

The Nakhon Si Thammarat National Museum, Thailand

By Patricia Bjaaland Welch

For thousands of years, Peninsular Thailand was one of the earliest and most important trade centres connecting East and West. Indian traders plied the coastline long before the Arabs, Chinese and Europeans reached its shores, bringing their cultures and religions along with their trade goods. Glimpses into this past can be seen up and down the coastline at such archaeological sites as Chaiya and Khao San Gaeo, their artefacts often housed in the *wats* (temples) and museums of the area, including the Nakhon Si Thammarat National Museum, which opened in 1974.



Vishnu

circa 500 BCE and features a protruding 12-ray 'star' on its face, together with four high-relief frogs.

The coloured glass and stone beads are stunning not only for their beauty but also for their sheer quantity – there are thousands of them in all shades of the rainbow. Many have been identified through chemical testing as being made from glass indigenous only to northern India. The beads on display, many dating back 2,000 years, are only a fraction of those that have been found in the area. Site looting is rampant in this part of the world and I visited one village where local 'collectors' were selling their finds at prices ranging from 15,000 to 25,000 baht per strung strand.

The religious sculpture galleries are, without doubt, the main attraction as they yield examples from the Dvaravati Period (6 – 11 CE) through Srivijaya (8 – 12 CE), Lopburi (11 – 13 CE), Lanna (11 – 18 CE), U-Thong (12 – 15 CE), Sukhothai (13 – 14 CE), Ayutthaya (15 – 19 CE) and the Rattanakosin or Bangkok Period (19 – 20 CE), with both Hindu and Buddhist images.

There are several examples of Vishnu, Buddha and the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, including a very early image of Vishnu (5 – 6 CE) in a style often described as "Southern School" and found in a spectacular nearby hilltop site that

The museum has an eclectic offering that ranges from ancient objects of daily life to the ceramics that have been found in the area (domestic and imported), but it is two galleries in particular that will probably hold most interest for visitors: the area's prehistoric artefacts and early religious sculpture.

Key amongst the prehistoric artefacts of Peninsular Thailand are its stone tools, beads and bronze *mahoretueck* (kettle) drums of the Dongson culture. These drums have been found throughout the region, testifying to early exchange patterns between northern Vietnam's Dongson region and its Asian neighbours. The drum on display dates to

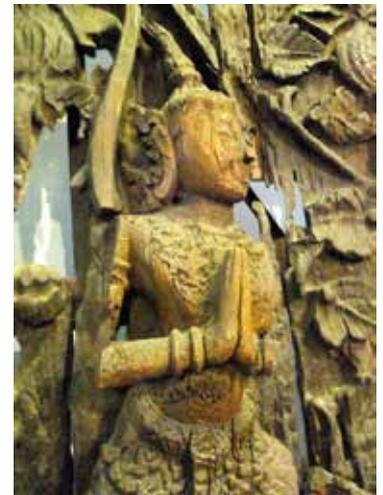


Khmer-Thai text on silver strip

most likely served as a destination marker for seaborne travellers. This early Vishnu varies radically from the taller, slim, muscular Vishnu statues one is more familiar with, as it has a shorter, fuller body and bulky *dhoti* (sarong), topped by a rounded face with full cheeks. Only Vishnu's mitred crown and the conch shell held on his left hip confirm his identity.

A small Sukhothai Period (13 – 15 CE) Harihara (the Hindu deity that combines aspects of both Shiva and Vishnu) is an unexpected find until one enters the museum's Ceramics Gallery where there are multiple examples of Thailand's famous Sukhothai and Sawankalok wares. These are found in large quantities throughout the region, testifying to the contact between these two polities during this period.

Nakhon Si Thammarat, wrestling free from Srivijayan influence, unsuccessfully attacked Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in the mid-13th century. The subsequent occupation brought waves of Theravadan Sri Lankan monks of the Lankavamsa sect to the peninsula. The Sukhothai King Ramkamhaeng (r. 1279-1298) invited them north to his capital. Contact between the two regions blossomed and the face of Buddhism in Thailand changed forever.



Wood carving of a deva

If you are interested in Thai history or the history of Buddhism in Southeast Asia, you may find a stopover in Nakhon Si Thammarat as illuminative as I did. Don't miss the Mahathat Temple and its vast collection of religious art with multiple fascinating examples of the region's 'Southern School' statuary.

Patricia Bjaaland Welch was in Nakhon Si Thammarat attending a four-day conference on Buddhism in Early Southeast Asia. She was the only passenger going to a Buddhism conference; most of the others were off to the beach resort of Koh Samui.

All photos courtesy of the author