

Southeast Asian Art

A Religious Content

Although rich and varied court art was produced in Southeast Asia, as we know from temple reliefs, religious subjects in stone and metal dominate the surviving art from the classical period (7th–13th century). Little art made from other materials has withstood the region's tropical climate, although a few extant pieces of early wood sculpture—now very worn—point to the existence of an important earlier tradition of carving. No early textiles have survived, and we can only imagine the beauty of the ancient costumes. Similarly, paintings on palm leaves and paper deteriorated long ago, and we have only second-hand evidence for the elaborate wood carvings and murals that may have decorated palace and temple walls. Some Cambodian stone palace architecture exists, but it is devoid of such decoration.

The South Asian Connection: Assimilation and Adaptation

The iconography of Southeast Asian sculpture strongly reflects Indian influences, which began to penetrate the region early in the Common Era. Buddhism and Hinduism were adopted with the identifying attributes and gestures of deities basically unchanged. Ideals of physical perfection and its representation in sculptural form, however, present quite distinct local characteristics such as regional facial types and bodies that reveal underlying musculature and skeleton.

Fewer Hindu deities are depicted in Southeast Asia than in India. Vishnu (image 46), Shiva, Ganesha, and Durga are the most popular, together with a syncretic deity called Hari-Hara (image 47), who combined aspects of Shiva and Vishnu. In Buddhist sculpture, emphasis was placed on the interceding role of bodhisattvas such as Avalokiteshvara (image 42 and 44) and Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future.

image 46

image 47

image 42, 44

Narratives

Royal courts, particularly in Cambodia and Java, commissioned extensive narrative reliefs for temple walls which portray episodes from the Buddha's life and scenes from Hindu legends and mythology. They also offer a wealth of detail about courtly and vernacular life, domestic customs, agriculture, industry, transport and architecture, music and dance. Most remain on temple walls in Cambodia and Java.

Functions of Southeast Asian Art

Worship

As in India, the majority of sculptures covered the exterior of temples that were circumambulated in worship. Sculptures of deities in the round may have been placed in the interior of temples and shrines, where dim light

would have added to the mystery of the divine being. Why small statues were made and how they were used is not known. They may have been votive images created as gifts to temples and shrines, or intended for personal use.

Hindu temples and Buddhist stupas were themselves objects of worship. They can be seen as microcosms of the universe, with their architectural forms replicating the cosmic mountains where the gods dwell. Typically, Hindu temples had towers that were oriented to the cardinal directions. Sometimes the ground plan is rectangular, with the temple surrounded by walls, a plan that resembles the sacred form of the mandala (image 8 and 13). Differing versions of this sacred cosmology in brick and stone occur throughout Southeast Asia, the most famous examples being the Buddhist monuments of Borobudur in Java, the Bayon at Angkor, and the stupas of Pagan in Burma, and the Hindu temples of Angkor, in particular Angkor Wat.

image 8, 13



Buddhist Shrine
Thailand or Cambodia.
Khmer style of central
and northeast Thailand,
13th century. Bronze.
Gift of Enid A. Haupt,
1993 (1993.387.7a-c)

bronze model of a Buddhist shrine

To Glorify the King

In Khmer Cambodia and in Java, the *devaraja* (god-king) cult embodied the belief that the living king transmitted divine will through his relationship with a particular god, and that the deity's images in the temple constructed by the king symbolized the god's approval of the king's divine right to rule. The *devaraja* cult was appropriated from India. Hindu rulers turned to Shiva or Vishnu as their patron deity. Buddhist kings derived their authority not from Buddha, who had renounced his worldly position, but from *bodhisattvas*, who were still of this world and possessed extraordinary powers. In keeping with these beliefs, occasionally representations of the monarch were made in the image of the god, often complete with the attributes of a deity (image 50). Many of the greatest Khmer temple-mountains were centered on a funerary shrine—the inner core of Angkor Wat, for instance—in which such statues were placed.

image 50

To Teach

Along with the cosmic and spiritual truths embodied in the temple's architectural form, extensive narrative reliefs on temple walls performed an educational role by instructing worshippers in both religious and historical events. For instance, as the pilgrim ascends the galleries at Borobudur, circling each level before climbing to the next, he or she is inspired by depictions of the Buddha's life and the compassion of bodhisattvas.

Precious Possessions

In comparison with India, where little ancient gold survives, hoards of jewelry and ritual vessels have been found in Indonesia and, to a lesser extent, Cambodia and Vietnam. The jewelry includes gold adornments for the head, ears, neck and chest, waist, fingers, upper and lower arms, and ankles and toes. Other examples of sophisticated metalwork are bronze, silver, and gold vessels for religious and court ceremonies, ritual weapons with elaborate finials, temple lamps and bells, and ritual objects such as the *vajra* (thunderbolt) and processional staffs. The fate of a large number of these precious objects was (and still is) to be melted down for the value of the metal.

Styles of Southeast Asian Art

Idealized Human Forms

Following the conventions of Indian art, Southeast Asian artists sought to visualize the spiritual perfection of the gods in idealized human form. Although the iconography was imported from India, notable differences are evident in Southeast Asian sculpture.

Anatomical Structure

The sculpture combines sensual forms with a strong architectonic basis, as if the sensuality of Indian sculpture had been merged with the formal, hieratic qualities of Egyptian sculpture. Although surface flesh seems to be inflated by prana (inner breath), the body is not usually as taut as in Indian sculpture. Beneath the skin surface, whose junctures are subtly indicated, there is the sense of muscle and bone. The sensuality and fecundity expressed in Khmer female figures (image 49) are not as exaggerated and seem restrained when compared with the voluptuous femininity typical of Indian art. Later Southeast Asian sculptures are even more abstracted, and forms cease to have a direct relationship to the human anatomy (image 45).

image 49

image 45

Pose

In general, a sense of dignity and restraint is created in the sculpture by an erect posture, frontal pose, and balanced forms. Serene expressions emphasize the compassion, purity, and introspection of transcendent beings.

Surfaces

In comparison to Indian sculpture, less emphasis is placed on adornment. Smooth areas contrast with the rich patterns of the figure's hairstyle and the pleats of the garment and the elaborate way in which it is worn. Some images were probably adorned with actual jewelry.

Sculpture in the Round and in Relief

Unlike Indian sculptural figures, which were rarely more than carvings in very high relief as part of a stela or for display in a niche, Southeast Asian deities were often carved fully in the round. A tradition of low-relief sculpture also flourished.

Scale

As in South Asian art, to express the power and complexity of the gods or kings, sculptures of them were sometimes represented on a superhuman scale, while lesser spiritual beings were portrayed smaller.