

# Enlightened Ways: The Many Streams of Buddhist Art in Thailand

By Patricia Bjaaland Welch

The Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) has opened another specialist exhibition in the footsteps of two successful exhibitions featuring Buddhist art: *On the Nalanda Trail: Buddhism in India, China and Southeast Asia* (2008) and *Serenity in Stone: The Qingzhou Buddhas* (2009). The current exhibition's focus is on Buddhism in Thailand, this year (2555 in the Buddhist Cycle) also coinciding with His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej's completion of his seventh 12-year cycle (to which Buddhists attach great significance) and the Thai celebration of the 2,600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Lord Buddha's Attainment of Great Wisdom.

Buddhism most likely arrived in Thailand in the 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries CE, encountering an earlier transplant, Hinduism, introduced by Indian merchants and travellers. Early Chinese records reveal that mid-4<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, local inhabitants were either Buddhists or Brahmins worshipping Shiva or Vishnu. A small selection of artefacts featured in the Brahmanism section of the exhibition – including a four-armed standing Vishnu found in Surat Thani and dating to the 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century, and a 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century earthenware seal with a central motif of a conch shell (symbol of the Hindu god Vishnu – remind us of this heritage).

Aniconic representations were the earliest depictions of Buddha and his teachings (an empty throne, a footprint, a Bodhi tree, the Wheel of the Law) and were transplanted to Thailand. *Enlightened Ways* features several such artefacts, including a magnificent 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century sandstone Wheel of the Law that also features Surya, the Hindu sun god. These large stone wheels were typical of one of the earliest styles of Buddhist art in Thailand known by the name of the culture (Mon) and state (Dvaravati).



The Hindu god Vishnu, sandstone, 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century, courtesy of the National Museum Bangkok

Many of the earliest Buddhist artefacts were influenced by the Indian Gupta style (5<sup>th</sup> century onward) such as the Buddha's thin, diaphanous robe, full facial features and large snail-like curls. One of the most charming pieces in ACM's permanent collection is the small bronze Gupta-style figure of a Buddha found just south of the modern Thai border,

in Kedah (see *PASSAGE*, March/April 2011, p 7). The earliest Thai Buddha (4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century) in the exhibition was found in Surat Thani in 1930. It too dates from the Gupta period, but was most likely made in Sarnath, India (whereas ACM's Kedah Buddha is believed to have been made locally, based on Gupta models). Its right hand is in *varadamudra* (granting favours), while its body rests in the graceful triple-bend pose known as *tribhanga*.



Relief of a standing Buddha, 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century, courtesy of the National Museum Bangkok

Buddha was known as the 'Lion of the Sakyas [his birth clan]', with his voice said to resemble that of a lion's. Hence the lion became known as a protector of Buddhism. Found atop Ashoka's historical pillars in India and guarding monuments and statues across all of Southeast Asia (and on into China and East Asia), the lion is represented in this exhibition by a charming 24 cm tall rendition in terracotta and stucco. These were often used as architectural features, stuck to monuments then covered in plaster and painted. Look closely at this piece (on loan from the U Thong National Museum) and you can see plaster remains between its legs.

One of the most familiar images of the Buddha in Southeast Asia known as *bhumisparsa mudra* (calling the Earth as his witness) is uniquely known in Thailand as *Maravijaya* (or 'Victory over Mara'). A bronze 8<sup>th</sup> century representation on loan from the Hariphunchai National Museum depicts this world-changing moment.

From the 6<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century, Hinduism, Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism co-existed in central Thailand. The exhibition acknowledges this *mélange* of faiths and includes, for example, representations of Avalokiteshvara, the multi-armed Buddha of Compassion, who will later emerge in East Asia as the female bodhisattva Guan Yin.

During the 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century, the Thai political scene was dominated by the Khmers. The crowned Buddhas of the Khmer-Lopburi period (Lopburi was the Khmer regional capital city now located within Thai borders), which unite the concept of divinity with kingship, are also represented



Lion decoration in stucco, Dvaravati, 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century, courtesy of the National Museum Bangkok



Dish painted with a lotus design, Sukhothai period, black iron underglaze, courtesy of the Southeast Asian Ceramics Museum, Bangkok University

in the exhibition, including a seated Boddhisattva holding a medicine flask.

Thailand has many unique iconographic representations of the Buddha unknown in other countries, such as the standing Buddha with *both* hands in the teaching *mudra* (*vitarkamudra*) known from Dvaravati times, but perhaps the most iconic is the *Sukhothai Walking Buddha*. During the seven weeks immediately following the Buddha's enlightenment, he is said to have engaged in several activities, one of which (week three) was walking back and forth in meditation along a golden path. Walking meditation is still recognised in Thailand as one of the four forms of meditation. This walking form is also associated with the descent of the Buddha from the Tavatimsa Heaven after converting his mother. While representations of earlier 'walking' Buddhas are not entirely unknown (some possible early examples exist in Sri Lanka, for example), its appearance during the Sukhothai



A 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century Khmer-style crowned Buddha, courtesy of Somdet Phra Narai National Museum, Lopburi

Period enchanted believers with its beauty and originality. The exhibition piece, part of ACM's permanent collection, was written about in *PASSAGE* (March 2009, p. 5). The Sukhothai period is most strongly associated with King Ramkhamhaeng (r. 1279-1298), who is also recognised for re-invigorating Theravada Buddhism in Thailand by inviting a senior teacher of Sinhalese Theravada doctrine to Sukhothai.

Not only Buddha images hold sacred or supernatural powers; in Thailand it is believed that amulets, medallions,

coins and clay votive tablets also hold special powers, especially when they are sacralised by famous monks or spiritual leaders who through their words or touch can impart further power to them.

*Enlightened Ways* features over 190 objects from numerous national museums and private collections. As well as bronze and sandstone statues of the Buddha and Buddhist triads, there are votive tables, scenes from the Vessantara Jataka,

furniture, textiles (including the newly acquired scroll featuring the Vessantara Jataka), coins and other artefacts that yield insights into Thailand's religious life, past and present.

Most of the clay votive tablets depict standing or seated Buddhas. Similar small clay votive tablets are still produced in Thailand's wats as souvenirs, just as they were more than a thousand years ago. Wet clay is pressed into moulds, then air-dried, sometimes fired in a kiln or oven until they reach a bisque state. Some may have a thin layer of gold leaf applied. They are then blessed by a monk and passed on to believers. Especially efficacious ones are made of clay mixed with the ashes of cremated monks or religious teachers. The examples on display come from the ACM collection.

Such exhibitions not only create wonderful learning opportunities for our members, but also for the greater Singapore community and its many visitors. Mythical creatures such as *garuda*, *makara* and *naga* are salted throughout the exhibition; spotting them is half the fun. We hope you will visit with your families and friends, increasing your knowledge and appreciation of Thailand, Thai history and religion.

The exhibition runs through 14 April 2013.



Late Ayutthaya period Buddha, showing the 'overcoming mudra', courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum

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