

ASIAN ART

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MODERN INDIAN ART HAMMERS HOME IN NEW YORK

In New York, on 19 March 2025, the gavel came down to a round of applause when MF Husain's (1905–2011) large oil on canvas, *Untitled (Gram Yatra)*, or 'village journey', achieved a world record for modern Indian art at auction when it sold to an unnamed institution at Christie's. The price was \$13.75 million, which doubled the previous record for any Modern Indian work (about \$7.4 million for Amrita Sher-Gil's 1937 oil on canvas painting, *The Story Teller*, in September of 2023 in Mumbai, as well as the previous record for Husain, approximately \$3.1 million (more than eight times its low estimate) for the painting *Untitled (Reincarnation)*, sold at Sotheby's in London last year.

Untitled (Gram Yatra) left India in 1954, the year it was completed. It was purchased by the Ukrainian-born, Norway-based doctor Leon Elias Volodarsky, who was in Delhi to establish a thoracic surgery training centre for the World Health Organisation. Volodarsky bequeathed the painting to Oslo University Hospital in 1964. Proceeds from its



Untitled (Gram Yatra) by Maqbool Fida Husain, painted in 1954, signed and dated, oil on canvas, 90.2 x 422.6 cm, sold for \$13.75 million in March at Christie's in New York

upcoming sale will support the training of future generations of doctors at the institution.

'The work adds so much depth to our understanding of Husain's early career,' Nishad Avari, head of South Asian Modern and Contemporary Art at Christie's, says. 'It highlights his commitment to defining what it meant to be a modern Indian artist, and, in turn, what modern Indian art meant to a nation that had only gained independence seven years earlier.' In Husain's work women play a central role within these vignettes – milking cows, milling grain, riding carts and caring for children – symbolising

fertility, creation, and renewal. The depictions extend beyond the domestic sphere, resonating with the broader narrative of a newly independent India striving to define itself.

MF Husain started work as a painter of cinema hoardings in Mumbai in the 1930s after attending art school in Bombay (now Mumbai) and joined the Progressive Artists' Group in 1947. In 1952, he held his first solo exhibition outside India in Zurich, marking a pivotal moment in the artist's career. During the 1950s and '60s, Husain started to gain national and international acclaim for his bold, vibrant paintings that often

explored Indian themes such as mythology, epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, rural life, and women. Although he was raised in a Muslim household, Husain sought the freedom to capture the essence of beauty in other religious cultures; however, from the 1990s onward, Husain faced backlash for his nude depictions of Hindu goddesses, which sparked protests and legal challenges. This eventually led to threats and court cases, and he lived in self-imposed exile from 2006, primarily in Dubai and London. In 2010, he accepted Qatari citizenship and remained there until his death in 2011.

Over the last few years, modern Indian art has been performing well at international auctions and demand is high. Indian art fairs are also experiencing significant success, reflecting a broader surge in the country's art market. The 16th edition of the India Art Fair, held in February 2025 in New Delhi, marked a milestone with a record 120 exhibitors and robust sales. The success of the India Art Fair has also spurred expansion plans, including a new edition of the fair in Mumbai scheduled for November 2025.

Some art-market analyses show that the market for Indian, and South Asian art in general, has grown over 250% in the last decade. This recent New York sale of modern and contemporary Indian art totalled \$24,864,316, selling 95 per cent by lot. In addition to the Husain painting, the sale established records for numerous South Asian artists, including Sayed Haider Raza (work on paper); Gulam Rasool Santosh; Sudhir Patwardhan; Jeram Patel; Ivan Peries; Senaka Senanayake; and B Prabha (work on paper).

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NEW ART MUSEUM, JAPAN

A new museum designed by Tadao Ando and dedicated to contemporary Asian art opened at the end of May at the Benesse Art Site Naoshima. The inaugural exhibition features representative works and freshly commissioned works by 12 artists and groups, including those involved with Benesse Art Site Naoshima from its early years, as well as others who have developed a relationship since 2016, when the Benesse Prize moved from Venice to Asia. The works are on view in multiple gallery spaces located on the first floor and two basement floors, as well as the cafeteria and outdoor sites. The exhibition aims to encourage visitors to think about and reaffirm the notion of 'Well-Being', an idea rooted in the origins of Benesse's activities when they began in Naoshima. Participating artists include Makoto Aida, Martha Atienza, Cai Guo-Qiang, ChimPom from Smappa!Group, Heri Dono, Indieguerillas, Takashi Murakami, N. S. Harsha, Sanitas Pradittasnee, Motoyuki Shitamichi + Jeffrey Lim, Do Ho Suh, and Pannaphan Yodmanee.

NEW CURATOR POSITION, SMITHSONIAN, WASHINGTON, DC

A gift from June and Simon KC Li to the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art has endowed a position for Curator of Chinese Art. This endowment will support current curator J Keith Wilson as the inaugural June and Simon KC Li Curator of Chinese Art.

This new gift builds on the Li family's ongoing support of the museum and its Chinese art programme. June Li is curator emerita and founding curator of Liu Fang Yuan, the Garden of Flowing Fragrance, at the Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens in San Marino, California.

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CITRA SASMITA

by Olivia Sand

As an artist, Citra Sasmita’s trajectory has been an atypical and unusual. Self-taught, she has made it a point to stay in her native Bali and fill her practice with local traditions. Not only is she determined to change the conventional patriarchal narrative in her pieces, but she also thrives to bring the community to further open to contemporary work, while still being rooted in tradition. Today, Citra Sasmita (b 1990) has brought attention to her work mainly through large-scale installations that take the audience on a journey. Her recent solo exhibition at the Barbican in London displaying panoramic scroll Kamasan paintings exemplified her endeavour. In the following interview, she explains her fascinating undertaking and discusses the milestones of her career and practice.

Asian Art Newspaper: You originally studied physics and literature. Looking back, what were these two areas missing to subsequently encourage you to engage with contemporary art?
Citra Sasmita: I am deeply rooted in my island as a Balinese person. It is a privilege to be born Balinese as all throughout our childhood we get to experience art. I am not just referring to art being taught at school, but also to art that is implemented through rituals or society, ranging, for example, from making offerings to the gods to participating in musical performances. As a result, this has



Citra Sasmita. Photo: Gus Agung Niskala Studio

NEWS IN BRIEF

She founded a series of educational programmes, including lectures, symposiums, exhibitions and performance arts to highlight Chinese garden culture. The couple also established the Center for East Asian Garden Studies at the Huntington. This gift benefits the National Museum of Asian Art’s Second Century Campaign and is part of the Smithsonian Campaign for our Shared Future.

SMITHSONIAN AND CAMBODIAN MUSEUMS STRENGTHEN LINKS
The Henry Luce Foundation has awarded a \$100,000 grant to the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Asian Art, initiating a multiyear collaboration between the museum and the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts of the Kingdom of Cambodia. Organised in multiple stages, the initiative’s first phase – focused on project planning through 2025 – is funded by the Henry Luce Foundation’s grant. The partnership between the museum and the ministry is built on the co-creation and mutual exchange of knowledge, and it aims to raise global awareness of Cambodia’s cultural heritage, especially that of the repatriated objects of Koh Ker. Experts from across the National Museum of Asian Art will design a specialised training programme to build the capacity of the museum sector and provide mentorship to staff at the National Museum of Cambodia.

KOREAN ART PRIZE
The programme is designed to discover and support talented artists who represent Korea on the global stage. Established in 2012, it has become a recognised award system in the Korean art scene, supporting trends and contemporary discourse in Korean modern art. Korea Artist Prize 2025 will deepen the storytelling of artists’ thematic consciousness and artistic worlds, providing a comprehensive perspective on major figures in the Korean art scene and connecting them with international discourse.

The four finalists selected as sponsored artists for Korea Artist Prize 2025 are active both in Korea and abroad, working with diverse media that include video, installation, sculpture, and virtual reality (VR). Kim Young Eun creates artwork that focuses on sound and listening as political and historical products and forms of practice. She explores how sound and listening are shaped and technologically developed within particular historical contexts and what possibilities listening can generate in the processes of knowledge production and the decolonisation. Kim Jipyeeong has critically interpreted the traditional thoughts and way of seeing found in the concept and technique of *dongyungbwa* (Eastern traditional painting). Through this, she intends to think outside of the Western-centered modernity about the reality of the division of North and South

Korea, the body of women, and ecosystems. Recently, she has focused on revitalising the meanings of folding screens, scrolls, and albums. Unmake Lab is a collective formed in 2016 by Choi Binna and Song Sooyon. Since 2020, the group has focused on work that combines Korea’s history of developmentalism with artificial intelligence elements (including datasets, computer vision, and generative neural networks) as they reconstruct the present social and ecological situation into speculative landscapes. Youngzoo examines the processes through which superstition, beliefs, and religious faiths are accepted and shaped within Korean society and shares them with viewers through a blend of experiences and media, including video, installation, books, performance, and VR.

FOTO BALI FESTIVAL.
Nuanu Creative City has announced the launch of FOTO Bali Festival, a major new addition to Southeast Asia’s cultural calendar. Held from 26 July to 17 August 2025, the inaugural edition will bring together photographers, visual storytellers, and creative practitioners from across Indonesia and around the world. Through exhibitions, conversations, and hands-on workshops, the festival offers a dynamic platform to engage with photography not simply as an art form, but as a powerful language for reflection, dialogue, and connection. Nuanu Creative City, the open-air

activated my cultural identity and DNA towards creating art. In modern society in Bali, learning physics and literature is part of our curriculum. In my case, both of my parents are teachers, with my father specialising in chemistry. In his opinion, it was best for my future to learn about science to become a teacher, too. He did not approve of my desire to learn art formally at school because he viewed the path of becoming an artist as being filled with too many challenges. Therefore, I initially followed his advice and started studying physics to become a teacher. However, halfway through, things changed: while at the faculty, I joined a theatre group where I also met art students. These encounters bolstered my passion for art and, these artists, academic writers, and poets provided me with incomparable tools and knowledge towards making art based on complete freedom. That was a privilege. Not having studied art formally, I did not know how to explore art freely in any medium or based on any discourse. I was therefore eager to learn about theories drawn from philosophy and social anthropology to complete and enrich my practice. Today, when I make installations, I realise I basically navigate my cultural memory, the one that holds making rituals, and keeps the

memories of my parents and my grandparents. When it comes to developing a universal language in a more contemporary way, I believe these two fields – literature and physics – also help me to plan and design my ideas. Creating a more universal language, Bahasa Bali, is important because the language bears a terminology with layers of meanings that require interpretation. Therefore, my translation of this philosophy into my works also provides people with a way to understand my culture.

AAN: Once you joined the theatre group and met with artists from different fields, did you have a mentor who helped you get started with your art practice? Can you talk us through the process?
CS: Before starting with my art practice, I wanted to find out about the foundations of art history, studying its trajectory from the Renaissance to the modern day. At that time, I was not satisfied with my art because I felt there was a distance between the expression, my identity, and my roots as a Balinese person. Taking part in residencies is what ultimately helped me reformulate my language because, as an artist, finding and developing your own language, especially in terms of iconography, is essential. In that sense, the opportunity and the experiences of these residencies, which established a certain distance from Bali were fundamental towards developing my practice. Coming back to Bali after a five-month residency in Yogyakarta, I was facing a mental block and was unable to make any work. I felt I first needed to find an answer to my hypothesis, questioning the position of women in patriarchal culture. But beyond my hypothesis, perhaps I also needed to learn about my own history, my own narrative and the knowledge I inherited.

This is what led me to *Kamasan* painting, one of the oldest painting styles in Bali, developed in the 15th century. This subsequently also triggered my meeting with my teacher, Mangku Muriati (b 1967), a priestess and a Kamasan painting practitioner. She provided me with considerable knowledge from the manuscript, which is written in an older language, a language I could not understand. As for the Kamasan painting itself, I did not learn the technique directly, since, in terms of iconography, there are many rules that I cannot copy or learn as an outsider. The connection between myself and the teacher is about the transmission of knowledge. I have been learning certain Kamasan painting techniques, asking my teacher about which iconography I could explore and which ones I could not. As of now, I have been learning from her for the past six years, also understanding the spirit of her endeavour: art is not only about commercialisation, with the artist getting an exhibition at a prestigious gallery. For my teacher, it is all the opposite: being a priestess and a painter has become a way of life, merging both disciplines, which have become one.

Similarly, making art and spirituality are not divided either. Based on what I have learned from her, as a Balinese, I tried to trace back my ancestors to find out how they were making art, as generally, we believe in making art for devotion or rituals. I also wanted to find out how art can resonate with other people to highlight knowledge, truth, or the *karma* story we inherit.

I realise that this informal relation between myself and my teacher contributes to making my art process more mature and has another mission – empowerment. I see the empowerment from my teacher, her contribution with her art towards the people in the village. Witnessing this, I became more aware of my responsibilities as an artist, too.

AAN: At this stage, have you and your work been embraced by the Kamasan community, or have you been criticised for bending the rules?
CS: At the beginning, when I enquired about learning Kamasan painting, I was told it could not be taught to outsiders. Fortunately, in Bali, the relationship between people are also based on sharing, which was helpful in this case since people in Kamasan tend to remain in their village. As such, they are not aware of what is happening outside the village, which I observed when sharing stories with them about the art scene in Bali, about the market, etc. It is as if time stood still in the village, which is also something that could be seen in their use of iconography or their narrative. Hearing a new story somehow encouraged them to develop the narrative. They realised that they could go beyond just illustrating manuscripts and that their painting could also refer to contemporary topics such as the political situation, predictions, or history.

AAN: Has the situation in Kamasan changed towards you?
CS: Absolutely. Generally, there is clearly a trust issue towards outsiders, but after I came to the village with a curator who could explain what my endeavour was about and talk about empowerment, their attitude towards me softened and we were able to start sharing. For example, I have been working with the Kamasan women’s community for part of my iconography, more specifically on the painted frame on my canvases, while the canvases itself is still made traditionally by the villagers. Through this interaction, it feels as if they started accepting me because working with me on the frame of the canvases also determines the iconography I can subsequently explore in the painting. Ultimately, it is very communal, with the community and me injecting our spirit into the work. This makes my practice very collective, with an exchange of knowledge and iconography. Today, they are more open-minded, with art being considered social, at opposed to an individual undertaking with the artist working alone in their studio.

AAN: Do you feel it is your responsibility to transmit this tradition and to open it up to the contemporary world?
CS: I am convinced art can have an impact, but it is very slow and takes time. In my case, I engage with contemporary art, but I also have a relationship with traditional artists, leading me to acknowledge the value and the process of their art making. In my practice, I try to take this traditional spirit into making new art, but in a contemporary spirit. Looking back, when it comes to having an art-historical reading of the artistic timeline and its development, from the senior artists to what was passed down today, we tend to have a very linear reading. However, for us traditional artists, we primarily consider the time factor. The concept of time is very cyclical as



Installation view of Citra Sasmita’s Ode to the Sun at Yeo Workshop, Singapore, 2020

“
I needed to learn about my own history and narrative
”



Detail from Into Eternal Land, installation view at The Curve, Barbican, 30 January to 21 April 2025 © Citra Sasmita. Photo: Jo Underhill / Barbican

it can be repeated and happens repeatedly. Learning from past experience has truly helped us navigate what we will do in the present and what can be inherited for future generations. And that is the context we live in: it is not only about making art, but also about the mindset of living. In this collision of time and spirit, there is no dichotomy anymore between what is traditional and what is modern. We can filter the spirits and get to a new concept of art making. In my recent exhibition at the Barbican in London, I tried to imagine and create a new cosmology of the post-patriarchal culture where the superhuman or the superpower are women. I wanted to bring additional female narrative into the artwork, not to challenge or compete, but to

balance the inequality in its distribution between men and women.
AAN: How did you get the Kamasan community to broaden their approach?
CS: It was a long process, and it took time. As I started learning about the iconography, for example, I realised the paintings featured a lot of male heroes. It is important to point out that when it comes to Kamasan painting, only men can inherit the knowledge, leading them to become the masters of the sketch. A father would pass down the knowledge to his son, whereas women only appear as assistants, mixing colours and crushing powders for the pigment. As such, women were not put in a very prominent position within the art-making process in society. Things drastically changed in the 1950s with Ni Made Suciarni (b 1932), a pioneering Kamasan woman painter and the first female painter to break the rules of society. Kamasan painting involves around 15 traditional steps towards completion, and she mastered all of them. She encouraged many female painters to follow her path. These women felt privileged because they no longer carried the burden of illustrating manuscripts but could freely make paintings based on their own female gaze. As a result, there is an increasing number of female figures in the paintings, often based on their free illustration of soap operas they might listen to on the radio or the gossip they heard. It is an interesting time, and the issue is not about debating over a possible dichotomy of the technique – traditional or not – but rather to see the content of the piece, the gaze of a male versus a female painter. Initially, my iconography attempting to counter this inherited narrative, which always highlights male heroism, was not seen as a Kamasan iconography. However, it is my own language. Ultimately, when they saw all these female figures in my paintings, it encouraged them to do the same in their own painting by including more female figures.

AAN: There are many topics you address in your work, from gender and sexuality to patriarchy. How do you think your work can contribute to this specific discourse?
CS: I am convinced my own undertaking and the one led by others will have some resonance. Every artist creates with a god lending a hand. This is based on a

philosophy in Bali referring to Siva Nataraja, the god of art, who should keep on dancing to make the earth rotate. If the god stops dancing, the earth will be facing an apocalypse and will be destroyed. Following this train of thought, I firmly believe the pieces completed by these artists will resonate, like that of a small water ripple. I cannot do it alone, but all artists should initiate their own ripple to reflect, touch, and connect with all the creative energy and creative people to inspire or be inspired. Working with this kind of humble spirit and connecting to people through my art is very rewarding. In addition, as artists carrying on our heritage, we are facing the question of whether we should demonstrate persistence, resilience, and resistance when it comes to the traditions we inherit. Is this true of our culture or not? This is all the more relevant in the present context of globalisation, with people’s mindsets, initially based on caring and sharing, changing towards capitalisation and transaction. In my case, as somebody from a generation that still believes in traditional life, this is a genuine crisis, because money has become the only value we respect. Coming back to the fundamental purpose of making art, one based on a communal spirit, making collaborations has truly enriched my soul as an artist.

AAN: Have you been facing any resistance towards gaining recognition at home or abroad?
CS: I am aware of my lower-ranked position as an artist living on the island of Bali, which also makes it a challenge to be accepted on the Indonesian art scene. Being from Bali, my artwork is considered traditional and consequently aimed at the tourists who come to visit the island. To challenge this mindset, it is essential to come up with a language people can understand, where they can appreciate the detail and the value they cannot see in traditional art. As a Balinese artist, emphasising that I am an artist from Bali has sometimes become my political statement. I am not an Indonesian artist because I specifically inherited the knowledge and the tradition of Bali. In my opinion, only the Balinese can speak about it, and we do not need someone else to do it for us. I may be considered a marginalised artist, but I keep having faith in my discourse, without following any global trends. I firmly believe in what I consider my foundation in making art.

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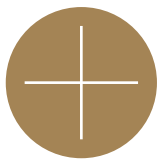


Citra Sasmita: Into Eternal Land, Act One, (detail) 2024, from Into Eternal Land, The Curve, Barbican, 2025 © Citra Sasmita

My mission is rooted in history, addressing a woman's position in my culture as well as the history of the colonisation in Bali. I want to learn and further explore this discourse. I simply feel lucky to make art based on the present spirit of the rising, the indigenous, shamanism, offering a different reading of art as a new alternative to contemporary art. I do not know whether this is a trend or whether it will be a long-term development. Nevertheless, reflecting and mirroring my teacher, who has been making traditional art her whole lifetime, it has significantly inspired me to have a commitment to continue this discourse for the long term. This discourse is like a tree with a branch and a root. For me, it is never-ending, and I can always find new inspiration, material, or medium to explore. It all comes down to communicating with the people, the material, and exploring how this kind of discourse can connect. Relying on this approach, I did not end up trapped in a dichotomy between high and low art. I was fortunate that some curators understood my undertaking and supported me, as initially, when I first presented my works, people in Indonesia had doubts, as their only point of reference was traditional art.



Citra Sasmita in her studio. Photo: Santi Permana



WATCH Citra Sasmita discuss her work at the Barbican



Installation view of Citra Sasmita, Mae Fah Luang Art & Cultural Park, Thailand Biennale, Chiang Rai 2023, The Open World, 9 December 2023 to 30 April 2024. Courtesy Thailand Biennale Chiang Rai 2023

the artists about their genealogy, who was their master or teacher. That master-student relationship was essential since there was no art institution until the 1960s. One can quite easily tell the difference between the institutional European aesthetic and the traditional Balinese aesthetic, as we did not follow the rules regarding dimension, perspective, or colour.

The mindset of making art between European and local artists is very different. We do not feel the need to sign our paintings – basically keeping them anonymous. In addition, there is no individuality in the art making process as we make art together, with villagers, for example. When it comes to size, we believe in functionality with the architecture. Sometimes, we make the decorations for a traditional Balinese pavilion that can reach up to 100 metres in length. Thus, we can share the knowledge with the people who cannot read the manuscript. Beyond the concept of

sharing, the durability of art is not a priority, as we acknowledge the fact that it may be affected by the rain or burned by fire.

AAN: In what sense has the spiritual aspect impacted the making of art?
CS: As spiritual traditional people, we believe in reincarnation. Art is like a rebirth, with its own life span. Therefore, we do not necessarily care about the durability of the art if the knowledge is preserved and being passed down. Over time, with the influence of the European painters who came to Bali, the local artists started to make fragmented pieces, small in size as they were meant as souvenirs. Also, they began signing their paintings and considering the aspect of durability of their works. Thus, the concept of Salon painting was born in Bali, and in 1930, we exhibited at the Colonial Exhibition in Paris, our first international exhibition, of which we were very proud.

AAN: How is your generation tackling the contemporary art world?
CS: One of the challenges my generation is facing is the lack of exhibition opportunities, as there are no leading galleries in this field. Therefore, we sometimes find ourselves excluded from the art scene, which makes us to try even harder to get into the spotlight. That is why I decided to not just spend time with the art community but made it a point to also exchange ideas with academics and activists. This has helped shape my art and broaden it by having another mission – in this way I can address the issue of equality. Art can become a cultural weapon, but it can also act as a diplomatic way to distribute a message to educate. Ironically, this comes back to my parents' desire to see me teach, I can teach through my



Installation view of Citra Sasmita, Timur Merah Project: The Embrace of My Motherland, 2019, as part of Biennale Jogja XV, Yogyakarta, 2019. Courtesy Biennale Jogja, Yogyakarta. © Citra Sasmita

art by talking to scholars who are researching my work. It feels very rewarding if in some way I can help students with their graduation. It is a small contribution, with these students carrying on and rescuing something they will pass down on their end.

AAN: Your exhibitions feature a complex scenography. How so?
CS: With my interest in theatre, designing my work is like designing a stage for the audience. Therefore, I appreciate it all the more when the curator or the institution sends me additional information about the space ahead of time, influencing the way I set up my exhibition or the kind of theatre I can present to the space as devotion. For example, the curved gallery in Barbican, where I recently had my show, was not an easy space. The challenge lay in how to navigate my design and how to imagine people becoming actors in my installation. In the curved gallery, my design echoed spiritual geometry based on Hindu philosophy. With my design, I wanted to find out what type of dramaturgy I could create for the space. I came up with five stages for the space, from the prologue, acts one, two and three, followed by the epilogue, referring to the stages of life, the journey from birth to death. It also reflected the cosmology of places in Bali, from the micro to the macro cosmos. Entering our traditional houses or temples mirrors the body parts from head to toe. So, I imagine also the energy flow from the root, the base, the earth as the foundation going to the head, and reaching enlightenment. I love to play in that kind of dramaturgy, the journey to revelation or enlightenment, leading people to experience complex things in my installation. In addition, our rituals are very complex, not only in the dances and music but also in the symbols seen in our offerings that even I cannot understand. The offering symbolises our microcosmos, encompassing the

planets, the solar system, water, mountains, and the sea. When I create a piece, I also try to figure out how I can bring the complexity of our inherited knowledge into the space through a simple work of art.

AAN: When you paint, is it free-hand and based on spontaneity?
CS: It is free-hand, but sometimes I feel like Sisyphus, carrying a big stone to the top of the mountain that then rolls back down. The journey of making a painting is quite similar, as there are moments where I do not know how to start, but once I know the story from the beginning to the end, I do not need any sketches, and it is just a free-flowing act.

AAN: Do you use traditional materials in your work?
CS: The canvas comes from Kamasan and is still made traditionally. To have good texture and quality, it requires a drying season. Therefore, I am also working with the villagers' calendar for a good time to make a canvas. During the rainy season, I am limited, even if I have a lot of deadlines, as the canvas will be of poor quality. Thus, I simply follow my body calendar as to when I can start and finish. Surprisingly, when I surrender to time or the circumstances, it almost feels like there is a magic hand working for me, allowing me to finish on time.



Installation view of Citra Sasmita, Timur Merah Project X: Bedtime Story, 2023, as part of the Biennale of Sydney, 2024 © Citra Sasmita

“
Embroidery is a technique I started exploring recently
”

As to the pigment, it is presently only used for special occasions in conjunction with rituals, since the resources are limited. In the past, the ochre we used, was extracted from hematite stones that were used as anchors for the ships. The sailors usually threw these stone into the sea after they were no longer needed, allowing the Kamasan painters to harvest it. In 1969, however, promoters developed hotels and resorts in the harbour with the sailors thrown out from the area as there were no more prospects for fishing. Since that time, Kamasan painters have had no access to the stone anymore. This explains why

they do not want to use it except for special occasions. As a result, they are now using acrylic paints, which I also started working with for my practice.

AAN: You have also completed pieces based on embroidery. How do they compare to the paintings that you do free-hand?
CS: Embroidery is another technique I started exploring recently, taking me on a journey from east to west – Kamasan is in the east of Bali, while the embroidery is from the west of the island. This kind of traditional technique faces its own challenges. When I began exploring Kamasan painting, they were trying very hard to change the stigma of the painting, all too often seen as a traditional souvenir. They did not have any market until I started making Kamasan paintings. Today, people can see another value in Kamasan painting. Similarly, the embroidery technique was almost extinct, for the simple reason that there was no market. Additionally, there is no logistics for the material because the western location of the village is too far from the centre of the city. For me, it requires a four-hour drive to get to the village

and they only make embroidery if there is a commission for a family shrine, for example. This is pricey because it is handmade. Considering the cost, many households have refrained from commissioning them. Also, finding an embroiderer has become complicated as people do not want to continue anymore. The younger generation prefers to work in offices, or as migrant workers on a cruise ship, which give better salaries. Eventually, I met a priestess family that is still making embroidery. Today, I feel that art is mostly completed by someone spiritual, and they are very close to the art. Regular people no longer have an interest in work that involves such skills. In my collaboration with the family of the priestess, we try to revitalise the material, turning our backs on low quality when selecting the yarn, the cloth, to make something similar in standard to what they inherited from the older generation. I end up borrowing their heirloom pieces to check in the city what kind of material I can find to distribute it again in west Bali. Our collaboration is also equal because when we discuss my art practice, they understand my iconography. Once we agree on the

piece, I make the sketch for the embroidery, after that I no longer interfere and let them handle their part, including the colour process. Therefore, once the embroidery is finished, I experience this element of surprise as my iconography has a new face, echoing a new language through the embroidery.

AAN: It must feel rewarding to save traditional techniques that may otherwise disappear.
CS: In the case of the embroidery, it feels wonderful to see the finished piece on such a large scale. I cannot emphasise enough the importance of the transmission of knowledge. Let us consider the temple of Borobudur in Java, a masterpiece of spiritual architecture. The temple has exact measurements even though our ancestors did not have the technology we have today. Their measurements were based on the body, more specifically on their foot, whilst also relying on mirrors to reflect the sound. For their time, it was already a very scientific process involving physics. Today, we accept their process as a code, which is not based on direct knowledge, but a code we need to crack through our connection with past generations.

We have a commitment to save their knowledge, so it becomes visible as an aesthetic offering, we can show in the art scene.

AAN: Can you share what your next endeavour?
CS: I am presently exploring kapok trees, more specifically the bark cloth from the tree. I am working with a community from central Sulawesi, another island in Indonesia. I became fascinated by the relationships seen in the islands in the 'Ring of Fire', who also use the kapok tree and make bark cloth in their culture. This is not only the case for Indonesia, but also for Tahiti, Hawaii, and New Zealand, for example. It is exciting to follow how this kind of knowledge migrates to all these islands, allowing us to share a similar mindset and a similar ideology of spirituality, especially in making a bark cloth. This is why, since my first project, I have been interested in observing art from marginalised or indigenous communities to develop their aesthetic in a contemporary way through a fruitful and meaningful collaboration.

● Citra Sasmita's work is included in the exhibition Musafiri at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, until 16 June

AAN: Throughout your trajectory, did you have a chance to explore the history of Balinese art beyond Kamasan painting?
CS: My generation has little access to learn about senior Balinese artists as there are hardly any books describing their legacy available. Instead, there were European painters who came to Bali and influenced its cultural life, like Miguel Covarrubias (1904-1957) or the German painter Walter Spies (1895-1942). Some exchanges took place between these artists and the local community, impacting the development of Balinese art. However, what remains puzzling to me is the dichotomy between traditional and modern art, as well as the fact that there is no precise trajectory regarding the senior or previous artists. Basically, it is up to us to visit studios and find out from



Installation view of Citra Sasmita, Timur Merah Project IX: Beyond the Realm of Senses (Allegory of the Archipelago), as part of Choreographies of the Impossible, 35th São Paulo Biennale, Brazil, 2023 © Levi Fanan / Fundação Bial de São Paulo / Citra Sasmita

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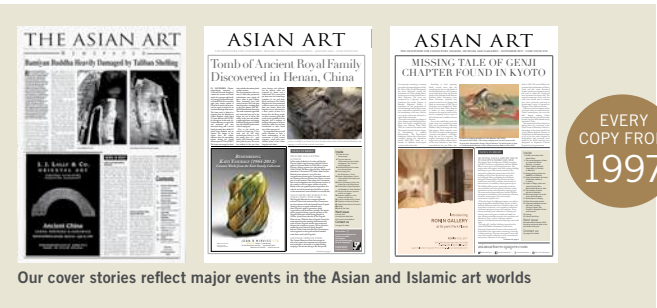
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EVERY COPY FROM 1997

A new exhibition at the British Museum, *Ancient India: Living Traditions*, considers the origins of three major world religions through the emergence of early India's sacred art, exploring the enduring devotional practices of today. Here, thousands of years of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain religious works are brought together to trace the transformation from symbolic representations to the human forms we recognise today. Drawing from the museum's South Asian collection with loans from national, international, and community partners, the exhibition is the first to consider early Indian sacred art through a global, pluralistic lens.

The exhibition also offers a multi-sensory journey through the devotional art of each religion, starting with an exploration of ancient nature spirits and examining ideas of community, continuity, and change. It also explores how ancient religious practice has shaped living traditions today and the daily lives of nearly two billion people worldwide. Featuring over 180 objects, including sculpture, as well as paintings, drawings, and manuscripts, this exhibition aims to examine how India's ancient indigenous religions moulded its sacred landscape and continue to influence spiritual and artistic traditions.

Between 200 BC and AD 600, artistic depictions of the gods and enlightened teachers of these three religions dramatically changed from symbolic to showing them as human figures, with the iconic imagery and attributes that we know today. Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain sculptures were produced in the same workshops in artistic and religious centres such as the ancient city of Mathura, India, meaning there are many similarities in this religious art. Great temples and shrines across the subcontinent were cosmopolitan hubs, drawing pilgrims from across Asia and the Mediterranean, and spreading these ancient religions and their art across the world.

Visitors first encounter a striking statue of Ganesh, one of India's most beloved gods, instantly recognisable by his elephant head. Revered by Hindus, as well as some Jains and Buddhists, he symbolises wisdom and new beginnings. Upon close inspection, traces of hot pink pigment still remain on the 1,000-year-old statue, serving as lasting evidence of worship. His imagery, including the hooded cobra rising above his shoulder, reflects the influence of nature spirits, ancient deities believed to embody the power of nature and with the ability to both protect and cause harm to people if not adequately appeased through offerings.

The exhibition studies these nature spirits, which played a vital role in both urban and rural life in ancient India, whilst examining the dawn of the region's three earliest religions through their art. A key highlight is the evolution of depictions of the Buddha, tracing the transformation from symbolic representations to the human form we recognise today. In contrast, images of the Hindu goddess Lakshmi, associated with wealth and good fortune,



Ardhanarishvara, 'lord who is half woman', Shiva and Parvati combined in one deity, Rajasthan School, circa 1790-1810, gouache on paper, 24.9 x 19.8 cm © The Trustees of the British Museum

ANCIENT INDIA

Living Traditions

have remained largely unchanged for over two millennia.

Puja is the devotional act of worshipping a god or deified teacher in Jainism, Buddhism, and Hinduism through invocations, prayers, songs, and rituals. It is through the act of puja that the devotee makes a spiritual connection with the divine to seek release from the cycle of rebirth to attain the transcendental state of *moksha* or *nirvana*, enlightenment, usually facilitated by a ritual object in the



Seated Jain, an enlightened teacher meditating in lotus position showing the dhyanamudra, meditation gesture, white marble, circa 1150-1200, height 68.5 cm © The Trustees of the British Museum

form of a painting, sculpture, print, or even an element from nature. It is these rituals that can be seen in the interactive elements of this exhibition.

Hindu belief is based on the four Sanskrit texts, the *Vedas*, with the oldest dating from around 1500-1200 BC. Besides this acknowledgement of the authority of the Vedic tradition, there are no other doctrinal bases, but there are many diverse schools of thought, gods, goddesses, ascetics, and deified heroes – each with their own rich and complex mythologies. Contemporary Hinduism is a complex religious system consisting of several different cults based around various gods, mainly the central gods of the Hindu pantheon, Shiva, Vishnu, and the goddess Devi, or Shakti. Hindu art is primarily devotional in nature, with the concept of the divine being represented in a human or superhuman and symbolic manner in the form of gods and goddesses, whereas Hindu sculpture was produced for two reasons: as an image of the god for veneration within a temple or on a domestic altar, or as decorative carvings to cover the exterior walls of temples or portable shrines illustrating the



Ganesh, volcanic stone, 11th/12th century, Java, height 62 cm © The Trustees of the British Museum



Bimaran reliquary casket, gold and inset with garnets, Gandhara School, Darunta, circa 1st century, 6.60 x 6 x 6.6 cm © The Trustees of the British Museum

legends of the deities to the devotees. The proportions, attributes, and poses of the Hindu sculptural representations were dictated in the sacred texts, the shilpashstras, or art manuals, which are found in the two texts, the *Citralakshana* and the Citrasutra section of the *Visnudharmottara-purana*.

There are several striking images in the exhibition of Ganesh, the elephant-headed son of Shiva, one of the three most important deities of the Hindu pantheon, and his consort, the goddess Parvati. He is widely worshipped as the remover of obstacles and the bestower of good fortune, prosperity, and health. The origin of his hybrid body – consisting of an elephant's head with one tusk and an infant's torso with a distended belly – is related in Hindu legends. Parvati is said to have created Ganesh in human form to act as her door guardian. When he refused to admit Shiva to Parvati's chamber, the god cut off the child's head. To placate the distressed Parvati, Shiva replaced the head with that of the first living thing he could find – an elephant.

Hindu deities are often depicted with multiple heads and arms, a physical expression of the multiplicity of their superhuman powers. People show their love and respect for Ganesh in a festival dedicated to the god that is held in August each year in Mumbai – the Ganesh Chaturthi festival.

The Indonesian sculpture of Ganesh in the exhibition shows how Hindu ideas and imagery flowed in both directions between India and Southeast Asia. The sculpture displays Ganesh's traditional attributes, such as his broken tusk, axe, and prayer beads – along with some differences. Javanese artists often portrayed him with skulls, his feet together, and carrying an empty bowl rather than one filled with sweets (*modakapatra*), indicating communities understood and worshipped him differently.

Unlike Hinduism, which derives its authority from ancient scriptures of unknown origin, Jainism and Buddhism were founded by historical figures. Jainism is based on the teachings of the spiritual teachers of the Jain tradition, Tirthankaras or Jinas. The twenty-third Jina, Parshvanatha, who is thought to have lived in the 7th century BC, founded a Jain community based on the renunciation of the world. The last and 24th Tirthankara, Mahavira, is considered by many to have been a contemporary of Shakyamuni Buddha and preached on the path to liberation through ascetic practices and

extreme non-violence in India in the 6th century BC. The Jinas, or conquerors, are portrayed in various materials and mediums, including stone sculptures, bronzes, and paintings. These important religious figures, despite their having achieved liberation from the world in which we live, are believed to be accessible to humans as objects of devotion. Thus, many Jains worship images of the Jinas and believe that they can be found in different sacred spaces throughout the universe. A marble figure depicting a Jain Tirthankara (enlightened teacher) is included in the exhibition and shows the auspicious symbol (*svicatsa*) on his chest. Tirthankaras are human, not divine, and the earliest certain representations of them in human form were shaped in Mathura, possibly in about the first century BC. Seated in meditation, this figure of a tirthankara has the sacred symbol of an endless knot in the middle of his chest.

Jainism encourages personal meditation, following a strict ethical code, and practising ahimsa, or non-violence, and kindness toward every living creature. While liberation is possible only for those who as monks or nuns have renounced the world, wealthy Jain merchant families have been the mainstay of the religious community throughout history, supporting monks and donating temples and images. The major centres of Jainism are in India, mainly in the states of Gujarat and Rajasthan in western India, Madhya Pradesh in central India, Maharashtra in the Deccan, and Karnataka in the south. Jain temples became quite magnificent structures in the Middle Ages – particularly well-known are the temples of gleaming white marble in the Indian state of Rajasthan.

A highlight of the Buddhist art in the show is the British Museum's Bimaran Casket. The Buddha was first represented symbolically, through footprints or a tree, for example, and was only later depicted in human form. This gold reliquary might represent the earliest dateable image of the Buddha shown as a man, as coins found with a similar image could possibly date to the late first century. On the casket, the Buddha stands with his right hand raised in the gesture of reassurance and is flanked by the gods Indra (right) and Brahma (left).

Highlighting the ongoing relevance of these dynamic, evolving practices in these three religions, the exhibition underscores the deep cultural and spiritual impact of South Asian, East Asian, and Southeast Asian diaspora communities in the UK. To bring these objects to life, multimedia films illustrate how these traditions continue to be practised and flourish in the modern world.

- Until 19 October, British Museum, London, britishmuseum.org.
- Catalogue available.
- Online event: 5 June, curators introduction to the exhibition, free but book online
- At the museum, 11 July, lecture on 'how ancient India transformed the world'

AUCTION OF BUDDHIST RELICS POSTPONED

Global outrage from Buddhists and a last-minute intervention by the Indian government pressurizes Sotheby's to cancel its controversial auction of the 'Piprahwa Gems of the Historical Buddha'.

Every May, devotees from around the world come together to celebrate the Buddha's birthday (known as Vesak day). Paramount among these gatherings, are those centring around monuments pertaining to contain relics of the historical Buddha. The Tooth Relic Temple in Kandy, Sri Lanka, and Wat Saket (more commonly known as the Golden Mount) in Bangkok, Thailand, are two of the most well-known.

However, on 7 May this year, a gathering of an all too different kind was planned in Hong Kong. It too centred around historical relics of the Buddha but was arguably the antithesis of everything that this religion represents. The event in question was the attempted auction by Sotheby's Hong Kong on behalf of Chris Peppé and his family of a lot named 'The Piprahwa Gems of the Historical Buddha'.

But due to the intervention of the Indian government on 5 May 2025 – spurred on by a groundswell of criticism from 'Buddhist devotees and scholars alike' – the auction was pulled at the eleventh hour.

The Indian government is now demanding that the so-called 'gems' be repatriated and has threatened legal action against both Sotheby's and the Peppé family if they do not comply. Furthermore, they are demanding an apology from both parties arguing that the proposed auction was an affront to Buddhists worldwide.

To understand why Sotheby's and the Peppé family would even consider auctioning off historical relics of the Buddha in the first place, we need to look at two issues: 1) the provenance of the objects which stretches back to the British colonial period in India, and 2) the leveraging of the relics' high-profile exhibition history. Doing so raises serious ethical questions in terms of both the claims to ownership via colonial era laws and the actual intentions of the Peppé family in loaning the material to a number of prestigious international museums, both public and private, since 2018 onwards.

The so-called 'Piprahwa gems' were part of a larger group of objects discovered in 1898 by William Caxton Peppé, a British colonial landowner whose estate lay in northern India, in what is today's Uttar Pradesh State, close to the border with present-day Nepal.

Peppé, a trained engineer, excavated a ruined stupa (a Buddhist reliquary monument) on his land at Piprahwa. He discovered the single most important cache of Buddhist relic deposits ever recorded in India, consisting of five urns, which acted as reliquaries, within which were kept gems, ash, and bone fragments. Based on an inscription on one of the reliquaries, scholars and Buddhist devotees alike believe that the bones may in fact be those of the historical Buddha, whose cremation took place some two-hundred years before their



The Piprahwa Gems on view at Sotheby's Hong Kong



The Piprahwa Stupa in India. Photo: courtesy of Wikimedia/Creative Commons
Right: Screenshot from notification on Sotheby's website

internment in the stupa in [question](#).*

Peppé documented the finds and informed the British colonial authorities. Under the 1878 Indian Treasure Trove Act, he was permitted to retain a percentage. Within a year, petitioning by a Thai monk resulted in the corporeal remains – the bones and ash – being gifted by said authorities to King Chulalongkorn of Siam, on the grounds that he was the preeminent Buddhist monarch of the period. He subsequently enshrined a portion of them in Wat Saket in Bangkok while gifting portions to other Buddhist countries, including Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Japan.

The majority of the 1800 gems meanwhile had been deposited in the Indian Museum in Kolkata. It is a long-standing issue, however, that the bulk of this collection remains locked away in the museum safe, off limits to Buddhists, the wider public, and scholars alike. Perhaps the publicity surrounding the Peppé portion of the reliquary contents might prompt the museum to review this policy after 120 years.

The share that Peppé was allowed to retain were referred to as 'duplicates' (an art historical term used to justify the proportioning out of similar material from a hoard or archaeological site that is very much frowned upon today), and it is these

objects that were handed down through four generations of the family and were subsequently put up for sale at Sotheby's.

This caused outcry and consternation amongst Buddhists worldwide. Amal Abeyawardene, president of the British Mahabodhi Society, for example, said: 'The "Piprahwa gems" represent extremely valuable secondary relics of the Buddha, possessing unique spiritual and historical significance. Were it not for the vicissitudes of Indian history, such items would not now be offered for sale; rather, they would still be preserved – alongside the Buddha's corporeal relics – as objects of devotion and pilgrimage for his followers.'

Colonial imbroglios aside, a more recent chapter in the relics' history is equally unseemly. For the past decade they have been loaned by the family for display at a number of high-profile museums and exhibitions worldwide. These include the recently closed Rubin Museum of Himalayan Art, New York, the Rietberg Museum, Zurich, the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore (ACM), the National Museum of Korea in Seoul, and most recently, the 2023 blockbuster *Tree & Serpent: Early Buddhist Art of India* exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (The Met).

This raises the possibility of a more calculated motive behind these



The Piprahwa Gems were part of a larger group of objects discovered in India in 1898

According to the Peppé family, this was done out of a desire to make these relics accessible to devotees, scholars, and the general public overall. As Conan Cheong, the then curator of the exhibition at the ACM Singapore, recounts: 'Chris Peppé, and other members of the Peppé family, who couriered the relics in person to the ACM, repeatedly conveyed their motivations for the exhibition: to make the relics publicly accessible, particularly in a city like Singapore with a substantial population of practising Buddhists. They even requested that the ACM publicise the exhibition to local Buddhist temples. Accordingly, the museum did not charge ticket fees. I was shocked that the Peppés, who claimed to want only for the relics to be accessible to Buddhists, would put them up for sale.'

This raises the possibility of a more calculated motive behind these

apparent noble gestures. This 'padding the provenance' by exhibiting at high profile museums is a tried and tested means to inflate the price of objects put forward for auction and these exhibitions were prominently listed on the Sotheby's auction website. Reaching out to Chris Peppé directly, I asked whether this was the case. I received no response.

Tellingly, however, when the sale was first publicised on Sotheby's website in February 2025, the feature carried a scholarly article by John Guy, Curator of South and Southeast Asian Art at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. It was post-dated to February 2025, so as to appear to have been written as an endorsement of the sale. In fact, the research paper was published in 2023, at the time the Piprahwa relic offerings were displayed as part of the *Tree & Serpent: Early Buddhist Art of India* exhibition, curated by Guy. He informs me that he regarded the linking of his publication to the Sotheby's sale as highly inappropriate and that it was done without his knowledge or consent. The Met's lawyers demanded that it be removed immediately, which was done, along with a written apology from Sotheby's.

The Guy article was quickly replaced by a piece written by Chris Peppé entitled 'The Piprahwa Gems: A Four Generation Story of Custodianship'. This was accompanied by a short introduction penned by their Chairman for Asia, Nicolas Chow, who, without even the slightest hint of irony, opens his piece by stating that, 'Sacred objects are transcendental, tools that facilitate one's spiritual journey to a higher realm'. Given that the estimate was in the millions of dollars, we can perhaps safely assume that the 'higher realm' he was referring to is the pure land of unbridled capitalist greed.

In a further attempt to justify the sale, Chris Peppé was [quoted](#) last month as saying that the family considered donating them to a temple or museum, but this proved problematic and, in the end, they decided that an auction was the fairest approach to allow these objects to return to Buddhist hands. With the auction now called off and the demands made by the Indian government, the relics' fate is now uncertain.

The Buddha taught that materialism and the clinging to selfhood is the root cause of suffering. It is a tragic irony that after four generations of contact with these most holy relics, these teachings appear to have been lost on the Peppé family. In choosing self-gain over the Buddhist principle of selflessness (*anatta*), they have become embroiled in a controversy that may take just as many generations for them to recover from.

- Stephen A Murphy is the Pratapaditya Pal Senior Lecturer in Curating and Museology of Asian Art at the School of Arts, SOAS, University of London and was senior curator at ACM, Singapore, from 2014-2020
- * Quotes and related links can be found in the interactive digital edition of this issue



Plate, Venice, 1633, maiolica (tin-glazed earthenware), diam. 10.25 inches, Musée National de Céramique, Sèvres

In 1494, the Milanese priest Pietro Casola recorded his awestruck reaction to the wealth of merchandise in the Venetian marketplace: ‘Who could count the many shops so well furnished that they also seem to be warehouses, with so many cloths of every make – tapestry, brocades, and hangings of every design, carpets of every sort, camlets (fabric) of every colour and texture, silks of every kind; and so many warehouses full of spices, groceries, and drugs, and so much beautiful white wax!’ Many of the products that caught Casola’s eye came from the Eastern Mediterranean and beyond, brought to Venice by merchants. No other city was more adept at cultivating this Levantine trade, and as the Byzantine Empire gradually gave way to Islamic sultanates in the region, Venetians increasingly came into contact with Islamic ideas, culture, and way of life.

In 2007, The Metropolitan Museum of Art organised an exhibition about Venice and its trading world, and in 2014, it focused again on the Islamic world and trade in *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition*. The Venice and Islam exhibition examined the relationship between Venice and its principal Islamic trading partners: the Mamluks of Egypt and Syria, the Ottomans of Turkey, and the Safavids of Iran, over a thousand-year period. It explored the artistic and cultural ideas that originated in the Near East and were later channelled, absorbed, and elaborated in Venice, a city that served as a commercial, political, and diplomatic magnet on the shores of the Mediterranean. The underlying theme of the exhibition focused on the reasons why a large number of Venetian paintings, drawings, printed books, and especially decorative artworks were influenced by and drew inspiration from the Islamic world and its art. Orientalism in Venice was based on direct contact with the Islamic world, which introduced new technological, artistic, and intellectual ideas. These Venetian objects are studied in relation to works of Islamic art, providing an immediate, comparative visual reference. A continuous thread throughout the exhibition focused on the works of Islamic art that entered Venetian collections in historical times and explored the nature of the artistic relationship between Venice and the Mamluks in Egypt, the Ottomans in Turkey, and the Safavids in Iran.

The exhibition’s starting point was 828, the year two Venetian merchants stole Saint Mark’s body from Muslim-controlled Alexandria and brought it to Venice. It concludes in 1797, when the Venetian Republic fell to the armies of Napoleon Bonaparte. The first half of the 9th century marked the beginning of Venice’s complex relationship with the Islamic Near East. The city



Beaker, Venice, late 13th/early 14th century, free blown glass, enamelled and gilded, maximum diam. 9.5 cm, height 11.3 cm, Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Frankfurt-am-Main



Bayezid II (r 1481-1512), attributed to an anonymous painter from Verona or follower, Venice, 1578 or later, oil on canvas, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich



Mosque lamp, Cairo, free blown glass, tooled on the pontil, enamelled and gilded, circa 1329-35, height 35.56 cm, diam. 23.9 cm, gift of J Pierpont Morgan, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



Loom-width piece of velvet fabric, Bursa, Turkey, late 16th century, silk velvet pile, voided ground with silver and gilt-silver wrapped silk brocading, Kunstgewerbemuseum, Berlin



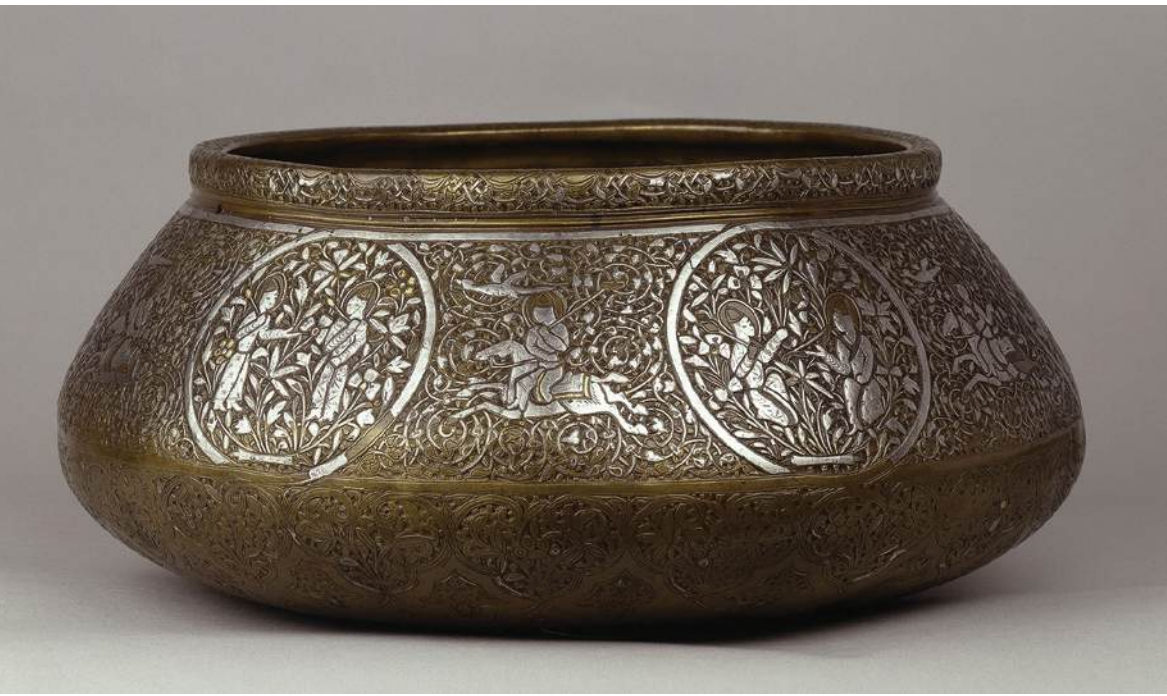
Portrait of Sultan Mehmet II by Gentile Bellini (1429-1507), oil on canvas, 65 x 52 cm, Istanbul, 1480, 65 x 52 cm, the National Gallery, London

shapes and decorative styles had developed in response to European tastes, and inscriptions in Latin could sometimes be found on Islamic metalwork alongside Arabic calligraphy. By the end of the 15th century, trade with the Mamluks amounted to 45% of all Venetian investment in overseas commerce, according to Eliyahu Ashtor in his book *The Jews and the Mediterranean Economy* (10th to 15th centuries), published in 1983.

By the end of the Mamluk era, Venice was recognised as Europe’s principal source of Oriental spices and luxury goods. Prominent wealthy Florentines would procure Chinese porcelain and Syrian blue-and-white ceramics in Venice. The Venetian Republic’s long symbiosis with the Mamluk sultanates not only reflected the mercantile acumen and maritime adventurousness of its traders. The long-lasting partnership also demonstrated the value of constant diplomatic effort to smooth over difficulties – whether overt hostilities or misunderstandings. On the whole, diplomacy was highly ritualised. The detailed documentation that accompanied every diplomatic exchange and the prominence of the office gifts that oiled the wheels of the trading treaties, assured the transmission of both written and visual information from East to West. Venetian diplomats also leveraged the wealth of luxurious oriental goods found in the city to acquire goods for embassies elsewhere in Europe. A collection of Damascus carpets was given as a gift to Cardinal Wolsey (1473-1530), archbishop and statesman to Queen Elizabeth I of England.

One of the most famous episodes of artistic exchange between Venice and the Islamic world came when Gentile Bellini, the official painter to the Venetian Republic, went to work at the court of Sultan Mehmet II in Istanbul from 1479 to 1481. This diplomatic mission followed a bitter 16-year conflict between Venice and the Ottoman Empire, as by this time, Mehmet II had developed an appetite for portraits of himself by Italian artists.

Unlike the carpet trade, Walter B Denny writes in the catalogue, which appears to have been almost exclusively in an east-to-west direction, textile commerce between Venice and the Islamic Middle East was distinguished by the flow of textile goods in both directions. Venice in the 16th century was a major producer of silk luxury textiles: the raw silk itself was produced in Gilan and Mazandaran on the Caspian shore of northern Persia, and was purchased in the Middle East by Venetian merchants after being transhipped overland through Bursa in Turkey – then the capital of the Ottoman Empire, from 1326 to 1402 – and later through northern Syria, from whence it was taken by ship to Venice. Venetian luxury silks achieved a high reputation in Europe, and even, enjoyed a flourishing demand in the Ottoman Empire of the 16th century. Early Venetian velvets seem to have had a profound impact on Ottoman velvet design,



Bowl, Iran, probably Shiraz, mid-14th century, cast brass inlaid with gold and silver, max diam. 24 cm, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Islamische Kunst

which apparently during the later 15th century moved from relatively small-scale repetitive designs, often employing the characteristic paired wavy band and three balls known collectively as *cintamani*, to larger-scale ogival compositions (see the illustrated Venetian silk brocade as an example.)

Venice also developed strong trading links with the Ottoman Empire (1281-1924). At the height of its power in the 16th and 17th centuries, it encompassed Anatolia, the Middle East, parts of North Africa and much of southeastern Europe. No other Muslim power in history has rivalled its longevity and extent. Because so many of the major commercial centres in the Mediterranean came within its

empire – Bursa (in 1326), Constantinople (1453) and Damascus (1516), Venetians needed to develop both commercial and diplomatic relations with the Ottomans. ‘Being merchants’, the Venetian ambassador to the Sublime Porte wrote in 1553, ‘We cannot live without them’. Apart from territorial disputes in the 15th and 16th centuries, both sides generally sought a peaceful coexistence. In the 16th century, the vogue for portraits of Ottoman sultans continued in both Venice and Istanbul. Few figures stirred the Venetian imagination as much as Suleiman the Magnificent (r 1520-66), and his likeness could be found in many Venetian portraits, medals, ceramics and prints.

By the time the Republic of Venice fell to Napoleon in 1797, Venice was still famous for its refinement, but no longer played a major role in international politics or commerce. In the final two centuries of its existence, its merchants and diplomats paid more attention to the expansion of the Venetian territories in northeast Italy, whilst at the same time, countries such as Portugal, England and Holland were developing sea routes to China and India, bypassing Venice altogether.

● The exhibition was held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, from March to July 2007, metmuseum.org. ● Catalogue available, Venice and the Islamic World 828-1797

VENICE AND THE ISLAMIC WORLD

needed strong diplomatic relationships, especially with the Mamluks and the Ottomans, in order to survive, yet at the same time it could not relinquish its role as one of the defenders of Christendom in Europe, which represented the dominant force in Venice’s economy. The continuous presence of Venetian diplomats and the long-term residence of merchants in the main cities of the Near East that contributed to Venice’s distinctive cosmopolitan character based on trade. The most frequent ports of call for Venetian merchants included Istanbul, Damascus, Cairo, Aleppo, Trebizond and Alexandria.

As Deborah Howard points out in the accompanying catalogue, unlike Spain and Sicily, Venice was never ruled by any Islamic caliphate. Originally an outlying colony of the Byzantine Empire, the Republic gradually established its cultural and political independence. After the

First Crusade in 1096, the Venetians lost no time in establishing trading bases in the Kingdom of Jerusalem, based on the model of their trading privileges in Constantinople since 1082. Thus, from the era of the Crusades onwards, Venice enjoyed a network of trading posts, known as ‘colonies’ in the Levant and Central Asia, including Damascus and

“
Venetians increasingly became in contact with Islamic goods
”

Tabriz. Venetian commerce depended on the maintenance of smooth relations with Muslim trading partners.

Venice’s economic and diplomatic relationships with these Eastern Mediterranean regions were tied principally to the Mamluk Sultanate (1250-1517), whose rulers halted the advance of the Mongols west of Iraq and expelled the last of the Crusaders from the Holy Land in the second half of the 13th century. The Mamluks inherited from the Fatimids (circa 910-1171) and the Ayyubids (1171-1260) the role of middlemen between South and Southeast Asia and Europe in the valuable spice trade and in the movement of other goods by land and sea via Damascus and the Red Sea. Venice consistently sought privileges from the Mamluks and ultimately became their main European trading partner. Several cities under Mamluk control had

permanent Venetian diplomatic representatives with regular access to local authorities. Ties between the Venetian oligarchy, nobility, and merchant class and the Mamluk courts and their retinue were strong. Luxurious, exotic goods were available for anyone who could afford them. Sumptuous textiles – silks, velvets, and carpets – are among the most portable of all the arts, and large numbers of Islamic examples were imported to Venice from an early date. However, the backbone of Venetian trade was not merely the acquisition of personal wealth and luxury objects for their palazzi on the Grand Canal. The Republic’s commercial supremacy depended first and foremost on the city’s role as an entrepôt. These imports included spices, dyes, aromatics, silks, carpets, and gems, as well as cargoes of cotton and sugar.

The presence of Islamic art in Venice can be documented from the Middle Ages. The earliest objects to arrive in the city, relief-cut glass and rock-crystal vessels from Fatimid Egypt, are still in the Treasury of Saint Mark’s Basilica. Over the centuries, merchants and diplomats developed a taste for Islamic ceramics, textiles, arms and armour, metalwork, and manuscripts, displaying them in their homes alongside European works of art.

These luxury imported objects found their way in to all walks of Venetian life. Even fabrics embroidered in Arabic, which were incomprehensible to the average Venetians, were popular in the city and were often found in churches. Metalwork inlaid with silver and gold was a speciality in Damascus and Cairo under the Mamluks. By the early 15th century, however, new



The Reception of the Venetian Ambassadors in Damascus, anonymous Venetian painting, 1511, oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris

The British Museum

Hiroshige artist of the open road

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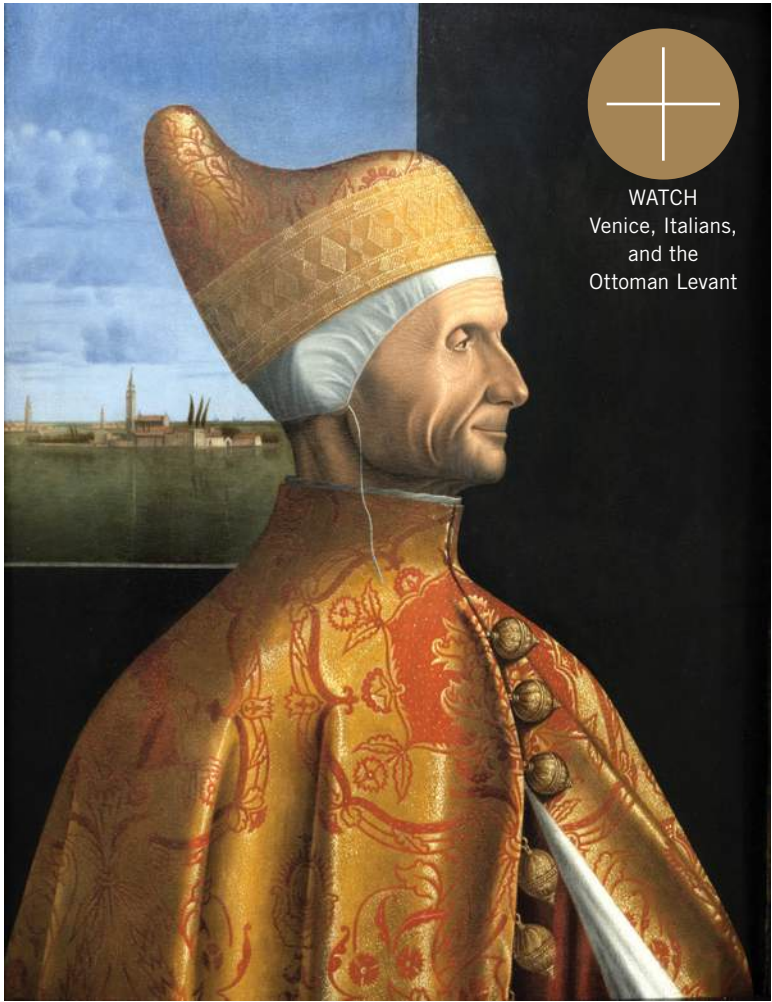
Collection of Alan Medaugh.

Portrait of Doge Leonardo Loredan by Vittore Carpaccio, circa 1501-05, tempera and oil on panel, 26 1/2 x 20 1/8 inches, Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia - Museo Correr. At the time of his accession to the dogeship, Venice was engaged in the Second Ottoman-Venetian War (1499-1503), which had started in 1499. The war took a heavy toll on the Venetian economy, and in 1502-03 Loredan agreed to a peace treaty with the Turks.

The Ottoman empire (1299-1923) was once considered one of the most important economic and cultural powers in the world. It ruled over a vast swath of the globe stretching from the Middle East and North Africa to Budapest in Hungary in the north. Throughout the 15th and 16th centuries, the Venetian and Ottoman empires were trading partners – a mutually beneficial relationship providing each with access to key ports and desirable goods for trade.

Although various wars intermittently interrupted their relationship, both empires relied on trade for their economic well-being. The Ottomans sold wheat, spices, raw silk, cotton, and ash (for glass making) to the Venetians, while Venice provided the Ottomans with finished goods such as soap, paper, and luxurious textiles, along with other goods traded along the Silk Roads. The same ships that transported these everyday goods and raw materials also carried luxury objects such as carpets, inlaid metalwork, illustrated manuscripts, and glass. Wealthy Ottomans and Venetians alike collected the exotic goods of their trading partner, and the art of their empires came to influence one another.

The Frist Art Museum is presenting an exhibition to explore this specific relationship – Venice and the Ottoman Empire, by looking at the artistic and cultural exchange between the Republic of Venice and the Ottoman Empire over four centuries. This cross-cultural exhibition examines the complex links between the Republic of Venice and the Ottoman Empire from 1400 to 1800 in artistic, culinary, diplomatic, economic, political, and technological spheres. ‘The relationship between Venice and the Ottomans represents a fascinating and multifaceted chapter in the history of Mediterranean geopolitics, one marked by a blend of cooperation and conflict, handshake and arms-length approaches, diplomacy and back-stabbing, understanding and misunderstanding,’ writes exhibition



WATCH
Venice, Italians,
and the
Ottoman Levant

VENICE AND THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

curator Stefano Carboni in the exhibition catalogue.

Featuring a diverse selection of more than 150 works of art in a broad range of media, including ceramics, glass, metalwork, paintings, prints, and textiles, the exhibition draws from the collections of seven of Venice’s renowned museums. The paintings of well-known Venetian artists such as Gentile Bellini, Vittore Carpaccio, and Cesare Vecellio are showcased alongside works created



WATCH
How Venetian velvet
is made

Portrait of Doge Cristoforo Moro attributed to Lazzaro Bastiani, 1462-71, tempera and oil on panel, 20 1/2 x 16 1/8 inches, Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia - Museo Correr. Moro's reign was marked by the beginning of the Ottoman-Venetian War (1463-79)

by the best anonymous crafts people both in Venice and the Ottoman empire. The Venetian loans are joined by a selection of recently salvaged objects from a major 16th-century Adriatic shipwreck of a large Venetian merchant vessel that have never been exhibited outside Croatia. They come from the *Gagliana Grossa*, a fully loaded Venetian ship that sank in 1583 in the waters off the Dalmatian coast while travelling to Constantinople (now Istanbul).

Organised thematically, the exhibition begins with an overview of diplomacy and trade during the period illustrated through portraits of powerful Venetian and Ottoman leaders including doges, sultans, and ambassadors. On display are nautical maps as well as a printed manual that illustrates how merchants who spoke different languages conducted business using hand gestures. Despite diplomatic efforts, relations were not always harmonious. Between 1400 and 1800, the two powers fought seven major wars, with the Venetians gradually losing almost all their overseas territories to the Ottomans.

The exhibition, however, emphasises that during periods of peace, the two powers forged a close relationship and shared aesthetic tastes. The museum’s curator-at-large, Trinita Kennedy, writes, ‘Venetians and Ottomans admired and sought one another’s luxury goods and gave

them to each other as gifts. Ottoman sultans liked Murano glass and portraits of themselves by Venetian artists, while Venetian women wore Ottoman clogs and perfumed their homes with incense burners imported from Ottoman regions’.

The next two sections are dedicated to decorative arts and textiles, which figured prominently in commercial exchanges and the interior design of Venetian homes. Turkey and Safavid Iran (which produced and loomed raw silk) had for centuries been part of the trade networks linking Asia to Europe by land and sea. The Ottoman trade silks primarily came from the city of Bursa, the main entrepôt for the trans-shipment of raw silk from Iran to the west. By the early 15th century, Constantinople had also developed a silk-weaving industry, and by the end of the 15th century, velvet (*kadife*) had come to be considered the pre-eminent luxury textile of the Ottoman court, with a velvet-weaving industry established in Bursa, partly in reaction to the international popularity of the silk velvets the Italians produced in Venice and Florence.

Marika Sardar in the book *Interwoven Globe* comments, ‘Soon the technical accomplishments of the Ottoman weavers reached great heights, with the production of complex designs with contrasting areas of raised and voided pile as well as brocading with metal-wrapped thread (*kemba* and *seraser*), making Ottoman velvet the main luxury textile traded abroad. A distinctively Ottoman decorative style emerged from the court workshops based in the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul. The design of the textiles evolved alongside that of ceramics, tiles, carpets, and even drawing, as all these media took up the same repertoire of motifs and arrangements. By the mid-16th century, popular motifs included pomegranates, artichokes, and tulips, often set along undulating vines, placed in ogival lattices, or used to fill other motifs such as medallions. Other popular motifs included tulips and carnations, the *cintemani* design (a pattern of three circles in a triangular pattern), and symbolic ‘tiger stripes’. Both cultures favoured red and gold, and bold designs with their textiles are so similar that sometimes it can be difficult to discern whether a textile was made in Venice or Bursa.

The next section is dedicated to the spice trade tracing how Venetian merchants traded through the Ottoman-controlled ports in Africa and Asia. Once spices arrived in Venice, they were unloaded for distribution across Europe. Some were resold directly to merchants arriving from the north, others were shipped on barges up the Po Valley and then transported across the Alps to Germany and France. The sea



Doge Francesco Morosini’s corno ducale (ducal horn), Venetian, late 17th century, woven brocade, 8.75 x 9.75 x 6.25 inches, Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia - Museo Correr



Fragment of velvet cloth, late 15th century, Venetian, figured cut silk velvet, single harness brocaded, lancé, and bouclé, 32.75 x 21.75 inches, Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia - Museo di Palazzo Mocenigo

route sent spices to London and Bruges and on to Paris. In 15th-century Venice, saffron ranked as the most expensively trade spice with cinnamon, cloves, and nutmeg ranking next with pepper, although still a high price ranking below the other spices. The spice trade started to decline by the early 16th century the Venetians had lost their stranglehold, as the Portuguese and Spanish explorers found direct sea routes to Asia with the Dutch and British on their heels, who were hunting for their own spices wanting to further develop their own maritime trade routes in Southeast and subcontinental Asia.

In addition to spices, Venetians depended on trade with the Ottomans for coffee, figs, pistachios, raisins, salted sturgeon, sugar, vinegar, and, most importantly, wheat. This part of the exhibition leads to an exploration of ship building, sailing, and a storied shipwreck in the next two sections. One of the highlights here is a large group of objects recovered from the *Gagliana Grossa* shipwreck, illustrating the opportunities and perils of seafaring in this age. The ship’s diverse cargo offers evidence of the types of goods Venetians traded in the Eastern Mediterranean. ‘The Venetian Senate sent a Greek diver to salvage diamonds, emeralds, pearls, and some luxury textiles on board, but the rest of the goods remained on the seabed until the site was rediscovered in the 1960s,’ explains Kennedy. ‘Excavations are ongoing, and this exhibition presents some of the most recently found objects’.

Works in the penultimate section centre around the revered Venetian naval commander and doge Francesco Morosini (1619-1694), who played a major role in Venice’s interactions with the Ottoman Empire in the 17th century and amassed a large collection of art taken from his campaigns, as well as acquired from the Venetian art market.

The exhibition concludes with the return to textiles in a gallery devoted to the extraordinary creations of Mariano Fortuny (1871-1949), the Spanish artist, designer, and inventor who lived and worked for most of his life in a Gothic palace in Venice, creating sumptuous textiles with new printing techniques that recalled the Republic of Venice and the Ottoman empire.

● Until 1 September, The Frist Art Museum, Nashville, fristmuseum.org,
● Catalogue available, Venice and the Ottoman Empire: A Tale of Art, Culture, and Exchange

CHINESE WOMEN

The exhibition *Chinese Women* looks at various aspects of the lives of women in Chinese culture, including a selection of poems written by women evoking the tensions inherent in their status. The show begins with a presentation of their traditional depiction in art, from the evolution of beauty standards embodied by funerary figurines of the Tang dynasty (618-907) to the hieratic portrait of an elderly lady of the Qing (1644-1911), an anonymous witness to ancestor worship in China. Beyond the country’s borders, a certain romanticised image of Chinese women reached Europe through export porcelain and spread there as an idealised model in the Chinoiserie of Antoine Watteau (1684-1721) and François Boucher (1703-1770).

The second part of the show has a striking wedding bed of carved and gilded wood as its centrepiece, symbolising that crucial moment in a person’s life that represents marriage. In a centuries-old patriarchal society, numerous decorative motifs had evolved relating to the wish for marital bliss, fertility, and the desire for male offspring. Common symbols include red dates, lotus seeds, persimmons, and magnolia leaves. Dragons and phoenixes are also featured, symbolising prosperity and marital harmony. The colour

red, used for bedsheets and decorations, signifies happiness and warding off evil. The double happiness symbol was usually prominently displayed, signifying double happiness and a joyful marriage.

The importance of marriage, whether experienced as an obligation or as a happy union, is widely echoed in literature, notably through the well-known classic *The Romance of the Western Chamber* (*Xixiang ji*), frequently illustrated on ceramics. It relates the story of a secret love affair between Zhang Sheng, a young scholar, and Cui Yingying, the daughter of a chief minister of the Tang court. The two first meet in a Buddhist monastery where Yingying and her mother have stopped to rest while escorting the coffin of Yingying’s father to their native town. Zhang Sheng falls in love with her at first sight but is prevented from expressing his feelings while Yingying is under her mother’s watchful eye. The rumour of Yingying’s beauty soon reaches Sun the Flying Tiger, a local bandit, and he dispatches ruffians to surround the monastery, in the hope of taking her as his consort. Yingying’s mother agrees that whoever drives the bandits away can have

Yingying’s hand in marriage, so Zhang Sheng contacts his



Alcove wedding bed, carved wood, red lacquer and gilt, Qing dynasty, 19th century, Fondation Baur, gift of Beth Krasna, Musée des Arts d’Extrême-Orient

friend General Du to help. The general subdues the bandits, and it seems that Zhang Sheng and Cui Yingying are set to be married, Yingying’s mother goes back on her word. The two young lovers are greatly disappointed and begin to pine away with their unfulfilled love. All is not lost; with the help of her maid, the lovers are reunited and eventually find happiness, and Zhang Sheng achieves acclaim as a talented scholar – so all ends well.

The third section explores women’s accoutrements and attire and considers the painful practice of foot binding, a form of mutilation considered a status symbol and a mark of feminine beauty

in the past. It was the custom in Chinese families that on marriage a bride went to live with her husband’s family. The women and younger members of the family were cloistered in the domestic apartments. One of the main



Circular reversible tuanshan, fan, double-sided embroidered silk, Qing dynasty, 19th century, Fondation Baur, Musée des arts d’Extrême-Orient



WATCH
Late Qing
Fashion
in China by
Jessica
Harrison Hall

diversions for women in the Qing dynasty was the art of embroidery. Almost every garment worn by the middle and upper classes was embellished with embroidery and auspicious symbols, as were soft furnishings in the home, bed hangings and covers, and pillows. From a young age, a girl was taught to embroider and prior to marriage was required to prove her skills to her prospective in-laws. In the Qing dynasty, the designs and application of embroidery eventually turning into a commercial industry in China.

Foot binding began at any time when the girl was between the ages of three and twelve. The feet were usually bound to a length of 13 cm. The 7 cm ‘lotus’ was quite rare and only for those women who had servants to support them while walking. As part

of her dowry, a woman would make several pairs of shoes as proof of her needlework ability as well as showing her small feet. While there were attempts to ban foot binding earlier, it was effectively banned in China by 1957, with the last known new case reported that year. The practice had already largely disappeared in most parts of China by 1949.

Female deities are the subject of the fourth section, especially those that provide special protection to women and children, as well as popular beliefs related to childbirth. The cult of Lady Linsui, the goddess Chen Jinggu, gained significant traction during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) and continues to be practised in South China, Taiwan, and across parts of Southeast Asia among Chinese populations. She is the protector of women and children, especially during pregnancy and childbirth. The deity is also considered an avatar of Guanyin, goddess of mercy, who is a female manifestation of the Buddhist bodhisattva Avalokitesvara.

The exhibition closes with the works of several women painters from the Ming period (1368-1644) to the present day. Dong Xiaowan (1625-1651), the Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908), Ling Shuhua (1900-90), as well as the artist Peng Wei (b 1974), each tell, in their own manner, a tale about the status of women.

● Until 20 July, Baur Museum, Geneva, fondation-baur.ch

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CHANGDEOKGUNG AND THE SECRET GARDEN



Japsang (animal figures) on the ridges of the roof of a gwolnaegaksa (government offices) building at Changdeokgung



Korean rank badge with two leopards signifying an upper military rank, LACMA collection, Los Angeles

Gyeongbokgung in Seoul is the primary, most visited, and best-known of the five royal palaces in Seoul. It is the iconic symbol of power and the Joseon state (1392–1910), but it is the smaller, charming Changdeokgung that steals the show. Referred to as the East Palace in Joseon times, as it was east of Gyeongbokgung, Changdeok means 'to let virtues prosper'. It is an exceptional example of official and residential buildings that were integrated into and harmonised with their natural setting. Situated at the foot of a mountain range, it was designed to embrace the topography in accordance with *pungsu* principles (the Korean form of *feng shui*), by placing the palace structures to the south and incorporating an extensive rear garden to the north, called Biwon, or the Secret Garden.

Other considerations of traditional architecture included the use of *dancheong* decoration and *japsang*, the animal-shaped tiles placed along the ridge and eaves of a roof that serve both decorative, symbolic, and shamanic purposes. They show the grandeur of a building and chase away evil spirits and misfortune, as well as adhering to Confucian principles.

The construction of the palace



Painting of the Eastern Palaces, Donggwooldo, early 19th century, showing Changdeokgung and Changgyeonggung. Donggwool is an alternative name for Changdeokgung, ink and paper on silk, 274 x 583 cm. Two versions of the painting exist in the collections of Korea University Museum and Dong-A University Museum.



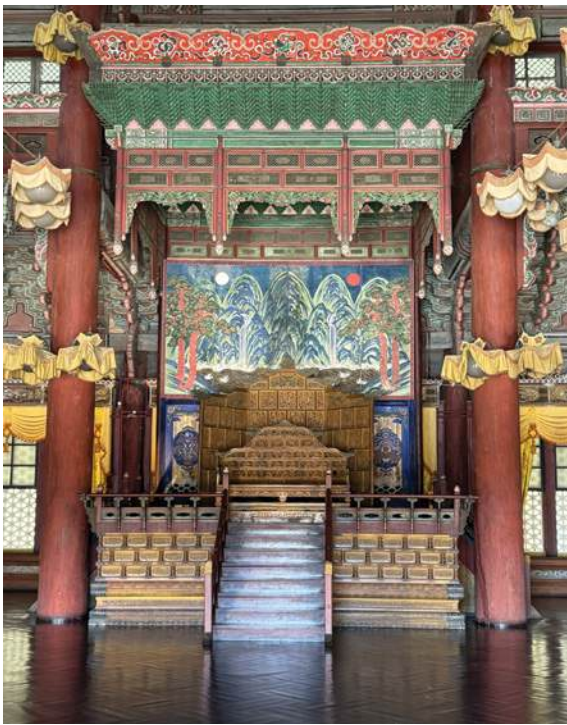
Injeongjeon Hall in Changdeokgung complex



WATCH
Royal Palaces
of Seoul



The east corridor leading to Injeongjeon Hall



The King's raised throne in Injeongjeon Hall, or throne hall, with the symbolic five peaks screen as a backdrop

began on the auspicious site in 1405 on the orders of King Taejong (1367–1422), to be used as a secondary palace of the Joseon dynasty. After its destruction during the Japanese invasion and the Imjin Wars (1592–1598), it was rebuilt in 1610 by Prince Gwanghaegun (1575–1641), who was regent from 1592–68; it then served as the main palace for approximately 270 years.

Like many Joseon palaces, Changdeokgung comprises official, military, civil, and domestic buildings sprawling over a large complex with numerous courtyards, back alleys, and a large open square. Injeongjeon Hall (Hall of Benevolent Governance) is the main throne hall that was used for holding the most formal state events, such as audiences with ministers, coronation ceremonies,

weddings, and receptions for foreign envoys. State ceremonies during the Joseon period were classified into one of five categories, and collectively known as the Five Rites of State. The first was Auspicious Rites, which included memorial services to royal ancestors; the second, Felicitous Rites, such as royal weddings and birthdays; the third Guest Rites, for receiving foreign envoys; the fourth is Military Rites, such as the king's ceremonial military review; and the fifth relates to Sorrowful Rites – royal funerals.

This main hall was also used for the national examinations for recruiting officials to the palace. The Joseon rulers were committed to the cultivation of talented people and their selection into government service. Civil officials, military officers, and people with special skills were selected through three separate examination systems, collectively known as the *gwa-geo*. The king himself presided over the final palace examinations, held in the capital, Hanyang (now Seoul), for



The octagonal pavilion, samsamwa, of Seongeonggak, part of Crown Prince Hyomyeong's (1809–1830) study, once used as a storeroom for his book collections and as a library

the civil and military candidates. The Ceremony for Announcing the List of Civil and Military Examination Passers was attended by the king, civil and military officials, and relatives of the successful examinees, where the king granted certificates and special flowers, *cosa-bwa*, made of paper to the successful candidates. The top achiever of the civil examination also received a type of parasol to show his achievement.

In 1454, the Joseon court adopted a system of insignia of rank for civil and military officials based on that of China's Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Square badges of embroidered birds and animals on silk were worn on the front (*hyung*) and back (*bae*) of official costumes. They are clearly differentiated from the round badges embroidered with a dragon (called *bo*) worn by the king and the crown prince on the front, back, and shoulders of their court attire. Besides being ornamental, rank badges served as visible status markers in a Confucian society that prized strict social and political hierarchy. The rank system of government officials during the Joseon dynasty comprised nine ranks, from first to ninth degree. Each rank was divided into junior and senior positions, and the posts above the junior sixth degree were also divided into upper and lower classes, in keeping with Neo-Confucian thought. These divisions and classifications made a total of 30 ranks, with civilian and military officers identified by the rank badges worn on their outer garments. Initially permitted for wear by civil and military officials of the third rank and higher, eventually the use of rank badges was broadened to all nine ranks. Regulations on the specific animal imagery and correlating ranks evolved over the course of the Joseon dynasty.

The interior of Injeongjeon Hall was remodelled in Western style during the reign of King Sunjong (1874–1926) with the traditional black brick flooring replaced with parquet flooring and the installation of electric lamps. The ceiling has kept its traditional coloured *dancheong* decoration with lotus flower and *bonghwang* (Korean phoenixes) patterns. This practice, literally 'balance and contrast between red and green', is the



Seonjeon Hall, built to the east of the throne hall, with the unusual – and expensive – blue-tiled roof, it is the only example of this type in the palace complex



Entrance to Seonjeon Hall

method of ornately painting wooden buildings that was reserved for royal palaces, Buddhist temples, and Confucian institutions during the Joseon dynasty. Kwon Yj-eun, in her essay on the subject, *Dancheong: A Signifier of Architectural Function and Status*, writes, 'Dancheong also served as a signifier of architectural hierarchy. Historical records from the Three Kingdoms period (57 BC–AD 668) to the Joseon era confirm that decorative colouring was applied only to buildings with public purposes and of high status, such as royal palaces, Buddhist temples, government buildings, and Confucian schools, and that the styles of colouring them were organised according to the specific purpose of a building. The ornamental painting of a building symbolised both its practical function and hierarchical position, distinguishing it from other structures and imparting a sense of sacredness and dignity'.

Other important objects in the main hall include the striking Sun, Moon, and Five Peaks (*irworobongdo*) screen. The traditional pattern of the screen was an innovative way to identify the position and presence of the king. The sun and moon symbolise *yin* and *yang*, with the five peaks representing the four cardinal directions and the central location. Flowing water and trees indicate both changing and unchanging qualities in the world – bringing together all the elements that represent the universe. The throne was located front and centre of the screen, showing the ruler's place at the centre of this universe, giving a sense of power and

“
*In Joseon
palaces, the
throne is
elevated in a
central position*
”

control – and a visual representation of the authority of the king. This iconic design is found on other screens and paintings, with about 20 extant examples known today. It was first used at Gyeongbokgung, which was especially created for the first ruler of the Joseon dynasty, King Taejo (r. 1392–98), the first Joseon king.

In Joseon palaces, the throne is elevated and sits at the centre of the hall with the *irworobongdo* screen as the backdrop, with a wooden canopy above the throne, the same as that placed over statues of the Buddha in Korean temples. The throne always faced south on platforms reached by several stairs. Besides the thrones seen in the royal palaces, only two other thrones are known to exist – now housed in the National Palace Museum of Korea.

The large courtyard in front of the hall was used for important state events, including the audiences with the king, called *jocham*, when all civil and military officers greeted the king on specific mornings each month. Enthronement ceremonies were also held here. In keeping with the



Huijeongdang, the king's quarters, which served as a private office and bedchamber for the king. It was destroyed by fire in 1917 and rebuilt in 1920 with materials taken from the king's residence at Gyeongbokgung



The traditional dancheong decoration on the beams and ceilings at Huijeongdang



Daejojeon Hall, the queen's residence

principles of *pungsu*, the stone terraces at the back of the hall were built to relay the vital energy from the Baekdu-daegan mountain range, which runs 1,500 km the length of the peninsula.

The next large building, Seonjeongjeon Hall, is the king's council hall and the only structure remaining at Changdeokgung with blue-glazed roof tiles. Here, a daily audience with the king, called *sangcham*, would be held when the ministers, high-ranking officials, court recorders, and other dignitaries would attend to discuss affairs of state. The blue roof tiles were demanded by Gwanghaegun, when he was acting as regent during the Japanese invasion, instead of the conventional dark grey tiles, as he wanted to build a striking and imposing building. Court records noted that they were costly to create, as they required a glazed firing. A scribe noted, 'How can we now think that

we can make Seoul stand out only by glaze firing the roof tiles of the throne hall with extremely expensive greyish blue pigment made from nitre. It must be imported from thousands of kilometres away, especially during this hard period when the nation is facing difficulties due to carrying out an unnecessarily grand scale palace construction. I deeply feel regretful that the officials in charge of the ad-hoc committee will insist on doing everything in such a luxurious and excessive manner despite the difficulties, not even one person appealing and trying at all to correct the negative consequences of such custom'.

Continuing the journey through the palace, the Huijeongdang Hall, or king's residence, was considered the royal bedchamber as well as an informal workplace for the king. It burnt down in 1917 and the current building dates from 1920, modelled



Buyongjeong pavilion and Gulanggak Royal Library in the Secret Garden. Right: Buyongi pond and the lotus pavilion

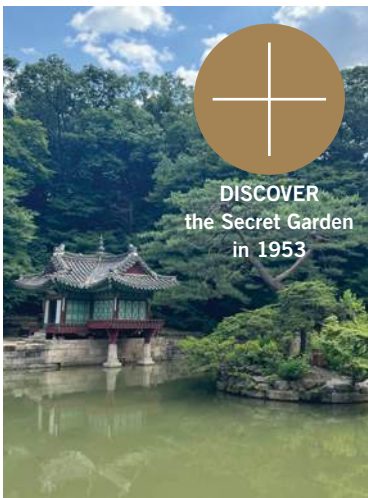
in Western style but with materials taken from Gyeongbokgung. This gives the residence a very different feel – a car port was also introduced for the king. The royal residences were separated, in keeping with Confucian thought, with the king's residence in Huijeongdang Hall and the queen's quarters in Daejojeon Hall. Other buildings in the complex include buildings specifically used for study, as well as an apothecary, shrine, and the government office complex.

A highlight of the palace is a tour of the Secret Garden to the north of the main buildings that remains frozen in time. It was created as a large leisure garden and is the epitome of Joseon-period landscaping, taking up almost 60% of the entire area of Changdeokgung's grounds. It preserves the original topography with garden areas planted in the lower ground alongside a series of lotus ponds. The garden, as it looks now, was primarily modelled by King Sejo (1417–1468), the second son of Korea's most famous monarch – King Sejong, who is renowned for creating Hangul, the Korean alphabet, as well as his significant contributions to Korean culture and intellectual life. The existing garden pavilions date to King Injo's reign (1595–1649). The garden was intended as a place for the king and royal family to relax, a royal retreat, as well as the location of various popular outdoor activities such as archery. Male members of the royal family would also join in military exercises that were organised in the garden's precincts.

The main hallmark is Buyongi Pond, an artificial feature with a man-made round islet to one side that is modelled on the Taoist cosmology thought that heaven is round and the earth is square – bringing harmony to heaven and earth. This round-square association was intended to reflect the balance between the celestial and terrestrial realms, considered essential for the well-being of humans and the universe. The pine tree on the islet is associated with longevity and immortality and represents the immortals' realm, allowing the visitor to ponder the elusive ideal of eternal life.

The two-storey pavilion overlooking the pond houses the Gyujaengak (Royal Archives), with the upper floor being the reading room, Juhanmu – which translates as 'a place opening on to the universe'. A perfect spot to end the exploration of Changdeokgung.

● Reading: In Grand Style: Celebrations of Korean Art During the Joseon Dynasty, published by the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco; Korea: A History by Eugene Y Park; ● The five royal palaces in Seoul are Changdeokgung, Gyeongbokgung, Changgyeonggung, Deoksugung, and Gyeonghuijeung ● National Palace Museum of Korea, gogug.go.kr



DISCOVER
the Secret Garden
in 1953



FROM LEFT
Side view of the
standing Buddha
at Maligawila,
set in an ancient
monastery
complex in a
forest,
Monoragala
district, Uva

Budurugala
panorama
showing the
Buddha with two
groups of
bodhisattvas on
either side,
Monoragala
district, Uva

Detail of the
Dambegoda
Bodhisattva, at
the monastery
complex of
Maligawila,
Monoragala
district, Uva

THE BUDDHIST COLOSSI OF SRI LANKA

The teardrop island of Sri Lanka has been known by many names throughout its long history – it has also welcomed diverse religions and beliefs. Writings in the *Mahavamsa* (the great chronicle) record the early and deep connections with Buddhism. Whilst most modern-day visitors to the island, curious about its history, seek out Anuradhapura, Sigiriya, and the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, there are other extraordinary sites to explore, often far away from the crowds. The island is home to several colossi – gigantic standing Buddhas and bodhisattvas that are found in North Central (Avukana Buddha), North Western (Raswehera) provinces, at Maligawila and Budurugala in Uva province, and perhaps the most well-known and most visited site – the standing Buddha at Gal Vihara in Polonnaruwa.

By the first century BC, Buddhism had been introduced to the island during the reign of Devanampiya Tissa of Anuradhapura (307-267 BC), a contemporary of the Mauryan emperor Asoka (268-232 BC), who supported the first Buddhist communities and built the first monuments. The Mauryan Buddhist mission found itself preaching to a receptive audience at a time when the first kingdom of Anuradhapura was on the rise. In later centuries, Theravada Buddhism was adopted by the Anuradhapura kingdom (437 BC-AD 1017), influencing its cultures, laws, and methods of governance. It eventually produced three subdivisions: the Mahavihara, Abhayagiri, and Jetavana traditions in Sri Lanka.

The discovery of an 8th/9th-century stone inscription at Nalanda Gedige temple near Matale shows that both Mahayana and the esoteric Vajrayana forms of Buddhism were being practised alongside the Theravada traditions. Mahayana followers accept the later *sutras* and emphasise the path of the bodhisattva. These later traditions were probably brought through the influx of trade by boats originating from Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, as the

bodhisattva Avalokitesvara was believed to be the protector of sailors and travellers. Mahayana Buddhism was thought to be widespread on the island in the 8th and 10th centuries. Other explanations cite southern Indian craftsmen being employed at court and introducing Mahayana influences into the local styles.

In John Clifford Holt's important book on the cult of the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara in Sri Lanka, *Buddha in the Crown*, he applied the terms 'Laukika' and 'Lokottara' for the understanding of this complicated and complex structure of religious culture: the former means 'of this world', while the latter can mean

'above' or 'beyond this world'.

This mix of beliefs brought its own characteristics to how Buddhism was practised and its temples and related art. Sri Lanka's Theravada traditions accommodated a variety of religious influences: pre-Buddhist cults and practices, Mahayana traditions, Tantric Buddhism, and Hinduism. The appearance of the colossi in Sri Lanka relates to this period of the 8th-9th centuries when Mahayana forms of worship had gained the upper hand, with colossi replacing the earlier popular worship centred on the *stupa* and *sarira*.

The Avukana Buddha is now generally considered to date to the 8th century and stands at 14 metres. It depicts the Buddha with a variation of the *asia mudra*, a variation of the *abhaya mudra* of protection, peace, and dispelling fear, and is considered one of the best examples of a standing Buddha from ancient Sri Lanka. The styling shows influences from the Gandharan manner but also incorporates decorative elements from the Amaravati School in India. In Amaravati style, the robe could be diaphanous, draped over the left shoulder and densely pleated. In the Gandharan style, the Buddha is often depicted wearing a monastic robe characterised by deep folds and pleats where the robe covers the body, with the drapery often shown gathered over and falling from the left wrist.

The Avukana figure follows this typical stylised way of wearing the robe that is found in all Sri Lankan Buddha statues created during the Anuradhapura period and thereafter – a bare right shoulder and the edge of the robe shown on the left side of the body, usually with the corner of the robe held together by the left hand at the left shoulder. In Sri Lankan Buddhist art, the *usmisha* or *sirapatha*, the cranial protuberance on the Buddha's head, is often depicted with a flame, which symbolises spiritual power and enlightenment.

Not far from Avukana, just 11 kilometres away as the crow flies, is



The standing Buddha at Polonnaruwa shown with an unusual mudra rarely found in Sri Lanka, popularly believed to be the disciple Ananda

another earlier colossus that stands at 10.92 metres, which is believed to date to the 3rd/2nd century BC. Called the Sasseruwa Buddha, it depicts the historical Buddha and is part of the ancient temple of Raswehera Rajamaha Vihara (307-267 BC). The Sasseruwa figure depicts the Buddha with the *abhaya mudra*, in high relief with the full height and width of the back and of the head connected to the rock face. Unlike the Avukana figure, the Sasseruwa Buddha is placed in an alcove. It has also lost its sirapatha.

The colossi found at Maligawila and Budurugala in the Monoragala district of Uva both date to the 9th/10th centuries. At Budurugala, the figures are carved into a rock face and belong to the Mahayana tradition.

The dominant figure of the Buddha stands at a height of 16 metres and is portrayed in the *samabhaya* posture (weight spread evenly on two feet) with the right hand in the *abhaya mudra*. It is recorded as the tallest standing Buddhist sculpture in Sri Lanka. It still shows traces of its original stucco robe, and a

long streak of orange suggests it was once brightly painted. The central of the three figures to the Buddha's right is thought to be the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. To the left of the white-painted figure is a group of three bodhisattvas, including a female figure in the *tribhanga* (thrice-bent) posture, a common position used for portrayals of Mahayana bodhisattvas, which is thought to depict Tara (the goddess of wisdom and the female consort of Avalokitesvara, known as the Bodhisattva of Compassion). This is the only representation of a female bodhisattva in Sri Lanka. The three smaller figures to the left of the colossus portray other deities, or *prathims*, including a figure of the Maitreya Bodhisattva in the middle (the future Buddha), which stands at 7.5 metres with the upper body being naked, adorned with jewellery, with the hands in *dharmachakra mudra* (turning of the Dharma Wheel). The other figures are thought to represent Vajrapani and Manjushri.

A short distance away, at Maligawila, are the colossi of Buddha and the Dambegoda Bodhisattva set in a large forested monastery complex. The colossi were first recorded by the archaeology department in 1934, where they were found in fragments. The site was cleared in 1951, which brought the discovery of the Bodhisattva's head, allowing archaeologist to study this previously unknown ancient monastery complex.

The Dambegoda Bodhisattva was discovered fallen from its pedestal with its face down but intact; however, treasure hunters had then blown up the torso of the Dambegoda figure looking for hidden treasure. It was finally restored and raised by the Department of Archaeology in 1990. The Buddha colossus, after several aborted attempts, was raised a decade earlier in 1980. The 9th/10th-century Maligawila Buddha is now considered the tallest free-standing statue carved out of a single limestone rock on the island, standing at 11.53 metres (the Budurugala Buddha is carved into the rock face). The Dambegoda Bodhisattva, in the form of Avalokitesvara, is of the same date and is associated with Maithree Natha Bodhisattva, the form adopted locally in ancient and modern Sri Lanka.

Finally, we arrive at the most visited colossus on the island – the standing Buddha found at Gal Vihara in Polonnaruwa, part of a group of stone Buddhas and rock carvings. It is also the

youngest colossus dating to the Polonnaruwa period, in the 12th century, created after the conquering Chola dynasty had been defeated the century before. The figure has an unusual mudra of *para dukkha dukkhittha*, sorrow for the sorrow of others, rarely seen in Sri Lankan sculpture.

Gal Vihara was built by Parakramabahu I (1153-1186) and comprises three cave sanctuaries housing four stone sculptures, two seated images, the standing colossus with the arms folded across his chest, and a recumbent Buddha. HCP Bell (1851-1937), the first commissioner of archaeology wrote, 'But it is the solitary life-like figure, traditionally styled Ananda, the favourite disciple of the Buddha, standing erect with crossed arms on a lotus pedestal 24 ft from the rock floor, which appeals specially to the imagination, from its sorrow-stricken expression and natural attitude of deep mourning. This statue is, *par excellence*, the most artistic and well conceived to be found anywhere on the island'. All these figures are related to the Theravada tradition patronised by Parakramabahu during his reign, where it had regained a significant revival and reform. The king played an important role in unifying the monastic orders and traditions, as well as addressing corruption and general decline. This period helped define Theravada Buddhism on the island, shaping its course for the future and its role in Sri Lankan state and life today.

Other large standing Buddha and bodhisattva statues on the island can be found at the Kelaniya temple, northeast of Colombo; the Muhudu Maha Vihara in Pottuvil in the east, which houses unrestored and incomplete standing stone figures; the bodhisattva carved in the rock face at Weligama on the south coast; and smaller figures at Situlpahuruvva in Yala National Park in the south.



The unrestored
standing
figures at
Muhudu Maha
Vihara in
Pottuvil,
Eastern
Province

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The Bodhisattva Maitreya, India, Bihar, Gaya District, 11th century, from the Nasli and Alice Heeramanek Collection, Los Angeles County Museum of Art



Buddha Shakyamuni, India, Uttar Pradesh, late 6th century, gift of the Michael J Connell Foundation, Los Angeles County Museum of Art



Buddha Shakyamuni, circa 850, from the Nasli and Alice Heeramanek Collection, Los Angeles County Museum of Art



Head of Avalokitesvara, mid-12th century or later, gift of Marion Hammer-Jacob, Los Angeles County Museum of Art



Gozanze Myo-o, Bright King of the East, Japan, Fujiwara period, 10th century, Los Angeles County Fund, Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Tantra, a text composed in the late 8th or early 9th century in India, the main purpose of which is to provide a path to spiritual awakening and enlightenment through the meditation on the deity Heruka Chakrasamvara in union with Vajravahni. The *tantra* outlines rituals, philosophies, and practices designed to cultivate enlightened states of mind by uniting the principles of bliss (right method) and emptiness (wisdom).

The exhibition also explores the role and meaning of *mudras* in Buddhist works of art. These highly stylised hand gestures indicate to the faithful, in a simple way, the meaning, nature, and function of the deities represented. They also give significance to the figure. While there are many esoteric mudras, over time, Buddhist art has retained five common and basic gestures in relation to figures of the Buddha, although other gestures can sometimes be found. The *dharmachakra mudra* (Wheel of Dharma), which represents the occasion when the Buddha preached his first sermon after his enlightenment in the Deer Park at Sarnath, North India, setting into motion the wheel of the teaching of Dharma. The *bhūmisparśa mudra* (touching the earth) is also called 'holding the earth to account or as witness'. The gesture is formed with all five fingers of the right hand extended to touch the ground, symbolising the Buddha's enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. The *varada mudra* represents charity, compassion, and boon-granting, often used in conjunction with the *abhaya mudra*. The *abhaya mudra* symbolises protection, peace, and the dispelling of fear. In Thailand and Laos, this mudra is associated with the movement of the walking Buddha. The *dhyana mudra*, associated with meditation and contemplation relating to the path of spiritual perfection, is made with one or both hands, with ritual objects often placed in the palm of the left hand. It is associated with the time when the Buddha meditated under a pipal tree before his enlightenment. When made with both hands, the hands are generally held at stomach height, or rest on the thighs. For some Buddhists, this triangle is said to represent the Three Jewels of Buddhism: the Buddha himself, the Good Law, and the *sangha* (community of Buddhist practitioners).

By showing works of art from across the Buddhist world, the show allows visitors to explore key concepts of the art and religion through objects that were created throughout Asia, following the path of Buddhism out of India, across the lands of the Silk Road, and the religion's current presence in modern-day life.

- From 11 May to 12 July, LACMA, Los Angeles, lacma.org
- Catalogue available

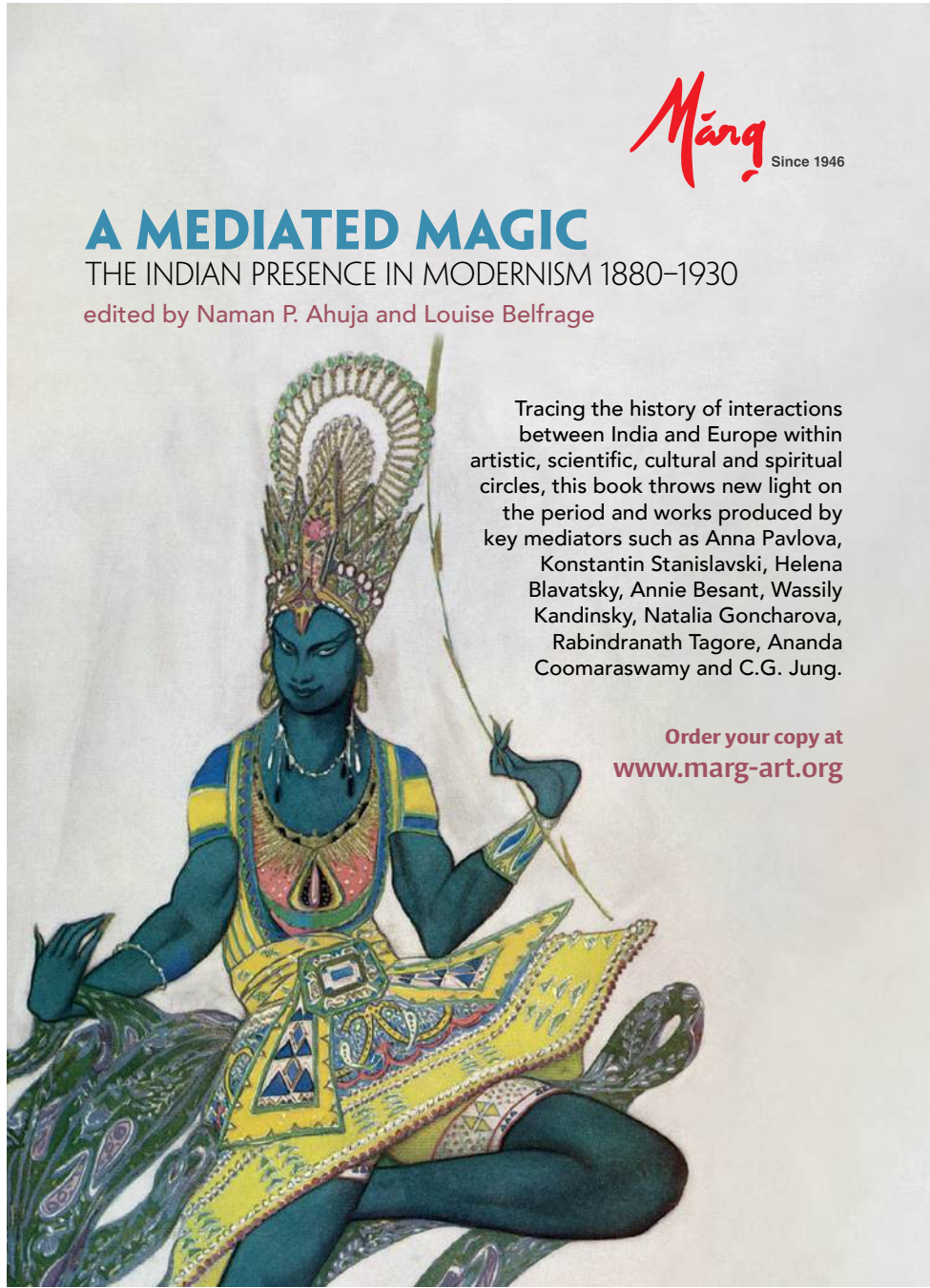


WATCH
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in a Time of
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WATCH
What is Mahayana
Buddhism?
a talk by Robert
AF Thurman

The Jina Buddha Ratnasambhava, circa 1100-25, from the Nasli and Alice Heeramanek Collection, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by the Jane and Justin Dart Foundation. All photos © Museum Associates, LACMA



Olivia Sand

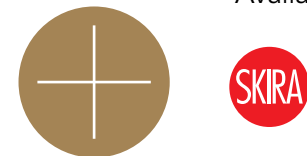
CONTEMPORARY VOICES

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ASIAN ART
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This exhibition explores Buddhism and Buddhist art around the globe, with a visit to the religion's origins in India. It then travels through mainland and island Southeast Asia, including the Theravada countries of Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam, to the Mahayana world of the Himalayas, including Kashmir, Tibet, and Nepal. Through the lens of these countries, Buddhist thought and practice are seen in ritual objects, *thangkas*, and sculptures.

The show focuses on art associated with the important developments in Buddhism such as Theravada (early monastic Buddhism), Mahayana (the Great Vehicle), Vajrayana (the Diamond Vehicle – tantric or esoteric Buddhism), and Chan (Zen). Drawn from LACMA's collections, with several significant loans from private collections, the exhibition starts with the life of the historical Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama, the Shakyamuni Buddha), the role of the bodhisattva, Buddhist cosmology, and key concepts such as *dharma*, *karma*, and *nirvana*. It also pays attention to the meaning of mudra – symbolic hand gestures or poses found in artworks associated with Buddhism.

Presented in two sections, the first section studies the life of the historical Buddha and work's associated with this period of the Buddha's life in the Indian subcontinent. The second section follows the journey of Buddhism across Asia to such countries as Sri Lanka and Indonesia in the south, the Himalayas to the north, and China, Korea, and Japan to the East.

Stephen Little, co-curator of the exhibition, writes in the catalogue essay 'Introduction to Buddhism and Buddhist Art', 'Both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism were practised in Southeast Asia in the early Common Era. Early evidence for the presence of Buddhism in Southeast Asia comes from dedicatory stela inscriptions in Pali and Sanskrit. Although Hinduism was probably the first Indic religion to reach the region. Buddhism soon followed. The early political states of Southeast

REALMS of the DHARMA



The Buddhist Deities Chakrasamvara and Vajravahni, Tibet, circa 15th century, the Nasli and Alice Heeramanek Collection, Los Angeles County Museum of Art

WATCH
Introduction of
Theravada
Buddhism to
Angkor

“
The exhibition explores the journey of Buddhism around the globe
”

Asia were closely connected via sea trade with India, Sri Lanka, and China. The vast extent of contemporaneous maritime commerce, and the surprising and relative ease with which people, goods, and ideas travelled, is suggested by the discoveries of Roman glass beads at the ancient seaport of Oc Eo on the southwestern coast of Vietnam and a coin of the Gallic emperor Victorinus, minted in Cologne between 269 and 271, at U Thong in Thailand.

Both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism forms spread throughout Southeast Asia, however, in modern times Theravada Buddhism prevails and influences religious practice in continental Southeast Asia in

countries such as Thailand, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. Buddhism and Hinduism also flourished in the early Khmer empire (present-day Cambodia) and in the Cham kingdom (present-day Vietnam). Buddhism became more popular in the Khmer empire with its adoption as a state religion in the late 12th century by King Jayavarman VII (1122-1218), when the Khmer empire encompassed Cambodia, much of Vietnam, and parts of Thailand. This influential monarch promoted Vajrayana Buddhism, building great temples such as those found at the complex at Angkor, the capital of the Khmer empire.

In the catalogue, Stephen Little again writes, 'Part of Buddhism's appeal was its fundamental compassionate teaching that enlightenment was open to all sentient beings (of all classes and castes). Buddhism in India developed slowly in the first several centuries after the Buddha's death but achieved great prominence during the reign of the Mauryan king Asoka (304-232 BC), who propagated the new faith throughout his vast kingdom in northern and central India. Among the symbols appropriated by Asoka, and visible at the top of several of the commemorative stone columns he erected throughout his kingdom, were the lion representing the Shaky clan, into which the Buddha was born and the Wheel of the Dharma or Dharmachakra'.

The first section is dedicated to works of the historical Buddha, dating from the late 6th century. A physical representation of the Buddha is absent from the historical sites in India predating the first century. Representation is made by the symbol of an umbrella (*chakra*), fly whisk (*chamara*), or footprints (*buddhapada*). The first image of the Buddha in human form appears at Mathura and develops further in the Buddhist art of Gandhara from the first to the fifth centuries. A highlight of the exhibition is a standing figure of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, from Uttar Pradesh, late 6th century; with its serene countenance, the work embodies the style of the late

Gupta dynasty (320-600), a balance of elegant form and inner spirituality. Although the Gupta rulers were Hindu, they actively patronised Buddhism. This Buddha embodies two ideals basic to Buddhism, the perfect *yogi* and the universal ruler. He possesses the yogi's supple body and contemplative gaze, and the ruler's strong shoulders, firm body, and webbed hands and feet. Time-honoured traditions of portrayal connect the Buddha's human form with nature; his long eyes are shaped like fish, his curls like snail shells, and the profile of his left shoulder and arm like the trunk of an elephant. Following the invasion of northern India by Islamic rulers from Afghanistan in the 12th century, this sculpture was preserved in a Tibetan monastery.

Another form of the Buddha, the Maitreya Buddha, is primarily linked to Mahayana Buddhism, which seems to have started to appear around the 6th century. This



The Cosmic Buddha Vairocana, Chinese, circa 1600, gift of Richard and Ruth Dickes, Los Angeles County Museum of Art

With forest covering two-thirds of the Japanese archipelago, Japan's celebrated carpentry culture is rooted in a profound respect for nature and trees. As part of their new exhibition in London, Japan House explores this relationship and the skills of temple, shrine, and domestic carpentry in Japan. The deep traditions of Japanese carpentry are carried on today by dedicated artisans (known as *daiku*), who embody not only a knowledge of craft but also a reverence for the forest itself. The link between nature and spirituality is perhaps best illustrated in the work of the *domiya daiku*, or shrine and temple carpenters, whose role directly connects the material world of wood to the spiritual realm. Unlike carpenters who focus on residential projects, temple and shrine carpenters specialise in the large-scale wooden structures of Buddhist temples (*do*) and Shinto shrines (*miya*).

Daiku have long honoured nature, seeking the benevolence of mountain deities in gathering their materials. Central to their ethos is the imperative of sourcing wood in harmony with the forest, advocating for the meticulous selection of materials tailored to each application. Japanese woodworking practice, renowned for its precision, is also rooted in a profound reverence and need for environmental balance. The domiya daiku are the keepers of an architectural heritage that spans over a millennium. The temples and shrines they construct and restore are more than mere buildings; they are spiritual hubs that are central to Japan's religious and cultural identity.

Prior to the entry of Buddhism from India via China and Korea in the 6th century, the Japanese revered the natural world in an animistic spirituality later known as Shinto. In this indigenous belief system, *kami* or nature spirits, inhabit trees, mountains, rivers, and many other aspects of nature and are responsible for natural phenomena such as rain, storms, fires, and typhoons. After Buddhism's arrival, the two faiths interwove in complex ways over the coming centuries and gave rise to two distinctive typologies of religious architecture: Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines. The carpenters aim to construct sacred buildings that are designed to endure for hundreds of years.

Dedicated artisans possess a deep knowledge and understanding of this essential craft, whilst maintaining a reverence for their environment, communicating with forest kami as they gather materials. Domiya daiku especially demonstrate the link between nature and spirituality, as their role directly connects the material world of wood to the spiritual realm. Their work involves working with large timbers and requires specialised knowledge of techniques such as complex *tsugite* and *shikiuchi* joints, as well as the assembly of intricate bracket systems (*kumimono*) and the creation of cambered roofs.

The head carpenter, or *toryo*, leads a team of skilled artisans, ensuring the buildings can withstand harsh weather conditions experienced in many parts of Japan. The use of *kigumi* (traditional joinery techniques), where wooden pieces are intricately fitted together without the use of nails, reflects the spiritual principle of purity and respect for the materials. This method symbolises the interconnectedness of all things – a key concept in both Shinto and Buddhism. The absence of nails, which can be seen as a form of violence against the wood, allows the



The wooden torii of Itsukushima Shrine (Miyajima), in Hiroshima prefecture, has become an iconic landmark in Japan

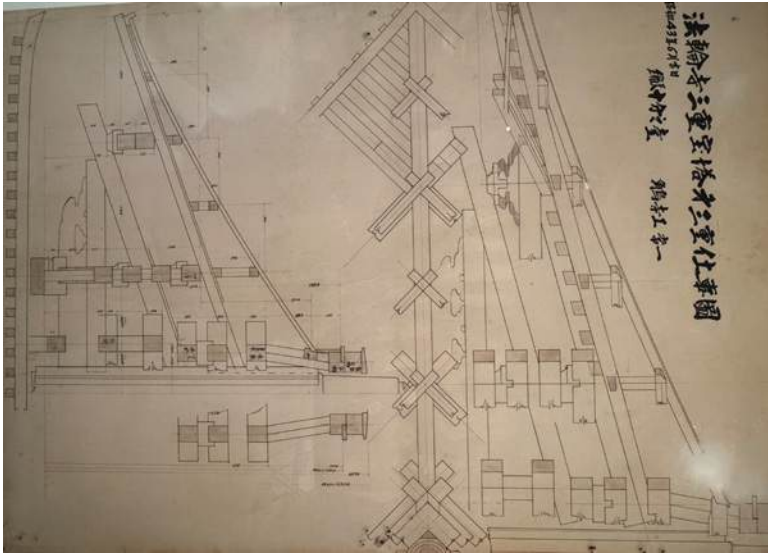


WATCH the making of a Kumiko model

TEMPLE CARPENTRY IN JAPAN



The pagoda of Horin-ji, Ikaruga, Nara, that was rebuilt in 1973 after being destroyed by fire in 1944



Elevation drawing for the three-storied pagoda at Horin-ji. The upper section presents an overhead view and cross-sectional view from the corner (diagonal) direction, while the lower section shows the cross-section from the front



Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region: Worship Hall of Okitsu-miya Yohaisho. Photo: Maki Hidekazu © World Heritage Promotion Committee

interlocking joints without any nails or metal studs, influenced by these aesthetic and spiritual concerns. The practice also served as a strategy to cope with a lack of suitable metal as a resource and as a response to Japan's earthquake-prone environment. When earthquakes occur, a building with rigid joints might suffer extreme damage, whereas timber-only joints

can flex and move to survive the shaking. Like master artisans of most disciplines in Japan, from ceramics to sake-brewing, this craft has been passed down through generations in a rigorous apprenticeship, in which masters train apprentices, or *deshi*, that can take decades. Aspiring carpenters often begin their journey

in their teens, living with and spending years observing and assisting master craftsmen before being entrusted with more complex tasks. This system ensures the transmission not just of technical skills, but of the philosophy and spirit of domiya daiku.

Central to this tradition is the use of hand tools, many of which have remained largely unchanged for centuries. The razor-sharp steel edge of a Japanese hand plane (*kanna*) in the hands of a skilled carpenter can achieve results that rival or surpass modern power tools. When today's domiya daiku embark on repairing or restoring ancient temples and shrines, they describe the process as a sort of collaboration with the original carpenters – however many centuries have passed. They emphasise that their craft is not passed down through written instructions, drawings, or verbal teachings. Instead, they are embedded within the very structures themselves, as each generation of carpenters infuses their work with personal conviction and spirit. Contemporary carpenters must interpret the techniques and ideals of the past by interacting directly with the materials, while also innovating to adapt to the current moment. As in other countries, the 20th century saw contemporary construction techniques gain prominence throughout Japan for most urban dwellings, workplaces, and other structures. And like many traditional crafts, the art of the daiku faces certain challenges today, due not only to fewer apprentices following in the master's footsteps, but also considerable economic and climate pressures. However, in the realm of spiritual architecture, it is inspiring that the work of domiya daiku is still seen as essential to Japan's cultural heritage. This type of knowledge and practical skill is the accumulation of centuries of knowledge and experience and should be preserved and supported in whatever ways possible.

To explore these traditions, the exhibition features a *kumiko* (woodworking) model to show kigumi, tsugite, and shiguchi techniques. Tsugite refers to the method of joining components end to end in the same direction, lengthening the material (a scarf joint), while shiguchi refers to methods of joining components at right or various angles (dovetail, rabbit, mortise and tenon joints, for example). Examples of the detailed processes of *sashimono* and kumiko, the intricate woodwork used in furniture and interior architectural fittings, show the impressive sophistication of the more refined aspects of kigumi.

There are also working drawings used by temple carpenters, including an elevation drawing from 1968 for the three-storied pagoda at Horin-ji in Ikaruga, Nara, created by Nishioka Tsunekazu. Pagodas in Japanese Buddhism are often said to contain relics and some of the ashes of the historical Buddha. Horin-ji's original burned down in 1944 when it was struck by lightning. To rebuild it, the temple organised a fundraising campaign that drew strong support from the public, and the pagoda's reconstruction in the original 7th-century Asuka period style began in 1973 and was completed in 1975. It now houses the original reliquary rescued from the fire.

● Until 6 July, Japan House, London, japanhouselondon.uk

FROM PAGE TO STAGE

The Allen Memorial Museum has organised two concurrent Japanese prints and printmaker exhibitions over the summer to look at Japan's rich literary heritage, showing how Japanese printmakers have visualised and reimagined classical texts across centuries: *Shining Prints: The Tale of Genji Reimagined in Japan and From Page to Stage: Kabuki's Heroic History Plays in Japanese Woodblock Prints*.

The *kabuki* exhibition explores how Japan's theatrical tradition transformed epic historical narratives, including the *Tale of the Heike* and related stories featuring overlapping characters and themes – into dramatic visual spectacles by highlighting prints (*yakusha-e*) depicting kabuki performances of such well-known epics as *The Revenge of the Soga Brothers*, *The Chronicle of Yoshitsune*, and the enduring revenge tale *The Treasury of Loyal Retainers*, or *Chushingura*, bringing to life the legendary 47 loyal *ronin* (a wandering samurai with no master), who patiently plotted vengeance against the lord who deceived their master. This type of theatre was meant to pull the audience into another and very different world – the term kabuki is comprised of three characters, *ka* (sing), *bu* (dance), and *ki* (skill), but it was derived from the term kabuku, which means 'to lean', as in leaning away from the norm, or out of the ordinary, bizarre.

Yakusha-e, literally 'actor pictures', have been sold to kabuki enthusiasts since the Japanese Edo period (1603–1868). Japan's popular dance-drama was perhaps the brightest expression of this 'floating world', captivating audiences since the early 1600s. The woodblock prints would often depict the actors striking an intense pose, eyes crossed, and limbs held rigid. These kabuki prints were collected by theatre-goers as souvenirs of performances and favourite stars – in the same way blockbuster film posters are collected today.

Kabuki theatre was one of the most dynamic art forms to emerge from Japan's 'pleasure quarters', the extraordinary districts that thrived in major Japanese cities during the 18th and 19th centuries. With dramatic storylines, lavish



The Actor Ichikawa Datezo (Shikaku) as Kajiwara Genta by Ippitsusai Buncho (active 1760-94), from A Picture Book of Fans from the Stage, 1770, colour woodblock print, surimono-e, ink and colour on paper, Mary A Ainsworth Bequest

“The first recorded performance of kabuki was in 1603”

costumes and celebrity actors, kabuki was the ideal subject for Japanese print designers. In an age of limited popular entertainment, the actors of the floating world aroused enormous interest. Portraits of them in full costume on stage were widely circulated. Intimidating kabuki male roles called *aragoto*, exerting a sinister presence in the Edo-style, had a particular pull. The theatre was an all-male preserve, and 'female impersonators', known as *onnagata*, were employed to play out highly stylised feminine roles.

The first recorded performance of kabuki occurred in 1603, given by a group of female entertainers. It is highly probable that dancing troupes were in operation before this date, and the 1604 performances featured a *miko*, a 'shrine maiden', who may have come from a shamanist background. All we know of her is that she was called Okuni and is said to have come from the great shrine of Izumo. She and her troupe gave their performances on

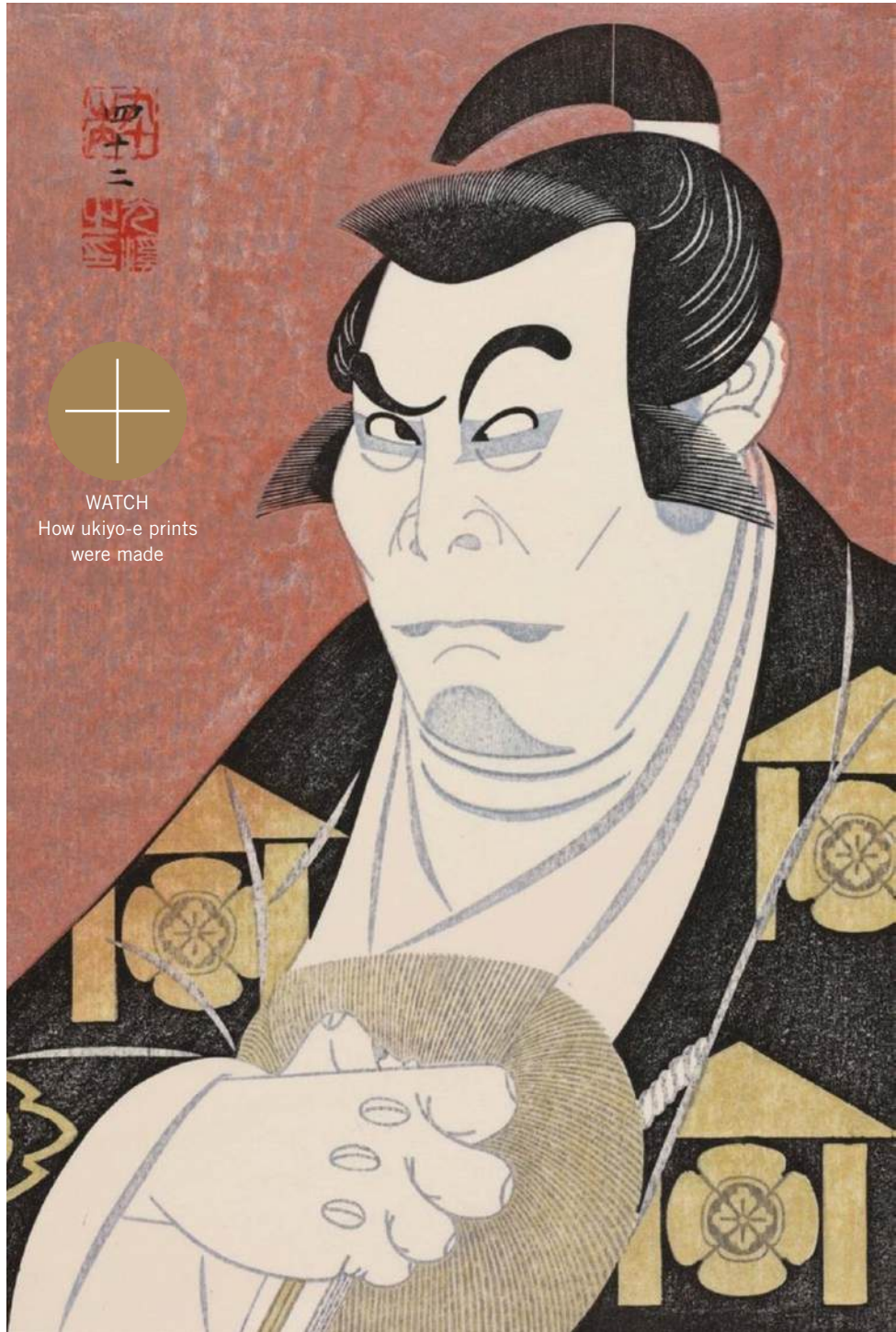
the dried-up Kamogawa riverbed in Kyoto, on almost the exact spot of the present-day Minami-za theatre. The dances appear to have been folk or quasi-religious, similar to the *bon odori* still performed all over Japan during the summer festival of the dead. Okuni's theatre was extremely popular and was described as *kabuku* – an archaic term, unfamiliar to modern Japanese, meaning literally 'tilted', but implying that which is strange or outlandish, and perhaps somewhat risqué.

In 1629, however, the shogunate banned women from the stage. The reason for this is generally given as immorality – the prostitution having become more unacceptable. It seems, however, more likely this was simply a convenient excuse, and that the real reason behind the ban was the perceived threat the reputation of actresses presented to public order, on account of their popularity not simply with the commoners – who made up the majority of the audience – but also with the samurai class which, the government thought, should be above such vulgar public display.

Kabuki continued, however, to be performed by young boys who had yet to reach maturity and shave their heads in the universal samurai hairstyle of the day. This became the so-called *wakashu kabuki* 'young boy kabuki', and in 1652, by order of the shogunate, the boys suffered the same fate as the women and for exactly the



Kabuki-za, Sixth Month, Kyogen (1899) by Utagawa Kunisada III (1848-1920), ink on paper, gift of Dominique H Vasseur in honour of Ronald F Patnik and Lawrence W Rassan



The Actor Ogami Shoroku in the Role of Kudo Suketsune in Soga No Taimen by Ogami Shoroku (1989) by Tsuruya Kokei (b 1946), colour woodblock print with mica background, Oberlin Friends of Art Fund

same reasons. Surprisingly, kabuki performances were allowed to continue provided the actors were mature males – with shaven heads. This became known as *yaro kabuki* and, although the term is no longer used, developed into the kabuki we know today.

In this exhibition, there is an 18th-century print depicting Ichikawa Datezo as Kajiwara Genta by Ippitsusai Buncho. Kajiwara Genta is a historical figure, a 12th-century samurai, often portrayed as a heroic and skilled warrior, known for his bravery and fighting skills, especially the battles between the Genji and Heike clans during the late Heian and early Kamakura periods. His character is found in several popular series in the 1770s and 80s in such plays as *Genta Kando* and *Yuki Nazuna Saiwai Soga*. Buncho developed a more realistic style of actor portraiture, together with Katsukawa Shunsho, and produced many works in *hosoban* (small vertical) format. He also had a very singular approach to his subjects: his figures are very slender but described with rounded, swelling lines that give them a sure sense of volume. His unusual talent for bringing out the role portrayed by means of very small variations in the actor's

expression or deportment produced a very idiosyncratic personal style.

Tsuruya Kokei (b 1946) is one of Japan's leading artists of woodblock theatre prints, and his work is represented in this exhibition. Lawrence Smith, in *Modern Japanese Prints 1912-1989*, writes, 'Tsuruya worked as a company "salaryman" until turning suddenly in 1978 to the production of woodblock prints of actors performing at the Kabuki-za in Tokyo. He began with bust portraits (*okubi-e*) inspired by the work of the artist Sharaku (worked 1794-95).'

The artist was admired by the President of Shochiku, the company operating the Kabuki-za, who gradually interested others in his work, until the editions reached 72 and his work attracted a dedicated following. The artist's own website gives us an update on his career: 'After 22 years of producing kabuki actor prints at Kabuki-za, the artist has released a series of self-portraits, *Loneliness*, and the series *Cat Kabuki* (out of love for his cat). The current series he is working on is entitled *Five Styles of Banzai-Ukiyo-e*, a series of portraits of ukiyo-e artists. In March this year, he announced that the third and last piece from the latest series *Banzai-Ukiyo-e*

San-en had finally been completed.

A highlight of the exhibition is a print from the Utagawa School by Utagawa Kunisada III depicting a popular scene from *Kanadehon Chushingura*, the classic drama of the 47 ronin, enacted at the Kabuki-za in Tokyo. In Act 5, the villain Sadakuro robs and kills the elderly Yoichibei one rainy night on the Yamazaki Highway. He stares over his shoulder with an angry frown as he pulls Yoichibei's money bag away from him, the hapless victim still clutching the end of the drawstring as he falls to the ground. Sadakuro carries a tattered umbrella and wears a black kimono with a geometric pattern. On the left, the ronin Hayano Kampei is out hunting in the same area, and hearing a sound, shoots into the darkness. Upon discovering the body, he mistakenly believes that he has killed a man. Here, he lifts his hat with one hand as he shoulders his gun with the other, a straw raincoat tied around his neck. The composition has been divided diagonally to feature the two incidents in the same print to give a sense of the action.

● From 22 August to 24 May 2026, both exhibitions, Allen Memorial Art Museum, Ohio, amam.oberlin.edu

THE IMPERIAL COURT OF HUE

Hue, the imperial capital of the Nguyen dynasty (1802-1945), was the centre of power of Dai Nam (Great South), the territory that forms modern-day Vietnam. Following the French conquest of the Indochinese peninsula in 1883, the Treaty of Hue placed the empire of Dai Nam (subsequently renamed Annam) under indirect French administration. The monarchy was preserved but without any real power. The emperor and his court fascinated the French, inspiring a wealth of paintings, photographs, postcards, and advertising illustrations depicting the imperial court and rituals of Hue in various forms. These images circulated widely, both in France and the colony, creating a paradox; it highlighted the grandeur of the monarchy while the institution itself was gradually being stripped of all authority. The imperial examinations, a pillar of the administrative structure, were abolished in 1919, and by 1925 political power had been transferred to the Resident-Superior of Annam. This presentation brings together works from the museum's collection, created by both French and Vietnamese artists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Rather than contrasting them, it explores the colonial context in which they were



Installation view of the depictions of various characters seen at the court in Hue, Vietnam

produced. Among French artists and patrons, it is often difficult to separate the admiration for royal ceremony from cultural appreciation, a taste for the picturesque, documentary intent, or even propaganda. Meanwhile, Vietnamese artists working on commissions responded to the expectations of the colonisers but did not entirely submit to them, using such commissions to create hybrid forms that reflected their own

vision. They reinterpreted their culture through new codes and customs, often in subtle dialogue with, or even subverting, colonial expectations. Therefore, the collection of works presented here is evidence of complex interactions. These works constituted a new visual culture, reflecting a context of domination and serving as a space for negotiation. ● Until 30 June, Musée du quai Branly, Paris, quai Branly.fr

INTRINSIC BEAUTY Celebrating the Art of Textiles



The exhibition – a collaboration among museum curators Sumru Belger Krody, Lee Talbot and Shelley Burian, includes textiles rarely exhibited due to their size or fragility, such as the enormous Safavid carpet measuring approximately 28 by 11 feet that may have decorated a Persian shrine. Other treasures include a 4th-century textile hanging from Egypt with an extraordinary three-dimensional design of a jewelled entryway into a garden; robes embroidered with metallic-wrapped threads for Daoist priests, considered some of the most visually splendid works of Chinese textile art. This juxtaposition of textiles from different regions

and time periods create conversations that shed light on cross-cultural connections and the preeminent roles textiles have played in the social, political, religious, commercial and artistic life of many communities. ● The George Washington, University Museum and The Textile Museum, Washington DC, museum.gwu.edu

Chair cover, China, silk, metallic-wrapped yarns. Embroidery on gauze, weave ground fabric, Qianlong period (1736-95), Qing dynasty, The Textile Museum Collection, acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1956



YUKINORI YANAGI Icarus

For his first exhibition featuring stellar works from the 1990s and 2000s, Yukinori Yanagi (b 1959, Japan) could not have dreamt of a more spectacular setting than the one at Pirelli HangarBicocca in Milan. With its 15,000 square metres, the space with high ceilings allows for the presentation of large-scale installations in the best conditions and under their best light. It is thus a unique opportunity to see Yukinori Yanagi's hallmark pieces brought together under one roof.

Originally trained as a painter in Japan, it is his stay in the United States – first studying at Yale and then living in New York – that most impacted Yukinori Yanagi's practice. While at Yale, he studied with the late Vito Acconci (1940 -2017) and was exposed to more unconventional art practices. As a result, he slowly drifted towards installation, burning all his paintings after graduating. In addition, his stay abroad gave him the opportunity to revisit Japan's history, especially Japan in the context of the Second World War and the subsequent events that deeply impacted the country. Yukinori Yanagi thus developed his approach of 'wandering as a permanent position', questioning his environment while constantly looking at things from a different perspective.

Even if the installations presented in the exhibition date back to the 1990s and 2000s, they seem to accurately illustrate the present state of the world: 'The world flag ant farm', probably his most famous installation to date, brings together 200 flags composed of coloured sand in transparent plexiglass boxes, connected by tubes to allow for the ants inside to move and carry grain

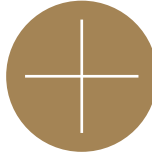


The World Flag Ant Farm (2025), by Yukinori Yanagi, detail, installation view at Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan, 2025, courtesy the artist and Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan Photo: Agostino Osio © Yanagi Studio

from one container to another. It underlines the fragility of the notion of borders, possibly ultimately leading to the disappearance of a country.

The installation gradually keeps changing as the ants work their way through the containers, echoes the artist's fascination for ants as a child playing with them, acknowledging them as a perfectly organised communal society. His interest in their organisation is also reflected in *Wandering Position*, where the artist followed an ant on a delimited space on the floor with a red crayon, a practice he started back as a student in his studio.

Beyond questioning the issues of identity and borders, Yukinori Yanagi has been one of the first artists to openly criticise Japan's society and the government's policy. In *Article 9*, which presents in various blocks of neon lights the article of the constitution stating that Japan would renounce war and the use of force to resolve international disputes to favour peace, highlights the debates Article 9 has triggered to this day. Another installation underlining the disruptive



LISTEN to Yukinori Yanagi discuss his work at APT2

state the world finds itself in is the site-specific piece *Project Godzilla*, which can be read in many ways. Presenting a heap of debris, barrels, cars or a boat amassed in a corner with the projection of an oversized eye of Godzilla, the artist addresses more specifically the issue of nuclear radiation, a fear that remains ongoing following the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Hanging from the ceiling, Yukinori Yanagi also presents a replica of the 'Little Boy' atomic bomb which was dropped on Hiroshima. The shock, the memory, as well as the interrogations related to Japan in the context of the Second World War have driven numerous works by the artist, sometimes also incorporating comic or superheroes figures famous in Japan during the artist's childhood.

Bringing together 15 of Yukinori Yanagi's most iconic works, the exhibition feels like an immersion into the artist's practice and mindset, where memory, history, and the world's constellation are brought together in a highly aesthetic and meaningful way. ● Until 27 July, Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan, pirellihangarbicocca.org

WORLD OF THE TERRACOTTA WARRIORS

After its popular exhibition of the terracotta warriors in 2008, the Bowers has shifted its focus to showing new archaeological discoveries from Shaanxi in the 21st century. The discovery of the first terracotta army pit in the 1970s turned a great deal of global attention to the life and legacy of Qin Shi Huang, the Qin emperor. Now, archaeological finds in Shaanxi within the past two decades have revealed new information about pre-dynastic China's political landscape and artistic achievements.

World of the Terracotta Warriors comprises over 110 newly uncovered treasures, including additions to the terracotta warriors, chariot regalia, jade and gold adornments, bronze vessels,



Ornament, Mid-Spring and Autumn period (770-475 BC), gold and turquoise excavated from Liujawa Site, Weinan in 2018, Shaanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology

and other objects. In collaboration with the Shaanxi Cultural Heritage Promotion Centre and museums and archaeological institutions across Shaanxi Province, these artefacts are making their North



Ritual wine vessel (zun), late Shang to Early Western Zhou dynasty, bronze, excavated from Shigushan Site, Baoji in 2013, Shaanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology

American debut, offering audiences a chance to explore the history of China before and during the Qin dynasty. ● Until 19 October, Bowers Museum, Santa Ana, California, bowers.org

HAORI Men's Clothing from 20th-Century Japan

The exhibition *Haori, Men's Clothing from the Early Twentieth Century* tells the story of Japan by using a unique window onto Japanese material culture through about 50 *haori* and *juban* (the garments worn over and under men's *kimonos*, respectively), as well as a few pieces of traditional children's clothing, from the Manavello Collection, by placing them in dialogue with installations by contemporary artists.

The imagery that decorates the garments on view is not only an example of fine workmanship, but also a document and attestation that provides insight into Japan in the early 20th century, a critical period of social, cultural, and political transformation, between accelerated modernisation and imperialist tensions. Works by contemporary artists are presented within the exhibition to encourage analysis and reflection, enabling visitors to orient themselves within a historical period of complex relationships between Japan, China, and Korea that is still little known in Italy and the rest of Europe.

Reveal, do not display, suggest without disclosing. These are the principles behind Japan's thousands-of-years-old culture, which is still woven from a balance, in a perpetual state of becoming, between solids and voids and a sense of harmony. Clothing contributes to defining the roles and spaces in which the complex Japanese society

takes shape and moves. The woman's kimono has always been of great interest in this context, while the sphere of men's clothing remains little explored.

Less striking but still visually interesting is men's clothing, which is a large part of the rich Japanese textile tradition. Whether elegantly austere ceremonial garments or modest pieces for everyday wear, men's kimonos contain and define a world that only becomes accessible in the domestic sphere or the intimacy of an amorous encounter. The soul of the wearer is revealed by the imagery that embellishes the inside of the jackets or the whole surface of the undergarment: seductive or narrative imagery, always sophisticated, expertly painted or woven, painstakingly rendered or barely suggested by a few strokes of ink, it tells the story of the culture of the Rising Sun with references to literature, the art of war, the natural world, and the sphere of the gods.

Traditionally considered an expression of everyday intimacy, the haori and juban on view in the exhibition take on new meaning and offer an opportunity to explore important current themes, including issues tied to Japanese expansion in Asia in the 20th century and the social and political implications that characterise their historical context. Not least, propaganda, which was circulated not only through traditional communication



Children's kimono depicting samurai helmets (kabuto), richly decorated on a blue background, Japan, mid-20th century, silk taffeta printed with a stencil (katayuzen) and finished with a brush, lined with raw silk taffeta, with two silk crepe belts applied to the bodice, 86 x 79 x 30 cm, private collection Photo: Alessandro Muner

means but also, surprisingly but pervasively, through clothing, including children's wear, to which a special section of the exhibition is devoted.

This allows a repositioning of the typical image of Japan in the West, still tied to a traditional, romantic vision, in contrast to the perception of a different Japan, still little-known today, which can be glimpsed in men's clothing. The typical imagery decorating this clothing celebrates the many-faced myth of the West while also aiming to emphasise Japanese national pride, both of which

culminated in the technological development and strenuous defence of the country's identity before and during the Second World War.

This legacy, far from being obliterated by the passage of time, still survives today in countries and places outside Japan but is still engaged, and the contemporary installations and videos in the exhibition offer tangible testimony of it, enriching the account with reflections on the past and present. ● Until 7 September, Museo d'Arte Orientale, Turin, maotorino.it

HOKUSAI AND MONET



Chrysanthemums and Horsefly by Katsushika Hokusai, circa 1833-34, ink and colour on paper, bequest of Richard P Gale

In 1897, Monet created four paintings of chrysanthemums in his garden at Giverny. Breaking from the tradition of depicting flowers in vases, he painted them *en plein air* as they grew. The resulting works, including *Massif de Chrysanthèmes*, show the expressive use of space and bold compositions reminiscent of Hokusai's depictions of large flowers. A collector of Japanese prints, Monet owned several examples from this series, and his fascination with Hokusai's dramatic compositions and unexpected perspectives is evident in *Massif de Chrysanthèmes*. This exhibition presents a rare opportunity to view Monet's *Massif de Chrysanthèmes* (1897), on loan to Mia from a private collection, alongside Hokusai's untitled *Large Flowers* series (created between 1833 and 1834).

Little is known about this series – nicknamed in the West for its striking close-ups of flowers like chrysanthemums, poppies, hydrangeas, and morning glories. Published in two sets of five prints, these works featured bold compositions and bright colours that captivated European artists like Monet. The 1830s

marked a period of experimentation for Hokusai – even as he entered his seventies, he explored new avenues of compositions while working on traditional subjects.

Mai Yamaguchi, Andrew W Mellon Assistant Curator of Japanese and Korean Art, explains, 'Hokusai's approach to depicting flowers was unprecedented, almost as if he were creating portraits of each bloom,' adding 'Hokusai was drawing on Chinese models of bird and flower paintings when he was designing this series. The novel compositions in these prints inspired a new way of seeing and interpreting nature, which resonated deeply with Monet'.

● Until 10 August, Minneapolis Institute of Arts, new.artsmia.org

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EXPANDING HORIZONS

Woodblock Prints from 1860 through 1912



Fujiwara no Yasumasa Plays the Flute by Moonlight (1883) by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839-1892), woodblock print, Ronin Gallery

Ronin Gallery celebrates its 50th anniversary with an exploration of five centuries of Japanese prints. From the first flowerings of *ukiyo-e* to today's contemporary talents, they will consider the history of Japanese printmaking in five exhibitions. The third instalment of this anniversary programme, *Expanding Horizons: Woodblock Prints from 1860 through 1912*, explores an era of profound change for both the art form and Japan as a whole. As Edo's 'floating world' faded in the gas-light glow of modern Tokyo, woodblock print artists expanded their subjects, styles and materials to reflect the transition from feudal nation to modern empire. From foreign ships in the newly opened port of Yokohama to military battles fought on foreign shores, this exhibition considers the complexity and creativity of the late Edo period (1603-1868) and Meiji period (1868-1912) through artists such as Yoshitoshi,

Kiyochika, Sadahide, and more. While ukiyo-e had achieved extraordinary popularity by the mid-19th century, the sense of economic and political stability that had shaped the floating world had waned. After more than two centuries of continuous rule, the Tokugawa shogunate crumbled under the pressure of social unrest and encroaching foreign powers. Following the arrival of American Commodore Matthew Perry in Edo Bay in 1853, the government ended 250 years of relative isolation. Japan formally engaged in trade with the United States in 1858, followed by France, Britain, Russia and the Netherlands a year later. As unfamiliar people and goods arrived in Japan, ukiyo-e artists fed a public curiosity about these new arrivals. Named for the international port opened in 1860, *Yokohama-e* (Yokohama pictures) recorded and

circulated early impressions of these imports. From harbour views to portraits of foreigners, artists such as Sadahide, Yoshitora, and Hiroshige III wove together imagination and inspiration from foreign media to indulge their audiences' curiosity. With the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the imperial line returned to power and public interest shifted from foreign novelties to national identity. From government and infrastructure to fashion and industrial aspirations, Japan shaped its modern identity along a Western imperial model. As social, economic, and political change progressed at a stunning speed, woodblock print artists reflected the development of a modern Japanese identity. *Kaika-e* (enlightenment pictures) portrayed technological achievements, imported pastimes, and Western fashion rendered in the bright hues of recently imported aniline dyes. By the late 1880s, a rejection of

Edo-period culture turned to a romanticisation. Throughout these shifting sentiments, artists such as Yoshitoshi bridged past and present, portraying the heroes and legends of ukiyo-e through a modern lens. Other ukiyo-e genres found contemporary relevance through fresh contexts. *Senso-e* (war pictures) drew on the visual language of *musha-e* (warrior pictures) to valorise Japan's imperial advances, while *bijin-ga* (pictures of beautiful women) reached a literary audience through *kuchi-e* (frontispieces for novels). Competing with the rising popularity of photography and lithography, woodblock prints of the Meiji period melded diverse artistic styles, Japanese history, international influences, and national aspirations to reflect the changing role of the woodblock print in modern Japan. ● From 5 June to 15 August, Ronin Gallery, New York, roningallery.com



Habataku (1979), Spreading Wings by Fujitsuka Shosei, madake bamboo and rattan, 85 x 60 x 68 cm, Eskenazi

JAPANESE BAMBOO MASTERPIECES

Eskenazi hosts two summer exhibitions: one presenting the first UK solo show of revered bamboo artist Fujitsuka Shosei (b 1949), designated a 'Living National Treasure' in bamboo craft by the Japanese government; and the other dedicated to the celebrated artist Ikeda Iwao (b 1940), and his innovative works made of bamboo and lacquer. There are 10 baskets and sculptures created by Fujitsuka Shosei from 1979 to 2022, demonstrating the prodigious skills that have seen the artist turn the humble material of bamboo into an art form.

Ikeda Iwao is presenting 16 works, seven of which were created specifically for the exhibition, which reflect the artist's distinguished and creative approach to tradition. Born to a father who was a master of bamboo, Ikeda started training when he was 10 years old, and between 1960 and 1984 he studied lacquer under Akaji Yusai (1906-1984), a 'Living National Treasure' in lacquer work. While drawing on his traditional training, Mr Ikeda has shifted towards original, conceptual work: by splitting or shearing and lacquering a



Untitled (2013) by Ikeda Iwao, bamboo, lacquer and gold, 70 x 13.6 x 7.7 cm, Eskenazi

bamboo section, he is able to explore, reveal, and emphasise its inner spirit. ● Until 4 July, Eskenazi, London, Eskenazi.co.uk

AUCTION

THE GOULD COLLECTION

Bonhams, London, 5 June

The 14th Dalai Lama (Tenzin Gyatso) was enthroned in Lhasa, Tibet on 22 February 1940. He was aged four. Among those present was Sir Basil Gould (1883-1956), the Political Officer for Sikkim, Bhutan, and Tibet, who was appointed to represent the British government. On the 85th anniversary of the Dalai Lama's enthronement, Bonhams announces the sale of the Collection and Archive of Sir Basil Gould. Unusually, the sale includes a large quantity of film related to the archived correspondence, estimated at £500-800. Sir Basil Gould played a pivotal role in the enthronement of the 14th Dalai Lama in Lhasa on 22 February 1940, representing British interests at the historic event. Arriving in Lhasa as the commander of the British Mission, Gould observed the solemn and elaborate ceremony within the Norbulingka Palace in Lhasa.



The Dalai Lama on the throne on 22 February 1940 by Krishna Kanwal, est £150-200,000, Bonhams

The search for the 14th Dalai Lama was an intricate and deeply spiritual process led by Tibet's highest religious authorities. Following the passing of the 13th Dalai Lama in 1933, signs and visions guided Tibetan monks to a remote village in Amdo, where a young boy, Lhamo Thondup,



Krishna Kanwal at work in Lhasa



The British Residence bungalow, Pagri (Phari), Tibet by Krishna Kanwal, est £3-5,000, Bonhams

exhibited remarkable recognition of personal items belonging to his predecessor. This included selecting ritual objects from a collection, a key test in confirming his identity. With divine guidance and rigorous examination, the boy was formally recognised and brought to Lhasa to prepare for his enthronement.



The Dalai Lama being placed on the throne by Kalon Lama and Chikyab Khempo by Kirishna Kanwal, from a collection of 40 watercolours from Krishna's 1939-40 visit to Lhasa to accompany Sir Basil Gould, est £180-250,000, Bonhams

Among the highlights is a series of 40 original watercolours by the distinguished Indian artist Krishna Kanwal, depicting Sir Basil's mission to Lhasa in 1940 and portraying the cast of characters at the enthronement. Estimated at £180,000-250,000, these evocative works, which have not been offered

at auction before, give a visual record of a pivotal moment in Tibetan history. Also featured is Kanwal's portrait of the Dalai Lama before he became spiritual leader, painted in Lhasa in early 1940 (estimate £70-100,000), and his portrait of the Dalai Lama at his enthronement (estimate £150-200,000).

Islamic Arts Diary



'I Love', sculpture by Marie Khouri, at the foot of the Pyramids of Giza, on display at the Institut du Monde Arabe © Marie Khouri

by Lucien de Guise

PARIS, CITY OF ENLIGHTENMENT

The Institut du Monde Arabe (IMA) has always been a solid provider of exhibitions relating to the Islamic world. At the moment, there are three shows at the same time, covering a lot of ground. The first of these asks an important question about a subject that always generates wide appeal: 'Writing or Calligraphy?' With the display items all from the IMA museum's collections, the exhibition takes a look at the almost celestial realm of Arabic calligraphy. Examining the subject in its widest range, there is everything from the earliest examples of the script in the *Qur'an* to its centrality to new media.

In the Arabic language, the term *khatt* does not distinguish between everyday writing and the more elevated art of calligraphy – writing which follows codes of proportion and harmony. From sacred texts to contemporary photography, including architecture and utilitarian wares, calligraphy has been used for centuries in all aspects of daily life. The Arabic alphabet and its derivatives create a spirituality and energy that can be felt before it is understood. This exhibition looks at the wonders of past examples while keeping a firm focus on the contemporary.

Each generation of calligraphers has promoted innovation that has evolved into different styles. Since the 1960s, numerous visual artists in the Islamic world have explored the heritage of classical calligraphy, giving rise to the '*hurufiyya*' movement, freeing themselves from the literal nature of writing and manipulating the design of letters in search of a pan-Arab and sometimes pan-Islamic visual language. In the present century, calligraphers are investing in new media, blurring the lines between design and fine art. Since the end of the 20th century, a modified form of calligraphy has also left its mark on city walls, becoming the medium for street art.

Included in the exhibition is the work of one of the most innovative artists of the word. 'I Love', by sculptor Marie Khouri, is a most striking example of her oeuvre. Born



Among the earliest aerial photos of the Middle East, Sidon, Lebanon. Photograph by Antoine Poidebard SJ, 1934 © Oriental Library of Saint Joseph University, Beirut

in Egypt and raised in Lebanon, Khouri is a Vancouver-based artist whose concepts are deeply rooted in a rich web of cultural and historical influences. Her sculptures sit at the conjunction of art and design. Owing a debt to Henry Moore's direct-carving technique, they explore the interplay between language, form, and the human body, while reflecting Khouri's personal connection to the complex histories of the Middle East. Her art becomes a bridge between her heritage and perspective, conveying universal themes of identity, memory and dialogue. One of her most celebrated works, *Let's Sit and Talk*, embodies this philosophy; hand carved in the form of Arabic calligraphy, it is both a work of art and a usable seating arrangement.

Expanding on this concept, the installation 'I Love' explores themes of cultural dialogue and unity. Composed of five hand-carved white curvilinear forms, this work transforms the Arabic expression *Babeib* (I love) into a physical and conceptual experience. After being shown in Vancouver and then in Cairo, at the foot of the pyramids, it has journeyed on to Paris. It ends on 21 September.

As widely travelled as the Arabic alphabet is, the focus at IMA can also extend to the opposite. *Treasures Rescued from Gaza: 5,000 Years of History* is geographically precise – or at least more so than the ubiquity of Arabic calligraphy. It is also very topical at a time when even to mention the word Gaza is to make a political statement. This small strip of land is, however, home to an abundance of archaeological sites, from all eras, which are now in peril.

The IMA is displaying an exceptional collection of significant

works that have by good fortune been saved from calamity. In the words of the President of the Arab World Institute, Jack Lang: 'Nothing is worse than abandonment and oblivion. This exhibition, which I would call a public salute, pays homage to Gaza, vibrant and wonderfully young'.

Since 2007, the Geneva Museum of Art and History has become the museum-refuge for an archaeological collection of more than 500 works belonging to the Palestinian National Authority, which it has not been possible to return to Gaza. The collection comprises amphorae, statuettes, funerary steles, oil lamps, figurines, mosaics and much more.

TRUE ORIENTATION

In London, the Islamic art and associated auctions provided some worthwhile material for collectors – and increasingly for non-buying enthusiasts too. The catalogue entries have become more informative than ever, and none more so than any painting associated with the Ottoman Orientalist artist Osman Hamdi Bey (1842-1910). His works rarely appear at auction but there were two fine examples at Sotheby's and Bonhams in recent months. Both involved coffee-making and both had comprehensive notes attached. Bonhams perhaps had the edge with a writeup from the ultimate authority, Edhem Eldem. Filled with fascinating insights, he revealed that *The Hearth* was among the Turkish artist's earliest works:



The Hearth (1879) by Osman Hamdi Bey, oil on canvas, courtesy of Bonhams

Dating from the Bronze Age to the Ottoman era, it has become a vital reference; the recent destruction makes it even more so.

With the assistance of the Geneva museum and the support of the Palestinian National Authority, the IMA is exhibiting 130 objects from this collection, including the spectacular Abu Baraqeh mosaic. It provides an important insight into Gaza's numerous archaeological sites from all eras, every one of which now in serious peril. The exhibition closes on 2 November.

Sticking to the same region, and many of the same preservation problems, the IMA is holding *Photographing Lebanon's Heritage, 1864-1970*. Another timely display, given the extent of destruction in the region, this exhibition provides a rich selection of old photographs from the collection of the Oriental Library of Saint Joseph University in Beirut. Dedicated to the sites and monuments of Lebanon, these have been greatly endangered in recent months.

Saint Joseph University is one of the older institutions in the Middle East, founded in 1875. The Oriental Faculty, within the university, was established in 1902. The faculty provided an institutional framework for the Jesuits of Beirut, who took an early interest in the archaeology of Lebanon and neighbouring countries. Jesuits throughout the world, especially in Asia, have often taken on this academic role, combined with an understanding of multiple languages – and religions. These scholars were also pioneers in



Detail of a Byzantine mosaic, Jabaliya site, Gaza © JB Humbert

prehistoric research in Lebanon. At this point, I would like to pay tribute to the late Pope Francis. His role in the Middle East was less scholarly than many Jesuits, but his legacy lives on in gestures such as turning a 'Popemobile' into an emergency medical vehicle for the people of Gaza.

The exhibition at IMA relies on the vast documentation of tens of thousands of photographs, supplemented by old acquisitions and others that are more recent. These photographs are currently being digitised and indexed, with the support of the Boghossian Foundation, the National Heritage Institute, and the National Archives of France. The exhibition consists of an installation of images in different formats. It invites visitors to explore a dozen sites as important as Byblos, Baalbek, and Tyre, through photographs of landscapes and monuments as well as scenes from social and economic life. Unrelated to the latest episode of cultural obliteration, the museum is exhibiting for the first time *Li Bayrut*, a large bronze sculpture by Chaouki Choukini, created the day after the devastating explosion at the port of Beirut in 2020. The exhibition runs until 4 January 2026.



Preparing Coffee (1881) by Osman Hamdi Bey, oil on canvas, sold for over £1 million at Sotheby's in April

'an art collector from Georgia'. More than that, he was a landowner in the Borchali district of Tiflis (Tbilisi) and head of the province's cavalry division. He was also a co-religionist of the artist, not that Osman Hamdi was the most committed Muslim. His existence is a useful reminder that Tiflis was once an Islamic emirate. Georgia these days is predominantly Christian, much like Crimea. Fought over by Russia and Ukraine, Crimea now has a minority Muslim population but for many centuries was a khanate.

ASIAN ART IN COLOGNE



A large ormolu-mounted famille verte '100 Boys' vase China, Kangxi period (1662–1722)
Height 68 cm. Provenance: Eugen Albert Collection (1934–2024), Mainz
formerly Edward R. Bacon Collection (1848–1915), New York. Estimate € 25,000–35,000



A four-case inrō with dragon rising to Mount Fuji Lacquered wood, 19th century
H 8.9 cm; W 5.9 cm. Estimate € 3,000–4,000



A fine ensemble of 12 junishi-inrō Lacquered wood, each signed Koma Kyuhaku, 19th century. Provenance: Private property, Hesse, Germany, formerly on loan and exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum, New York. Estimate € 25,000–35,000



An imperial yellow-ground 'Nine peaches' dish China, Yongzheng mark and of the period (1723–1735). Diameter 27 cm. Provenance: Private collection, Berlin
Estimate € 40,000–60,000

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AUCTIONS

13 June China, Tibet / Nepal, India, Southeast Asia, Japan Viewing: 9–12 June
30 May–17 June Asian Arts Online
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