th Centuries)

Bronze

Gift of Ina T. Campbell
1946.2

Standing Buddha

Thailand, 18th Century

Lacquered Wood

Gift of Wright S. Ludington, in memory of Charles Henry Ludington
1983.27.3

Head of Buddha

Thailand, Ayuthya Period (16th Century)

Sandstone

Gift of Wright S. Ludington, in memory of Charles Henry Ludington
1983.27.63

Head of Buddha

Thailand, 16th Century Stone

Gift of Mrs. Otto Jeidels

1948.1.1

Two Seated Buddhas

c. 1900; early-mid 19th Century

Gilt Bronze

1991.150.8 & .9