

Symbolism of

The Sukhothai Walking Buddha

By Patricia Bjaaland Welch

As a former guide in the National Museum of Bangkok, I get great pleasure from one of the pieces in the ACM collection: the Sukhothai Walking Buddha in our Southeast Asia gallery. Sukhothai means 'The Dawn of Happiness' and expresses the joy the Thai nation felt at its hard-won freedom from Khmer rulers in the 13th century. Thais still consider the late 13th to early 15th centuries their Golden Age.

One of the most distinguishing features is the flame that rises from the Buddha's ushnisha to represent the Buddha's radiant spiritual energy, most likely influenced by Sri Lankan iconography, where it appears as early as the 8th century and was popular in the 14th century to influence, we believe, Sukhothai artists.

Some visitors find the Sukhothai walking Buddhas unattractive or even awkward and distorted, but here is another clue in identifying Thai Sukhothai bronze Buddhas—they were inspired not by human models, but by the literal interpretation of the Buddhist Pali scriptures that describe the Buddha as having the 32 distinguishing marks or lakshanas of a Great Being, such as having small hair curls; a hooked nose ('like a parrot's beak'); inflated chest and abdomen as developed in yogic breath; long and sinuous arms 'like the trunk of a young elephant'; eyes half-opened as lotus buds; protruding heels; and chin like a mango stone. The three lines at the neck are also the mark of a Great Being. (Do visit The Peranakan Museum to discover the full 32 lakshanas in the current 'Lost Buddhas' exhibition, *Serenity In Stone: The Qingzhou Discovery*, which runs until 26 April.)

The most distinguishing element of the ACM Walking Buddha is the fact that it is sculpted fully in the round, walking. This is a Sukhothai innovation. A few rare walking Buddhas had been depicted in relief in India previously, but it was the artisans of Sukhothai who added the sculpted walking Buddha to those that stand, sit or recline on their sides. (Buddhas never kneel.)

Further elements that characterise this piece as belonging to the Sukhothai period are its overall sense of elegance and serenity, perhaps best captured in two elements: 1) the Buddha's soft smile (later images become more hardened or formulaic), and 2) the see-through, diaphanous robe (notice the delineating ridges at the chest, waist and hem) that covers the left shoulder only, exposing the right (known as 'open reversed mode'), with a distinctive 'fishtail' notch of the sanghati (the third garment traditionally worn by a monk, usually translated as shawl or scarf) at the Buddha's navel. You will find other Thai Buddha statues with fishtail-notched sanghati that are short, ending at nipple height, but these Buddhas will have a lotus bud-shaped ushnisha without a flame and are most likely from the Lan Na (Northern Thailand) School. In fact, this is one of the easiest ways to detect fake Buddhas—by ensuring that such small details as described above are all consistent (e.g. belong to

the same period and school). Forgers sometimes get creative and unknowingly mix such features to create inauthentic combinations (so a short fish-tail flap and flame spell 'fake'). Sri Lankan Buddhists say the walking Buddha depicts Buddha stamping his footprint into the ground, the origin of the well-known Buddha's Footprint on Adam's Peak in Sri Lanka.

Read the excellent description of this piece on page 317 of the *ACM A-Z Guide* for more information.

Patricia Bjaaland Welch is the author of *Chinese Art: A Guide to Motifs and Visual Imagery* (Tuttle, 2008), on sale in the ACM bookshop and other fine bookstores throughout Singapore, as well as T2 and T3 at Changi Airport. She is a member of FOM and lectures frequently at Monday Morning Lectures and docent training.

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