

Arts of Asia Lecture Series Spring 2012

The Arts of South Asia & the Himalayas: The Sacred & the Secular

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Royal Signs: Kingship and Art in Early Southeast Asia

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The lecture focuses on the art of Southeast Asia that dates roughly from 1000 BCE up until the 10th c. CE. This very long period can be broken into two periods, that of the bronze art that occurs without relationship to the art of India, and that which demonstrates Indian artistic impact. The periods are (again roughly) from the 1000 BCE - 2nd c. CE and then from the 6th c CE on. How to characterize the art from the first five centuries CE is highly contested by scholars, but for our purposes we will simply use this period as a transition between very different artistic groupings.

The early period of bronze production is often characterized as Dongson after an archaeological site in Northern Vietnam. The bronze objects produced in Northern Vietnam spread, via trade and migration, throughout Southeast Asia, including the Indonesian islands. Evidence from the relief images on the objects, and from present-day ethnographic studies of certain populations, argues that ancestor worship was of importance.

The appearance in SEAsia of Indian related art (that associated with Hinduism and Buddhism) around the 6th c. CE changed radically the art. Within a few centuries SEAsian artists were producing some of the most remarkable stone sculpture ever made. The lecture will focus on these developments in the art of present-day Thailand and Cambodia.

The following are questions that you will be able to answer from the lecture. I've supplied brief answers.

1. What was the art and culture in Southeast Asia before the impact of Indian related culture, art, and religion?

Answer: Pre-Indian related art included highly developed bronze objects, most importantly bronze drums (called Dongson drums). The drums date roughly from 500 BCE-200 CE, with the bronze period being from ca. 1000 BCE – 5th c. CE. The drums are associated with ancestor worship and possibly with regalia of rulers.

2. Did the indigenous bronze art end with the coming of the Indian culture?

The Dongson bronze making ended under impact from Chinese political domination of Northern Vietnam during the Han (Chinese) takeover (ca. 1st BCE-2nd c. CE). Bronze objects continued to be made in specific areas of SEAsia based on the Dongson prototypes, but Indian related art dominated from the 6th c. on.

3. What was the earliest Indian-related art in SEAsia?

The earliest Indian-related art are stone sculptures of the Hindu god Vishnu that appear in about the 6th c. CE. Also, lingas (phallic forms) of the Hindu god Shiva appear about the same time, although their dating is difficult. Buddha images also appear, although they probably date somewhat later, mostly to the 7th century.

4. What was the relationship between SEAsian art and culture and Chinese art and culture?

From Chinese histories we know that there was official contact between states in SEAsia and the Chinese court, but there is very little evidence that Chinese art and culture had much impact on the art and culture of Southeast Asia.

5. How did the Indian-related art develop in the two or three centuries (7th-9th c.) after its introduction?

Southeast Asian sculpture shows an astoundingly rapid development that by the 7th and 8th centuries produced some of the most remarkable sculptures ever made.

6. Who were the patrons of these sculptures?

The patrons were predominantly rulers and the elite. Ancestor worship, for which the Dongson culture supplies evidence, is probably the bases for the pre-Indian impacted culture and art. Indigenous ancestor worship was transferred to the Indian-related deities, allowing for local rulers to align themselves with universal gods and widely shared beliefs.

7. What architecture developed in conjunction with this early sculpture?

The sculpture was placed in small brick shrines with towers. The architecture developed over time differently in various areas of Southeast Asia, but the use of shrines (rather than temples as in Indian architecture), continued. The magnificent later monuments in Cambodia, for example, are based on shrines placed on the steps of a pyramidal mountain. The connection of the shrines built in a line led to the galleries, as at Angkor Wat (12th c.).