

The Philadelphia Museum of Art

By Connie Kirker

Where is it possible to find architectural examples of a Hindu temple, several types of Buddhist structures and an Islamic mosque all within a few metres of each other? In Singapore, of course, but also in the USA at the Philadelphia Museum of Art!

One of the most impressive features of this excellent museum is the architectural settings of the renowned period rooms. Among my particular favourites are the Chinese scholar's studio, the Indian temple, the Japanese and Chinese Buddhist temples and the Japanese teahouse.

Imagine being able to stand on one spot between two galleries and observe very clearly the differences and similarities between Chinese and Japanese art – the vivid, colourful, symbolic Chinese decoration versus the Japanese *wabi-sabi* aesthetic (the beauty of things 'imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete'). And best of all, the comparison is made in the context in which it was intended – the Confucian order and symmetry of the scholar's studio versus the asymmetry of the Japanese teahouse.

The Hindu Temple in the museum was reconstructed from the ruins of three South Indian shrines devoted to the worship of the Hindu god Vishnu, preserver of the universe. This is the only example of Indian stone architecture in any American museum! Projecting from the pillars are life-size figures of the heroes, mythical animals and divine beings that relate to Vishnu in the form of Rama from the great epic poem *The Ramayana*.

Top: Sunkaraku Ceremonial Teahouse; Bottom: Great Hall of Wisdom, Ming Dynasty



In the lovely full-scale Japanese teahouse *Sunkaraku* ('Evanescent Joy'), one would have had to humbly bend to enter the small entrance and sit on the *tatami* mat floor, if visiting the wealthy Japanese scholar who once lived there. The museum acquired *Sunkaraku* from Ōgi Rodō, the architect who constructed it with pieces from an 18th century teahouse. The natural materials – cedar thatch roof, nandina (a shrub known as 'heavenly bamboo') and red pine pillars, bamboo stalk ceiling – make a telling contrast with the fine, rich materials and rosewood furniture of the adjacent Chinese scholar's studio.



Pillared Hall from India temple in Tamil Nadu

The simple lines of the Japanese Buddhist Temple of the Attainment of Happiness (*Shofukuji*) also juxtapose nicely with the elaborate gilded ceiling from the Hall of Great Wisdom (*Dazhidian*) at the Buddhist Zhihua Monastery, Beijing, China. The museum has placed the ceiling in perfect context by installing it with architectural elements reconstructed from measured drawings made at the original site.

There are, of course, thousands of exquisite individual objects of Asian art traditionally displayed in glass cases with spotlights, but I think the period rooms are far more significant and useful teaching aids. It's not the vivid experience of walking the streets of Singapore, then again not every visitor to Philadelphia's outstanding museum is able to trek to Southeast Asia to compare. I'm happy that I can.

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Photos courtesy of Philadelphia Museum of Art