

Objects from Ancient Cambodian Kingdoms



The Hindu deity Vishnu-Vasudeva-Narayana

1175–1225
Cambodia; former kingdom of Angkor
Bronze with traces of gilding and gemstones
The Avery Brundage Collection,
B60B211

Vishnu holds several of his standard identifying attributes—the war discus, conch shell, and club.

Scholars, particularly those from Cambodia's former colonial ruler France, worked out the chronology of Cambodian sculpture so that a statue like this can usually be dated fairly accurately by the details of clothing and jewelry. Today Cambodian archaeologists and other scholars work actively with international teams to extend our knowledge.



The bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara

Approx. 1180–1220
Cambodia, former kingdom of Angkor
Bronze
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. David Buchanan,
2006.50

The bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara embodies compassion for all living beings.

The rulers of the ancient Cambodian kingdom of Angkor usually worshiped the Hindu deities Shiva or Vishnu. For a time under King Jayavarman VII, however, complicated forms of Mahayana Buddhism were favored. The central triad of deities was made up of a serpent-enthroned Buddha flanked by Avalokiteshvara and a goddess representing transcendental wisdom. This image probably came from such a triad.

In Jayavarman VII's version of Buddhism, buddhahood was understood to arise from the melding of compassion and wisdom. The deities representing these two qualities were associated with Jayavarman VII's father and mother, suggesting a parallel between their son and the Buddha.



Triad of Avalokiteshvara, serpent-enthroned Buddha, and the goddess of transcendent wisdom from the period of King Jayavarman VII.
National Museum of Cambodia.



Dedicatory plaque

Approx. 600–800
Probably Cambodia
Gold alloy
Gift of the Shorenstein Fund, 1988.12

It has been a common practice in Southeast Asia since ancient times to deposit a dedicatory plaque, together with small representations of gods, flowers, and mystical animals, in the foundation of a religious structure.

The arrangement of figures and motifs on this plaque reflects the ideal organization of a Hindu temple based on ancient religious texts. Placed in the foundation of a temple, the plaque symbolically transforms ordinary space into sacred space. Here, the function of the plaque is enhanced by its precious material and the fact that gold, because it does not tarnish, seems unchanging and eternal.

Depicted are sixty-four figures of Hindu deities. In the center of the top of the plaque is an unusual composite of Vishnu and Surya. Based on the ancient texts, the thirty-two figures along the other three sides may represent the constellations, which were supposed to have a great influence, both good and bad, on humankind. Figures of Ganesha, the elephant-headed god, are depicted at the four corners. In the center is a full-blossoming lotus flower.



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Objects from Mainland Southeast Asia, 600–1300



Lotus-shaped bowl

1230–1231

Cambodia or Thailand

Gold and silver alloy

Gift of the Connoisseurs' Council,
1990.201

This bowl raises intriguing questions.

An inscription in ancient Cambodian engraved on the exterior indicates that the bowl was a gift of a king called Shri Tribhuvanadityavarman, probably to an image of a deity. A date equivalent to 1230–1231 is given, but there is no other record of a king with this name in this period. Perhaps he ruled a small, and as yet unidentified, realm that did not last long.

The bowl is in the form of a lotus with eight petals. Adorning the bottom of the interior of the bowl is a lotus-shaped rosette surrounded by eight smaller rosettes.



Ritual bell

Approx. 1100–1200

Cambodia or northeastern Thailand;
former kingdom of Angkor

Bronze

Gift of Diana K. Chase, 2000.24.a-.b

On the middle prong of the handle of this bell is shown the Hindu deity Shiva riding his bull, Nandi, and carrying a trident, one of his symbols.

Below him is his son, the elephant-headed Ganesha. (On the other side of the handle are shown another deity riding what appears to be a lion, and beneath, a figure that might be Shiva's other son, Skanda.)

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Objects from Bagan (Pagan) and elsewhere in Myanmar (Burma)



Reliquary

Perhaps 800–900

Myanmar (Burma)

Bronze with lacquer and gilding

Gift of Jane R. Lurie, 1989.28

Portable reliquaries such as this were commonly used throughout the Buddhist world as containers for relics of the Buddha, monks, or high-ranking persons, as well as for sacred objects such as religious texts. This reliquary is in the shape of a stupa (a mound built to enclose relics, texts, or other sacred items), and may well have been deposited within an actual stupa. (Other stupa-shaped reliquaries are on view in Gallery 1, South Asia to 600)



Relief of standing Buddha

Approx. 1100–1250

Myanmar (Burma); probably Bago (Pegu) area

Gold repoussé

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. David Buchanan, 2005.89



Seated Buddha

Approx. 1000

Myanmar (Burma)

Lead-tin alloy with traces of gilding

Gift of Jeffrey Novick, 1989.45



Relief of standing Buddha

Approx. 1100–1250

Myanmar (Burma); Bago (Pegu) area

Gold repoussé

Gift of Mr. Johnson S. Bogart, 2005.90

The facial features of this image from Myanmar (Burma)—its broad forehead, cheekbones, and mouth, and its eyebrows connecting over the nose—resemble those of sculptures associated with the Mon kingdom of Hariphunchai in north central Thailand. The Mons are an ethnic group speaking a language related not to Burmese or Thai but to Cambodian. Historically, they seem to have lived in parts of central mainland Southeast Asia, particularly southern Myanmar and adjacent areas of Thailand. Mon speakers still live in some of these areas.

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Tablets



Votive tablet with seated Buddha

Approx. 700–1000
Myanmar (Burma); probably Hmawza
Earthenware
*Gift in honor of Leath and Heather
Castile, 1989.5.3*



**Votive tablet with seated Buddha
flanked by the disciples Shariputra
and Maudgalyayana**

Approx. 1100
Myanmar (Burma); former kingdom of
Bagan (Pagan)
Earthenware
*Gift of the Collection of Gursharan and
Elvira Sidhu, 1990.233*



**Votive tablet with six scenes of the
life of the Buddha**

Approx. 1200
Myanmar (Burma); former kingdom of
Bagan (Pagan)
Earthenware
Gift of Haskia Hasson, 1988.62



**Votive tablet with seated Buddha
flanked by standing Buddhas**

Approx. 1050–1100
Myanmar (Burma); former kingdom of
Bagan (Pagan)
Earthenware
*The Avery Brundage Collection,
B62P68*

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Lidded jar
1000–1200
Northern Vietnam
Stoneware with colored glazes
The Avery Brundage Collection, B62P53



Lidded jar
Approx. 1100–1300
Northern Vietnam
Stoneware with incised decoration under glaze
The Avery Brundage Collection, B61P15+

By the time these jars were made Vietnam had thrown off the Chinese political domination of earlier centuries and was ruled by local dynasties. The Vietnamese created vigorous and tactile ceramic wares like these large jars, of a character quite distinct from Chinese ceramics. Potters experimented freely, drawing inspiration from a variety of sources.

The shape of the bottom jar, with lobes outlined by rounded rectangular frames, and raised decoration of lotus petals strongly suggests a metalwork prototype. These forms may derive from the gold- and silverwork of Vietnam's southern neighbor, the Hindu-Buddhist territory of Champa. The jar's feet are in the form of crouching human figures.



Head of Shiva, from a linga cover
Approx. 800
Central or southern Vietnam; former kingdoms of Champa
Gold and silver alloy with gold, glass, and ebony
Gift of the Christensen Fund, BL77B1

The Hindu deity Shiva was sometimes represented in human form, and sometimes as a cylindrical phallic emblem called a linga. A linga was usually a sort of stone pillar, sometimes with a detachable metal covering. This head would originally have been attached to such a covering, and would have given the linga the appearance of having a head on one side. (A stone linga with one head can be seen in Gallery 1.)

Champa, in what is today central and southern coastal Vietnam, seems to have been made up of a number of territories not always connected by land but within easy travel along the coast by sea. The people of Champa were related to the peoples of the Indonesian Islands; in both regions political affiliations were sometimes formed along the coasts, suggesting the importance of travel and communication by boat.

Buddhist Bronzes from Indonesia

“Many kings in the islands of the Southern Ocean admire and believe Buddhism. In the city I visited, Buddhist priests number more than 1,000, whose minds are bent on learning and good practices.”*

So reported a Chinese Buddhist monk when he stopped at the Indonesian island of Sumatra in the 680s on his way home from visiting India's holy sites.

For the next five hundred years Buddhism, in its Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions, flourished in parts of Indonesia, particularly the island of Java. In fact, Java produced, particularly in the 800s, some of the most complex, ambitious, and beautiful Buddhist monuments of all time. Despite the fact that the majority of the Indonesian population is Muslim today, Borobudur remains a popular tourist destination and a marker of cultural pride.

*Adapted from J. Takakusu's 1896 translation of *A Record of the Buddhist Religion as Practised in India and the Malay Archipelago* by the monk Yijing.



Seated Buddha
Approx. 800–900
Indonesia; Central Java
Bronze
Gift of LEF Foundation, 1988.21

Traveling monks carried ideas, as well as texts and probably small artworks, between India, Southeast Asia, and China. Certain symbols, motifs, and trends in artistic style show up all around the Buddhist world, having been transmitted by pious travelers. For instance, the Buddha is usually shown seated cross-legged. However, in the period from the 400s through the 800s, images like this one, showing him seated on a throne, with his legs downward, were produced from India to Japan and at many Buddhist sites in-between.

The exact identity of buddhas seated in this way is sometimes not clear. In East Asia they are often identified as the buddha of the future, Maitreya. In Indonesia, some evidence suggests that they often represent a supreme buddha like Vairochana.

This image resembles, in its posture and proportions, a famous, larger-than-life-sized statue in the ninth-century Javanese Buddhist temple of Chandi Mendut.

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The bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara

Approx. 600–800
Indonesia; Sumatra
Leaded bronze
The Avery Brundage Collection, B65B58

From the 600s until at least the 1000s, the eastern coastal areas of Sumatra, peninsular Malaysia, peninsular Thailand, and nearby areas made up a powerful trading kingdom—or confederation of principalities—known as Srivijaya. Srivijaya derived its power and wealth from its control of the sea lanes through which traders carried goods back and forth from Arabia, Persia, and India through Southeast Asia to China.

This bronze statue is in a style associated with Srivijayan art in Sumatra. However, very similar bronze statuettes have been found in peninsular Thailand and Malaysia. Because their size would have made them easy to carry, it is not certain where they were made.



Srivijaya around 9th–11th centuries.



**The Buddhist deities
Avalokiteshvara and Vasundhara**

Approx. 850–950
Indonesia; Java
Silver and bronze
*Gift of the Walter and Phyllis
Shorenstein Fund, B86B1*

The bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara can be recognized by the tiny seated Buddha at the front of his hairdress. The female deity next to him is holding in her left hand a stalk of grain, and, if this is rice, it may identify her as Vasundhara.



**Seated Buddha,
probably Vairochana**

Approx. 900–1100
Indonesia; Java or Sumatra
Bronze
Museum purchase, 1991.5

The hand position of this figure is rare in Southeast Asian Buddhist art. In Korea and Japan this position, with the right hand wrapped around the forefinger of the left, identifies a figure as Vairochana, the supreme central buddha of some schools of Buddhism. Another Indonesian bronze with the same hand position as this one is inscribed with the name of Vairochana, so the identification here seems firm.



Ritual object (*vajra*)

Approx. 800–900
Indonesia; Central Java
Bronze
Gift of Walter Jared Frost, 1990.5.2

In Tantric Buddhism the thunderbolt (*vajra*) symbolizes the “skillful means” that can be helpful on the path to enlightenment, and the bell (*ghanta*) symbolizes transcendent wisdom. The union of skillful means and transcendent wisdom leads to the achievement of enlightenment. The practitioner, usually a trained monk, holds the *vajra* in the right hand and the bell in the left hand during rituals.

Other Buddhist ritual thunderbolts or bells can be seen nearby in this gallery; in Gallery 12, The Himalayas and the Tibetan Buddhist World; and in Gallery 26, Japanese Buddhist Art. These implements are also represented in sculptures and paintings throughout the museum.



Ritual bell with *vajra* handle

900–1500
Indonesia; East Java
Bronze
Museum purchase, 1991.17

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