



# ASIAN ART MUSEUM

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## EMERALD CITIES: ARTS OF SIAM & BURMA, 1775-1950

October 23, 2009—January 10, 2010

San Francisco, CA, August 15, 2009: From October 23, 2009 through January 10, 2010, the Asian Art Museum showcases *Emerald Cities: Arts of Siam & Burma, 1775-1950*, the first exhibition of its kind to use a systematic approach to present artworks from this region and period. The exhibition features more than 140 artworks drawn exclusively from the museum's collection, which is one of the largest and most important collections of nineteenth-century Siamese and Burmese art outside of Southeast Asia. On view are ornately carved furniture, lavishly decorated miniature shrines, gilded statues, elaborately illustrated manuscripts, colorfully detailed paintings, and mirrored and bejeweled ritual objects. The Asian Art Museum organized *Emerald Cities* and serves as the exhibition's exclusive venue.



King Nimi is carried through the heavens on a divine chariot, a scene from the Nimi Jataka. (detail) Approx. 1875–1925. Thailand. Paint on cloth. Gift of Dr. Sarah Bekker, 2008.78

The museum's holdings in Southeast Asian art increased dramatically in 2002 from a generous donation of artworks – including many rare sculptures, paintings, and decorative arts – from Doris Duke's Southeast Asian Art Collection. Before being distributed to organizations such as the Asian Art Museum, Doris Duke's Southeast Asian Art Collection included more than 400 museum-quality objects and 1,800 other items. Together, these objects have represented one of the most important collections of later Southeast Asian art outside Asia.

The collection was housed at Duke Farms – Doris Duke's principal residence in Hillsborough, New Jersey – where for many years it remained largely unknown both to the public and specialists. Over two-thirds of the artworks on view in *Emerald Cities* are from this collection. The museum spent more than five years to complete an extensive conservation project to preserve and stabilize these very fragile artworks. *Emerald Cities* provides the opportunity for their public debut.

“All of the artworks on view in *Emerald Cities* originate from the museum’s extensive collection, demonstrating the quality and depth of the museum’s holdings from Thailand and Burma,” says Jay Xu, Director of the Asian Art Museum. “Through the efforts of Forrest McGill, the museum’s Chief Curator, and M.L. Pattaratorn Chirapravati, co-curator of the exhibition, *Emerald Cities* and its accompanying catalogue contribute both to scholarship and public appreciation of the rich and varied artistic traditions of Southeast Asia.”

“A feast for the eyes awaits visitors to *Emerald Cities*,” says Forrest McGill. “The writings and religious thought at the time emphasized the gorgeous, flowering, bejeweled, heavenly city of the gods. This view of a luxurious and fantastical Eden is evident through the artworks on view in the galleries which originate from the three great cities of the time—Bangkok, Mandalay and Rangoon.”

The artworks in *Emerald Cities* are presented by region, divided into three distinctive geographical areas: Burma; the highlands of Northern Thailand and Shan State, Burma; and Central Thailand. Within each geographical region, artworks are further categorized by their functions: Religious Art – including Buddhist manuscripts, sculpture, and objects for ritual use such as offering containers and ceremonial begging bowls; Mythology – including theatrical masks, costumes and puppets used for the dramatic productions of the epic of Rama; and Luxury Goods – including gold and silver vessels, furniture, and textiles.

#### **Exhibition’s presentation in the Galleries:**

The exhibition opens in Lee Gallery with three videos introducing important facets of the exhibition: Doris Duke and her Southeast Asian art collection; the conservation efforts undertaken in preparation for the exhibition; and a general introduction to Siam and Burma.

Artworks are presented in Hambrecht Gallery with the focus on Burmese art. One of the highlights is a lacquered and gilded Buddhist manuscript depicting scenes from the life of the Buddha (catalogue #3). This type of manuscript was often given to a monastery at the time when a family relation was preparing to enter the monkhood. Even up to the present day, it is customary for young men to become monks for as little as three months in order to bestow merit on their families. The manuscript on view depicts the scene of Prince Siddhartha (the Buddha-to-be) leaving his family to embark on his spiritual pursuit, a seemingly appropriate subject for the circumstances. The scene is placed in what would have been a contemporary Burmese royal court, with added embellishments that give it a fantastical quality.

Another highlight in the Burmese section is a rare, sequined, nearly-six-meter-long hanging that portrays the scenes of the legend of Rama (catalogue #19). Although its purpose is unknown,

one explanation is that this narrative textile may have served as a backdrop for puppet performances. The royal costumes portrayed in this artwork are echoed throughout the exhibition, through actual costumes and those that appear on puppets and in other paintings.

Hambrecht Gallery also features artworks from Northern Thailand and Shan State, Burma. One of the first of these is a lavishly decorated miniature shrine almost two meters high from the highlands of Northern Thailand (catalogue #34). Made of lacquered and gilded wood, the shrine is adorned with mirrored glass and topped by several tiers of tapering roofs with prickly finials and a tiered parasol finial. Its structure is based on architectural forms of the time and demonstrates the tendency towards the elaborate and ornate.

The exhibition continues in Osher Gallery with a section devoted to artworks solely from Central Thailand, which accounts for more than two-thirds of the artworks on view in the exhibition. On the wall to the left of the gallery is a head of a Buddha image in stucco (catalogue #45) displayed alongside other Buddha images. In the 1790s the first monarch of the new kingdom of Siam had hundreds of Buddha images from other parts of his realm brought to Wat Phra Chettuphon, a new temple built in Bangkok under his reign. To make the styles of the images uniform, he had them covered with layers of stucco coated in gilded lacquer. In the 1950s when this style had gone out of fashion, the stucco was removed from these temple images and most fragments were presumably discarded. The stucco Buddha image on view is only one of two that was known to survive.

On an opposite wall in the gallery, a complete set of thirteen paintings – each reflecting one of the thirteen chapters that recount the next-to-last story of the previous lives of the Buddha (catalogue #71-83) – is on display. This sacred story is often recited at religious festivals. In each painting a chapter of the sacred story is depicted in the middle of the composition with other narratives depicted along the edges. The stories often add soap operatic visual elements depicting everyday dramas that perhaps kept the story interesting and relevant to the audience. A complete set of thirteen paintings telling this story is extremely rare. Having served its purpose, a set of such paintings after a recitation at a festival may have been put away with no provisions in place for their preservation, or dispersed individually or in smaller sets.

A popular wedding gift from the royal Thai family was a gold bowl (catalogue #121). The ornate example on view in *Emerald Cities* was presented to the daughter of Hamilton King, a U.S. diplomat in Siam, by Rama VI on the occasion of her wedding in 1921. It was personally delivered by a Siamese envoy to the King family in the U.S. It is decorated with three alternating motifs: a mythical eagle with human attributes, stylized foliage, and a celestial being with the

hand gesture of adoration. The presentation of a traditional Siamese gift to a westerner indicates a strong sense of national identity and pride.

*Emerald Cities* closes by showcasing shadow puppets used for the enactment of the Rama epic, head dresses worn by dancers portraying Rama and Sita in classical Siamese dance, and wooden statues of mythical creatures that are half-bird, half human and inhabited an Eden-like forest in Buddha legend. Of these, the opulent and bejeweled head dresses particularly reinforce the sumptuous aesthetic found in artworks from Siam and Burma around the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This aesthetic in different variations is echoed throughout most of the artworks on view in *Emerald Cities*.

### **Conservation Effort**

The efforts to stabilize, clean, and repair the more than one hundred vulnerable art objects in this exhibition have been going on for more than five years. The rare kinds of Burmese, Shan, northern Thai, and Siamese artworks on view, even though they may not be more than a century or two old, have often not survived in good condition. There are many reasons: the tropical climate of their homelands; the fact that some of these types of artworks were made for short-term use and no particular effort was made to preserve them later; and—for Burmese objects—the multiple wars of the last two hundred years. Even in Thailand and Burma, many artworks do not survive.

In 2004, thanks in part to a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services the museum surveyed its substantial Southeast Asian art collection to document its condition. Subsequent funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and other sources allowed the museum to undertake a major conservation effort to treat the artworks in need of care. The museum's conservation team, including specialists in paintings, textiles, and other objects, spent some 6000 hours studying and photographing objects and planning and carrying out the treatments to preserve them and make them look their best. The main objective for the conservation project was preservation as opposed to complete repair to maintain the artworks' authenticity. The conservation efforts also proved invaluable in dating the artworks and learning more about their history.

### **Related programs**

In conjunction with *Emerald Cities*, the Asian Art Museum is presenting a host of related programs onsite including Burmese puppet performances by a marionette troupe brought from Mandalay, a family festival, a MATCHA evening mixer, lectures and more. On October 29 and

30, U.C. Berkeley is presenting a symposium—Object Knowledge: Art, Artifact and Authority in Southeast Asia—complementing the exhibition. Through the Community Speakers Program, the museum’s trained docent corps travel throughout the community upon request to present talks on the *Emerald Cities* exhibition to interested organizations. For a complete schedule of programs, visit [www.asianart.org](http://www.asianart.org) or call 415-581-3500.

### **Publication**

A fully-illustrated catalogue entitled *Emerald Cities: Arts of Siam and Burma 1775-1950* documents the exhibition. Published by the Asian Art Museum, the catalogue includes essays by: Dr. Forrest McGill, Chief Curator and Watis Curator of South and Southeast Asian Art at the Asian Art Museum; M.L. Pattaratorn Chirapravati, associate professor of art history at California State University in Sacramento, CA; and Peter Skilling, noted specialist in archaeology, history, and literature of Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia. The museum gratefully acknowledges the underwriting of the catalogue by the Society for Asian Art and members of the museum’s Avery Brundage Circle. The catalogue is available at the Asian Art Museum store (\$37.50 softcover, \$49.00 hardcover). 415-581-3600 or [shop@asianart.org](mailto:shop@asianart.org).

### **Media Preview**

A media preview for *Emerald Cities: Arts of Siam and Burma 1775-1950* is scheduled for Wednesday, October 21, 2009 at 10:30 a.m. Remarks begin at 11:15 a.m. Please RSVP by Friday, October 16 to [pr@asianart.org](mailto:pr@asianart.org) or call (415) 581-3713.

### **Exhibition Organization**

*Emerald Cities* is organized by the Asian Art Museum. Presentation at the Asian Art Museum is made possible by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, the Koret Foundation, Carmen M. Christensen, United Airlines, Kasikornbank, and the Connoisseurs’ Council, with additional support from the James H.W. Thompson Foundation and Dr. and Mrs. David P. Buchanan. Media sponsors: ABC7, San Francisco magazine. The museum gratefully acknowledges the underwriting of the exhibition catalogue by the Society for Asian Art and members of the museum’s Avery Brundage Circle.

### **About the Doris Duke Southeast Asian Art Collection**

Doris Duke (1912–1993) was the only child of James Buchanan Duke, a founder of the American Tobacco Company and Duke Energy Company, and a benefactor of Duke University in his native North Carolina. Throughout her life Doris Duke enthusiastically pursued her varied interests. From the time of a honeymoon tour to India, Thailand, Indonesia, and other Asian countries in 1935, Doris Duke was fascinated with the region’s cultures. In later decades she gathered countless antiques and artworks on her worldwide excursions and assembled notable collections of Islamic and Southeast Asian art.

After Doris Duke’s death in 1993, her Southeast Asian Art Collection became the responsibility of the trustees of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. The Asian Art Museum learned of the collection through its late board chair Jack Bogart. Through Mr. Bogart’s efforts, the Asian Art Museum was fortunate enough to be the recipient of a substantial part of this important collection after the trustees of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation approved a plan to donate the collection to appropriate museums in 2002. The Asian Art Museum of San Francisco and the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, Maryland, received the largest donations from the collection – 167 and 150 objects, respectively. In total, the foundation has donated close to 700 objects from the collection to approximately 20 museums across the country and abroad.

### **About the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation**

The mission of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation is to improve the quality of people's lives through grants supporting the performing arts, environmental conservation, medical research and the prevention of child maltreatment, and through preservation of the cultural and environmental legacy of Doris Duke's properties. Established in 1996 and headquartered in New York, the foundation supports four national grant-making programs. It also oversees three properties that were owned by Doris Duke in Hillsborough, New Jersey; Honolulu, Hawaii; and Newport, Rhode Island.

### **About the Koret Foundation**

An entrepreneurial spirit guides Koret in addressing societal challenges and strengthening Bay Area life. Koret adds to the region's vitality by promoting educational opportunity, contributing to a diverse cultural landscape, and bolstering organizations that are innovative in their approaches to meeting the needs of the Jewish and general communities.

### **About the Asian Art Museum**

The Asian Art Museum—Chong-Moon Lee Center for Asian Art and Culture is a public institution whose mission is to lead a diverse global audience in discovering the unique material, aesthetic, and intellectual achievements of Asian art and culture. Holding more than 17,000 Asian art treasures spanning 6,000 years of history, the Asian Art Museum is one of the largest museums in the Western world devoted exclusively to Asian art. Once located in Golden Gate Park, the museum now resides at its new, expanded facility at Civic Center Plaza. An architectural gem featuring a dynamic blend of beaux arts and modern design elements, the museum's new home is the result of a dramatic transformation of San Francisco's former main public library building by renowned architect Gae Aulenti (who famously reenvisioned an abandoned railway station as Paris's Musée d'Orsay) into a showcase for the Asian Art Museum's celebrated collection and exhibitions.

- **Information:** (415) 581-3500 or [www.asianart.org](http://www.asianart.org).
- **Location:** 200 Larkin Street, San Francisco, CA 94102.
- **Hours:** The museum is open Tuesday through Sunday from 10:00 am to 5:00 pm, with extended hours until 9:00 pm every Thursday from February through September.
- **General Admission:** \$12 for adults, \$8 for seniors, \$7 for youth 13–17, and free for children under 12. On Thursday evenings (February through September) general admission after 5 pm is just \$5 for all visitors except those under 12 and members, who are always free. **Target First Free Sundays:** The museum offers FREE general admission to all on the **first Sunday** of every month, courtesy of Target. Entry into *Emerald Cities* requires a \$5 surcharge after general admission.
- **Access:** The Asian Art Museum is wheelchair accessible. For more information regarding access, please call (415) 581-3598; TDD: (415) 861-2035.