

Arts of Asia Lecture Series Fall 2011

The Arts of South Asia & the Islamic World: Beliefs Made Visible

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The Site of the Buddha's Enlightenment and Its Significance for Asian Art

Forrest McGill, Asian Art Museum, September 30, 2011

The Mahabodhi Temple, Bodhgaya, Bihar State, India

Maha, “great” + *bodhi*, “enlightenment or awakening”

- What happened there?
 - The bodhisattva Siddhartha's meditation before the enlightenment
 - The attack of the demon Mara, the bodhisattva's calling on the earth to bear witness to his merits, and the bodhisattva's victory
 - The enlightenment (=the achievement of Buddhahood)
 - The events of the seven weeks after the enlightenment (the Buddha's gazing unblinkingly at the tree, pacing up and down the jeweled walk, being protected from a storm by a serpent, etc.)
- Objects of devotion
 - Primary
 - The bodhi tree
 - The diamond throne (*vajrasana* = *vajra*, “diamond, diamond-like” [among other meanings] + *asana*, “seat, seated position”)
 - Secondary
 - The shrine of the unblinking gazing, the jeweled walk, etc.
- The temple's primary architectural characteristics
 - Tall pyramidal towers with straight, not curved, sides
 - Tallest tower in the center, with four similar shorter towers around it at the corners
 - Tall cubical base
- The temple's history
 - According to legend, Emperor Ashoka (reigned approx. 269-232 BCE) visited the site and established a shrine and the diamond throne there.
 - Some parts of a stone railing from about 100 BCE survive.
 - The Chinese pilgrim Faxian recorded a tower at Bodhgaya in the early 400s.
 - The Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang recorded an elaborate towered shrine at Bodhgaya in the 630s. The corner towers were probably in existence by this time.

- Inscriptions record that the Burmese performed repairs to the temple around 1100 and around 1300.
- The decline and disappearance of Buddhism in India after 1200 left the temple largely untended.
- British travelers began visiting the site around 1790.
- The Burmese sent a mission to the temple in 1802, and another in 1875.
- In the 1880s a joint British-Burmese effort completely restored the temple, disturbing or destroying much original material in the process.
- Models of the temple
 - Considerable numbers of small stone models of the Mahabodhi were made in 1000-1200.
- Architectural copies or evocations of the temple
 - In Burma: at Pagan (approx. 1200-1250) and Rangoon (19th-20th century)
 - In Thailand: at Chiang Mai (1455-1470) and elsewhere (20th century)
 - In Nepal: at Patan (approx. 1550-1600)
 - In China: at Beijing (1473, 1748) and Hohhot (1732)
 - And elsewhere, 20th century

The Pala dynasty in northeastern India and Bangladesh, approx. 750-1150

- Sculpture Important in relation to the Mahabodhi: the Buddha image in the position of touching the earth to bear witness to the bodhisattva's merit, as he overcomes the demon Mara. This position is called *bhumisparsha* (*bhumi*, "earth" + *sparsha*, "touching") or *maravijaya* (Mara + *vijaya*, "victory")
- Architecture Little survives, but votive stupas show the appearance of architectural stupas

For further reading:

Asher, Frederick M. *Bodh Gaya*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Huntington, Susan L., and John C. Huntington. *Leaves from the Bodhi Tree: The Art of Pāla India (8th-12th Centuries) and Its International Legacy*. Dayton, Ohio: Dayton Art Institute in association with the University of Washington Press, 1990.

Leoshko, Janice, et al. *Bodhgaya, the Site of Enlightenment*. Bombay: Marg Publications, 1988.