

The Mahabharata (The Great Chronicle of the Bharata Dynasty)

Wood, cloth, and mixed media
From The Mimi and John Herbert Collection

Though the stories used in rod-puppet (*wayang golek*) performances have been derived from many sources, the majority are loosely based on the Indian epic the Mahabharata. This tale revolves around the conflicts between the Pandava brothers and their cousins, the Kaurava brothers, a rivalry that culminates in a devastating battle. The conflicts in this and many of the stories in Javanese puppet theater can be seen as battles between good and evil, but the plots of individual plays suggest a subtle sense of moral ambiguity that mirrors the outside world. As depicted in puppet theater, the heroes of the Mahabharata are not without fault. Likewise, the villains of the stories have complex personalities; many have admirable qualities and struggle with divided loyalties.

Indian stories were often modified for local Javanese audiences, and sometimes new narratives involving beloved characters from the epics were invented. A favorite character in Java is Ghatotkacha, the son of the Pandava brother Bhima and the giantess Hidhimbi. When Hidhimbi is about to become the queen of her realm, her brother, the demon Brajamusti, objects because he does not think women have the right to rule. Brajamusti challenges Hidhimbi, and Ghatotkacha arrives to defend her. Hidhimbi warns Ghatotkacha that he is not yet strong enough to face his uncle. Nonetheless he begins to fight, and ultimately, he is rescued by his mother. With a flick of her wrist, Hidhimbi sends Brajamusti flying into the air. (He lands in the kingdom of Astina, where he sees and falls in love with Queen Banowati, setting in motion yet another episode of the story.) Ghatotkacha eventually gains the strength to conquer his uncle.

TOP ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT



Ghatotkacha (Gatotkaca), son of Bhima
 Approx. 1984–1994
 Indonesia; Cirebon, West Java
 F2000.86.34



Ghatotkacha (Gatotkaca), son of Bhima
 Approx. 1950
 Indonesia; West Java
 F2000.86.124



Ghatotkacha (Gatotkaca), son of Bhima
 Approx. 1960
 Indonesia; West Java
 F2000.86.161



Ghatotkacha (Gatotkaca), son of Bhima
 Perhaps 1800–1900
 Indonesia; Cirebon, West Java
 F2000.86.109



Ghatotkacha (Gatotkaca), son of Bhima
 Approx. 1960
 Indonesia; West Java
 F2000.86.80



Ghatotkacha (Gatotkaca), son of Bhima
 Approx. 1970
 Indonesia; Ciampea, West Java
 F2000.86.78

MIDDLE ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT



The demon king Hidhimba (Arimba), brother of the giantess Hidhimbi (Arimbi)
 Perhaps 1800–1900
 Indonesia; Tegal, Central Java
 F2000.85.1



The demon king Hidhimba (Arimba), brother of the giantess Hidhimbi (Arimbi)
 Approx. 1920
 Indonesia; Cirebon, West Java
 F2000.86.111



The giantess Hidhimbi (Arimbi), wife of Bhima
 Perhaps 1800–1900
 Indonesia; Tegal, Central Java
 F2000.85.25



The giantess Hidhimbi (Arimbi), wife of Bhima
 Approx. 1920
 Possibly by Abah Wikarta (Indonesian)
 Indonesia; Tegal or Kuningan, Central Java
 F2000.86.72



The demon Brajamusti, uncle of Ghatotkacha
 Perhaps 1800–1900
 Indonesia; Tegal, Central Java
 F2000.85.6



The demon Brajamusti, uncle of Ghatotkacha
 Approx. 1920
 Possibly by Abah Wikarta (Indonesian)
 Indonesia; Kuningan or Tegal, Central Java
 R2000.86.90

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BOTTOM ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT



Ghatotkacha (Gatotkaca), son of Bhima
Approx. 1965
Indonesia; Bogor, West Java
F2000.86.79



Arjuna, the third of the Pandava brothers
Approx. 1970
By Pak Aji (Indonesian)
Indonesia; Bogor, West Java
F2000.86.75



Banowati, wife of Duryodhana (Suryadana) and of Arjuna
Perhaps 1800–1900
Indonesia; Tegal, Central Java
F2000.85.26



Drona (Durna), advisor to the Kauravas
Approx. 1950
By M. Ahim (Indonesian)
Indonesia; Ciampea, West Java
F2000.86.77



Krishna (Kresna), incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu and advisor to the Pandava brothers
Approx. 1960
Indonesia; Kebumen, Central Java
F2000.86.101

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More Is More: Massing Revered Objects in a Temple

TO LEFT OF THRONE



1
Offering container
Approx. 1875–1925
Myanmar (Burma)
Bamboo with lacquer, gilding, inlaid glass, and inlaid mirrored glass
Gift of George McWilliams, 2008.92.a-c

At important ceremonies, the Buddhist faithful in Myanmar present food and other donations to monks, sometimes in extremely elaborate containers such as this.



2
Crowned male figure, making a gesture of respect
1850–1925
Myanmar (Burma)
Wood with paint, lacquer, and gilding, and mirrored glass
Gift of the Donald W. Perez Family in memory of Margaret and George W. Haldeman, 2008.87.2

Who is this figure, with his princely garments, posture of respect, and rather wistful expression? It must be a minor deity or celestial being of some sort because in traditional Burmese contexts mortals, even kings, were rarely represented in sculpture. He might be one of the thirty-seven *nats*—a group of powerful spirits who need to be pacified

with offerings—but his characteristics do not match those of any of the thirty-seven as recorded in manuals.

Other possible identities are the deity Indra, who reverently accompanies the Buddha at a number of moments in his legendary life, or one of the Four Guardian Kings of the cardinal directions.

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3
**The monk Shariputra, the chief
disciple of the Buddha**

Approx. 1850–1925
Myanmar (Burma)
Wood with lacquer and gilding, and
colored glass
The Avery Brundage Collection,
B6OS599

In Myanmar (Burma) and Thailand, the Buddha is sometimes shown flanked by two of his chief disciples. In Myanmar they were often differentiated by their body positions. Both faced the Buddha, sitting respectfully with their legs to one side. Shariputra, the disciple shown here, was placed on the Buddha's right and leaned forward as if listening attentively; the other chief disciple,

on the Buddha's left, held his hands together in reverence.

These disciples, though they were contemporaries of the historical Buddha and legendary for their piety and power, may have seemed to sculptors more approachable than the Buddha and the celestial deities. Sometimes, as here, the sculptor imparts a sense of youthful tenderness.

Sculptures such as this are difficult to date with precision, as artists continue to make them today.



4
Shrine

Approx. 1875–1925
Northern Thailand
Wood with lacquer and gilding, mirrored
glass, plain glass, and ferrous and
nonferrous metal
*Gift from Doris Duke Charitable
Foundation's Southeast Asian Art
Collection, 2006.27.55*

Shrines like this were used to hold objects of religious reverence such as Buddha images, relics of important persons, scriptures, or other sacred objects. This shrine came to the museum empty. We have placed inside it a twentieth-century funerary urn from Thailand to give a suggestion of what it might once have contained.

The structure of the shrine is topped by several tiers of tapering roofs, a stupa-like element, and a tiered honorific parasol. The shape of this shrine and its decoration indicate that it was made in the northern region of Thailand.

Several of the roof decorations were broken and have been replicated and replaced. Following standard museum conservation practices, all the changes are documented in detail and are made to be easily reversible.

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More Is More: Massing Revered Objects in a Temple

The throne shrine and the arrangement of art objects around it are meant to evoke, in a general way, the feeling of being in a Buddhist temple in Myanmar (Burma) or Thailand. In temples, the main Buddha image is often densely surrounded by all sorts of other objects from various regions and time periods, such as sculptures, offering containers, and donations from pious people, sometimes even including items like grandfather clocks.



Interior of Wat Hua Lamphong in Bangkok, Thailand. *Iracha Borisudhiyangkun/123RF.*



5a Crowned and bejeweled Buddha image and throne

Approx. 1860-1880

Myanmar (Burma); Mandalay area
Wood and iron, with lacquer, gilding,
and mirrored glass

*Gift from Doris Duke Charitable
Foundation's Southeast Asian Art
Collection, 2006.27.17
and 2006.27.1.a-t*



22

Such an elaborate throne and Buddha image would have been an important fixture of a nineteenth-century Buddhist temple in Myanmar, and similar ones can still be seen in temples today.

The significance of the crowned and bejeweled Buddha image varied in different places and periods. In the region of Thailand and Myanmar, one story explained that the Buddha manifested himself enthroned, wearing a magnificent crown and royal finery, in response to an arrogant king named Jambupati who once attempted to

impress the Buddha with his grandeur. The lesson was that the grandeur of buddhahood vastly outshines that of earthly kingship.

This throne shrine and image were purchased in the 1960s by the wealthy art collector (and celebrity) Doris Duke, who assembled a huge group of Southeast Asian artworks with the intention of displaying them for the benefit of the public in a Southeast Asian cultural park. Her plans were never realized in the way she hoped, and eventually this throne and the rest of the collection ended up at Duke's estate in New Jersey, where visitors could sometimes see them. Some years after her death, many of the art objects were given to the Asian Art Museum and the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, and smaller numbers of objects to other museums around the country.

The original crown of this Buddha image disappeared long ago. The one the image now wears was made using traditional techniques and in the traditional style in 2002 by U Win Maung, an expert artisan in Mandalay, Myanmar. It was commissioned and then donated to the museum in memory of M. R. Vadhanathorn Chirapravati. The rest of the Buddha image's royal decorations appear to be original.



5b
Manuscript box with scenes of the story of the wise sage Mahosadha (Mahosadha-jataka)

Approx. 1900–1925

Myanmar (Burma)

Wood with lacquer and gilding

Museum purchase, 2018.146.a-.d

A beautifully decorated box such as this would have held a handwritten copy of sacred Buddhist texts. The long, narrow format of the text pages dictated the shape of the box.

Most Buddhists say that they “take refuge” in the “Three Jewels,” namely the Buddha, the teachings (dharma), and the community of monks (sangha). In this gallery we can see representations of all three: the Buddha in Buddha images, the teachings in this manuscript box that would have enclosed texts of parts of the dharma, and the monkhood in the image of the monk Shariputra, one of the Buddha’s most important disciples.



Handwritten page of the kind that would have been housed in such a box.

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More Is More: Massing Revered Objects in a Temple

TO RIGHT OF THRONE



6
Standing crowned and bejeweled Buddha

Approx. 1850–1900

Thailand

Bronze with lacquer and gilding

Gift from Doris Duke Charitable Foundation's Southeast Asian Art Collection, 2006.27.5

In the nineteenth century, kings of Thailand commissioned large standing crowned and bejeweled Buddha images of the same type as this one, and with the hands in the same position. The royally commissioned images were set up surrounding the famous Emerald Buddha in the royal chapel in Bangkok,

PLEASE SEE OTHER SIDE

where they can still be seen. Their function was to commemorate specific deceased royal parents and other relatives, both male and female. Thus images like this one, which were made in large quantities in all sizes, were associated with honoring ancestors.



7
Ceremonial alms bowl with stand

Approx. 1850–1950

Myanmar (Burma)

Bamboo with lacquer and gilding, wood, and ferrous metal with mirrored and non-mirrored glass

Gift from Doris Duke Charitable Foundation's Southeast Asian Art Collection, 2006.27.107.a-e

This elaborate object would have been displayed in a Buddhist temple, perhaps having been donated by a pious person.

The Buddha carried a bowl in which devoted people could give him food to sustain himself. Still today, Buddhist

monks go out every morning to accept offerings of food, carrying an offering bowl of iron or sometimes ceramic.

The alms bowl is a symbol of humility and nonattachment. Here, perhaps paradoxically, a non-functional alms bowl of glass rather than a more inexpensive material is presented on an ornate, glittering stand. A donor would have felt satisfaction in honoring the Buddha's alms bowl and its meaning with such a luxurious version.

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8
**Standing crowned and bejeweled
Buddha**

Approx. 1700–1750
Central or north central Thailand;
former kingdom of Ayutthaya
Copper alloy with lacquer and gilding,
and inlaid glass
*Gift of Jean A. Gillespie and Christine G.
White, 2010.340.a-.b*



9
Mythical bird-man

Approx. 1775–1850
Central Thailand
Wood with remnants of lacquer, gilding,
and inlaid mirrored glass
*Gift from Doris Duke Charitable
Foundation's Southeast Asian Art
Collection, 2006.27.24*

Mythical bird-men and bird-women are among the wondrous creatures that inhabit the Eden-like Himavanta Forest of Buddhist legend. They are frequently depicted in Thai sculptures, paintings, and other mediums. Wooden figures

of bird-men such as this were used in several sorts of royal ceremonies. One such statue is mentioned in the description of the coronation of King Rama IV in 1851, where it is said to have contained a relic of the Buddha. The custom of using such figures in royal ceremonies most likely went back centuries. Such statues have rarely survived, and only a handful are known. Several are in the National Museum, Bangkok.

The spire of this figure's crown was replaced at some point, presumably in the twentieth century.

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