



Indian Tradition In Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT:

The impact of Indian culture was profound, especially in parts of Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, Cambodia, and the Indonesian archipelago. Local rulers adopted concepts of state and kingship as well as urban development and hydraulic engineering. They also embraced a script and literature in the Sanskrit language. Indic elements were integrated and authenticated by both Hindu and Buddhist metaphysical ideologies. Those ideologies claimed to be universal, embracing all human diversity within a cosmic frame of reference. That probably explains why the culture was adopted, for there was no Indian conquest of terrain and no imposition of a populace or doctrine. India never established colonies in Southeast Asia, and the transmission was more a movement of ideas rather than peoples. Furthermore, the decision was in the hands of the Southeast Asian rulers, and the adoption of Indic elements represented a clear choice on their part based on preexisting priorities. The many Indian concepts of state and kingship adopted by these rulers reflect the extensive political power held by religious figures in the royal courts. In many cases, native rulers may have invited revered Hindu priests or Buddhist scholars to take up posts of power. Indian ideals of royalty legitimated the rulers' positions, and the fusing of foreign and indigenous concepts became a mutually beneficiary liaison for both the king and the religious adviser.

INTRODUCTION:

The blending of foreign and indigenous styles transformed Southeast Asia's art during the rise of Hindu and Buddhist states in the beginning of the 1st century ce. Even in those regions where Indian influence became strongly entrenched—namely, Cambodia, Burma, and Thailand—the older layers of ancient religion and artistic consciousness remained alive. Indian deities were readily identified

with local spirits. The local populations retained their animist customs, especially those connected with fertility and practical magic, often with art (in perishable materials). Those arts were influenced by and exercised a reciprocal influence upon the Indian forms. On the Indonesian island of Bali, which remains nominally Hindu, Indian and folk elements were thoroughly assimilated, producing a unique religious culture and art.

In many remote parts of the region, art was used to link village life with the supernatural, and people continued to follow the ways of their ancestors, with local art styles demonstrating the resilience of indigenous traditions. Interregional artistic influences in art, such as of the Indonesian archipelago, were less easy to assess, and certain common symbols, motifs, and art objects underwent a transformation both in function and meaning. Each region often interpreted and represented these motifs differently, so caution must be exercised in interpreting them.

The form and intensity of each foreign cultural influence changed with time. China's geographical proximity to the region greatly impacted the culture of Vietnam and Laos. But the stylistic elements of Chinese art are also found in the art and architecture of Java's north coast, northern Thailand, Cambodia, and Burma.

Islam became a religious constituent in Southeast Asia in the 15th century. Muslim traders from India, Persia, China, and the Middle East spread Islam to Sumatra, Java, and the Malay Peninsula, where it became a dominant political—and distinctive cultural—force from the 15th century onward. The cult of the ancestors was revived and encouraged by Muslim rulers, with folk versions of denatured Hindu art adapted to it. Decorative styles based on this art flourished in

Sumatra and Java especially and were officially revived in the late 20th century. European political and economic expansion into the region from the 16th century gradually became a dominant factor in the art of the region. In the Philippines, notably in and around Manila, Spanish Roman Catholic art flourished after the Spanish colonization. Elsewhere, European academy painting conventions made a steady incursion from the mid-19th century onward. The postwar period of nationalism, which marked the end of European colonial domination, significantly influenced culture and contemporary art development.

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS:

Both Hindu and Buddhist art were produced according to theoretical prescriptions. If the formulas were not followed, the art was believed to not fulfill its transcendent function. In practice, however, there was room for styles and types of images to change and develop fairly quickly. Hindu and non-Theravada art recognizes what could be called aesthetic values as a component in religious expression. Theravada Buddhism, however, always attempts to preserve the closest possible connections with the Buddha's recorded original deeds and sayings; its art, therefore, concentrates on repeating in its main Buddha figures the most exact possible imitations of authentic ancient images. The Theravada Pali canon lists

32 major lakshanas—the attributes of the Buddha—plus 80 minor anatomical characteristics. Some of these interpretations have developed over time. Many of these attributes appear to be Brahmanical and pre-Buddhist (pre-6th century bce), which explains why they are often linked to depictions of Hindu deities as well. (See below Burma; Thailand and Laos. In the subsidiary sculptured and painted figures, however, which illustrate scenes from sacred history, Theravada art has greater freedom of invention. In the 20th century, Theravada Buddhism was the only form of Indian religion to survive in Southeast Asia, save for the modified Hinduism of Bali. Its architecture from this period is decorated with a robust and innovative use of coloured glass, mirrored tiles, and a fantastical array of bright colours.

METHOD:

Most of the works made under the inspiration of the earliest magical and animist tradition are in perishable materials such as wood. Because the climate is so hostile, most of the works that survive are from the last few centuries.. There are, however, a large number of Neolithic stone implements and prehistoric stone monuments (megaliths) as well as bronzes, which provide a solid archaeological basis for interpretation of Southeast Asia's earliest art traditions.

For the art of the classic Indianizing civilizations, the archaeology of European countries played a major role in clearing, excavating, and reconstructing major sites in their colonies—i.e., the French in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam; the Dutch in Indonesia; and the British in Burma. Old bronzes were found in fair quantities; apart from those of the early Dong Son culture (also see below Bronze Age: Dong Son culture), all belong to one or other of the Indianizing traditions. Many old brick and stucco buildings survive, notably the medieval work at Pagan, Burma, and in central Thailand, though an enormous number are known to have perished. Apart from Pagan's murals and a few Indianizing rock and wall paintings on plaster, very old paintings are not known to exist. Most of the surviving Buddhist pictorial art on wooden panels or other fragile material is less than 300 years old.

The stone of dynastic buildings of course survived the best, by far. Scholars thus know much more about Indianizing stone architecture, with its sculpture, than about any other Southeast Asian visual art. But where good relief sculpture flourished, one can legitimately assume that vanished pictorial arts also flourished. And from details carved in stone and incised on bronze as well as from the scattered enthusiastic references in Chinese sources, one can be sure that

throughout their history the Southeast Asian peoples were intensely creative and lived their lives surrounded by a wealth of imaginative art in many different mediums.

There are many sites yet to be discovered and excavated. Knowledge of the history of art in many parts of Southeast Asia, especially of important episodes in Burma, Thailand, and Sumatra, was still scantily documented in the 21st century.

NEOLITHIC PERIOD:

The earliest works in Southeast Asia that can be called art are the rectangular polished ax heads of a familiar late Neolithic type that were found at many sites in Peninsular Malaysia, Indochina, and Indonesia. Some of the later Neolithic (c. 2000 bce to early centuries ce) implements are extremely beautiful and polished with the greatest care. They include practical adzes and axes, but some, made of semiprecious stone, are part of ritual grave goods. Ancient stone tools often thought to have medicinal or curative properties continued to be valued in many parts of Southeast Asia. These tools, with their fine edges, suggest that their owners were capable of very high quality woodworking and might well have decorated their wooden houses with intricate designs.

During the Neolithic Period, metal—both bronze and iron—came

into use for implements, bringing great change to the material culture. In many regions, notably Cambodia, Borneo, and Sumatra, numerous megalithic works of art survive, including menhirs (single upright monoliths), dolmens (two or more upright monoliths supporting a horizontal slab), cist graves (Neolithic graves lined with stone slabs), and terraced burial mounds, all dating from the late Neolithic. Some remarkable large stones are worked in relief with symbols and images of animals and humans, notably in the Pasemah region of Sumatra. Stone continued to be fashioned into tools during this period. These were often finely polished, and some may have been for ritual use. Stone rings and some bracelets have also been found. Many of these items are also seen at Bronze Age sites. These and other art objects suggest a highly developed cult of a spirit world connected with the remains of the dead (see below Cambodia and Vietnam; Indonesia).



**Shwesandaw *cetiya*, Pagan, Myanmar
(Burma)**

DISCUSSION IN THIS STUDY:

Almost contemporary with Chenla was the rise of the central Javanese kingdom. Soon after 600 ce the earliest surviving Hindu temples were built. About 770 the Shailendra dynasty began its long series of superb stone-cut monuments, both Hindu and Buddhist, which culminated in two enormous symbolic architectural complexes:

the Mahayana Buddhist Borobudur (c. 800) and the Hindu Lara Jonggrang, at Prambanam (c. 900–930). These monuments were decorated in an individual and exceptionally accomplished style of full-round and relief sculpture. Many small bronze religious images have survived. The art of the Shailendra dynasty testifies to the imperial and maritime power of the central Javanese kingdom, which seems to have influenced politics and art in Khmer Cambodia. It also took over the possessions of a major Theravada Buddhist kingdom called Shrivijaya, which had flourished in what is now Peninsular Malaysia and Sumatra and was centred at Palembang. The Javanese Shailendra ruled most of Peninsular Malaysia and Sumatra and installed themselves there in the mid-9th century, when their home terrain in Java was taken over by the Mataram dynasty, heralding the eastern Javanese period, which began in 927. Shrivijaya, under Shailendra rule,

declined in the mid-11th century, and most of its remains still await discovery.



Shwesandaw *cetiya*, Pagan, Myanmar (Burma)

In Vietnam about the 2nd century the predominantly Hindu kingdom of Champa was founded. Its capital was at My Son, where many temples have been found. This kingdom suffered much from attacks by the Chinese, and, after it began to lose the north to the Sinicized Vietnamese, the Cham capital moved in 1069 to Vijaya (Binh Dinh), in the south. There it was involved in continual warfare with the Khmer, who finally annexed southern Vietnam in 1203. The art of the northern Vietnamese as a whole was always so strongly under the influence of China that it can best be characterized as a provincial Chinese style.

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