

The Cinquantenaire Museum, Brussels, Belgium

By Jane Standertskjold

Treasures from the great civilisations of five continents can be found in this vast labyrinth of echoing halls and dimly lit annexes in central Brussels. Hergé did not need to travel the world to find inspiration for his Tintin albums when he had the Cinquantenaire Museum on his doorstep. He made many visits to study the thousands of artefacts on display. The wooden *Chimu* figure and mummy gained renown from their depiction in his stories. But beyond its fascination for Tintin fans, this museum holds some of the most important collections in Europe.

The Cinquantenaire is located in one wing of the monumental Palais du Cinquantenaire building, the headquarters of Belgium's Royal Museums of Art and History. The Palais was commissioned in 1880 by King Leopold II to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Belgian independence and to house the World Exhibition. A triumphal arch, designed by the French architect Charles Girault and completed in 1905, connects the wings and is a landmark sight in the city.



Chinese bodhisattva, Jin Dynasty, ca 1200 CE

Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos and Indonesia).

The Asian collections will be of special interest to readers of *PASSAGE* – on a first visit to the museum with a friend from Singapore, our planned one-hour 'quick look' became a fascinating six-hour exploration. There are many artefacts that will be familiar to visitors to the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore.

Some personal favourites include the 13th century Chola bronze of Shiva, Lord of the Dance, two rare wooden Chinese bodhisattvas (1200 CE), Khmer sculptures,

The museum is acclaimed for its excellent collections of works from antiquity (West Asia, Greece, Rome, Egypt) and the European decorative arts, but not many people know that it also has an outstanding collection of Asian art and artefacts in galleries dedicated to 'Non-European Civilisations'. These 'civilisations' are Eastern Christianity, Oceania (it is hard to miss the six tonne stone sculpture from Easter Island), the Americas (10 galleries of pre-Colombian and American Indian art), the Islamic World, China, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka, Korea, Tibet, Nepal and Southeast Asia (with separate galleries for Cambodia, Thailand,



Vietnamese lotus flower bowl, Thanh Hoa, 11th to 13th century

scroll paintings or *thangkas*, with 25 of the collection of 200 on show at any one time. There is also a small collection of Korean ceramics, but for Japanese art and Chinese export porcelain visitors are advised to go to another of the Royal Museums of Art and History – the Museums of the Far East, which are located to the north of Brussels.

The Cinquantenaire Museum should be on the itinerary of all lovers of Asian art visiting Belgium and there are usually no crowds or queues. Although not everyone will want to spend six hours on a first visit, it is advisable to allow plenty of time to tour the many galleries, browse in the book and gift shop and have lunch in the brasserie overlooking the large, formal park. The website (www.mrah.be) has information in French, Dutch and English.



Tibetan thangka, late 17th to early 18th century

Indonesian textiles and a room of Vietnamese bronze drums and ceramics (including a Ly Dynasty pot decorated with lotuses). There is even a full *gamelan* set, a ceremonial *osa osa* stool from the Nias Islands and cabinets of *wayang* puppets and masks. A delicate, seated, wooden deer (500 – 300 BCE), flanked by jade Neolithic objects and Tang *sancai*-style tomb (ceramic) guardians, welcomes visitors to the China Gallery.

The walls of the Tibet/Nepal Gallery are covered with Tibetan

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