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The production of an art and sculpture exhibition is not considered by many in Buddhist studies as an exercise which of itself would produce new insights into Buddhist history. As this superb volume demonstrates, however, the very assembling of artefacts that have never been considered together or, in some cases, left their country of origin, for a major international exhibition, makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the way Buddhism, in relationship to Hinduism, flourished and evolved in different periods, locations, and settings in the first millennium. This is the first time such a collection, of 170 Southeast Asian objects of various kinds, has been described in such detail or, to my knowledge, discussed from the informed perspective of a number of different disciplines. These offer the most recent discoveries and developments, which all add to our understanding of this highly diverse region. As John Guy, the curator, volume’s editor and writer of notes to each of the objects, suggests, such an exercise could not have been undertaken even a decade ago, and needed the recent advances in most of the major disciplines involved to make it possible.

Indeed to anyone studying the period, the richly cross-stitched interplay between various South and Southeast Asian cultures in the first millennium can be a little bewildering. There are so many river, sea and land networks, so many vernaculars, so many classical languages, so many shared textual groups, so many different contexts where only some texts are applied, so many forms of Buddhism and so much interaction with and response to the Hindu traditions, that it feels a bit like trying to reconstruct a complex and moving three-dimensional model of connections, with only fragmentary and partial evidence to suggest how the pieces fit together. This book explores the manner in which Hinduism and Buddhism travelled, became absorbed and shaped the political structures, social practices and ritual throughout the region. Very rarely is such material on this period presented together in a coherent fashion. So simply as a work of cultural history this book is immensely important, with substantial articles from leading scholars in a number of fields on recent developments in understanding the art, politics and material culture of the first millennium in Southeast Asia. Guy addresses the historical context of each object with meticulous care, with excellent photographs of each object, as well as many comparables not in the region.
By also including the greatly helpful general introductions by numerous scholars to various aspects of the relationship between different localities, their influence on other regions, and the dissemination of the traditions involved, a much larger historical picture is also communicated.

The main story of the collection is the travel of Buddhism and Hinduism around the area, and its impact on material culture, aesthetics and culture. As Thomas Campbell notes, writing of the formation of states such as Pyu, Funan, Zhenla, Champa, Dvārati, Śrivijaya, whose art work and even existence is still largely unfamiliar to global readerships, there is an underlying theme of gradual absorption and the integration of imported traditions: ‘It is the metamorphosis of Indian imagery into a Southeast Asian guise that defines this art’s unique contribution’ (vii).

As this book demonstrates, each culture actively provided an environment of pre-existent artistic forms and mores, already based on centuries of maritime and land interchange, as well as local variation in terms of materials used, preferred topics of art, customs of ritual worship and local story and legend. Guy demonstrates in his preface that ‘Indianization’ was not just a case of the absorbing of traditions in a uniform manner: factors as varied as different materials, cultural patterns, ways of constructing buildings, and highly disparate practices all shape this evolution. Sometimes entirely new concepts emerge through artistic expression. One of the most remarkable of these is the depiction of the Buddha teaching Śiva and Viṣṇu in the seventh-century rock-relief in the cave interior at Tham Phra Photisat, central Thailand, for instance, which shows a scene unthinkable in an Indian setting (Fig.1).

The volume is organized clearly and sensibly around themes. The first section gives a thorough and illuminating historical context. It has two essays by Guy, 'Introducing Early Southeast Asia', which sets the background, and 'Principal Kingdoms of Southeast Asia', which gives a lucid account of the varied regions and their distinct artistic and cultural identities, now all being reassessed as the 'hub' system of polity seems to have extended throughout the region, challenging earlier notions of geographical 'boundaries' and the very idea of 'statehood'. Berenice Bellina then explores the historical relationship of this region and the early maritime 'Silk Road', discussing the history of scholarship in the field and a growing sense, based on recent archaeological field work, that extensive trade routes were becoming established even from the Neolithic period. She demonstrates that by exploring the history and movement of material objects such as ceramics, a new pattern emerges of far greater diversification and a wider social horizon involved in travel and trade than had previously been supposed. Finally in this section, Geoff Wade examines references to the regions in Chinese texts to the ninth century, thus demonstrating a somewhat different notion of polity in this region from earlier models, and showing a hybrid and particularized picture of different states within the region.

After this wide-ranging but succinct introduction, the catalogue and items shown are very well presented, with arrangements of twenty to thirty items accompanied not only by detailed discussion of the background of each item, but also by appropriate introduction to that section by various scholars in related fields. This is arranged thematically in five separate sections.
The first section presents some rare Indian and Mediterranean objects recently recovered through recent field archaeology from Southeast Asia (Cat. 1–18). The presence of such imports bears testimony to the openness to new influences that operated in the region. In this section also the nature of inscriptions and their implications for examination of the objects are examined in separate essays: Arlo Griffiths introduces this subject, with an account of early Indic inscriptions found in Southeast Asia, and Peter Skilling extends this with study of the inscriptive culture of the area, with its ‘many faces’ (p. 62), arguing that an identity or identities emerged of quite a distinct nature to those of South Asia or China. Close archaeological field study of Burma then follows, with the discussion of various secular structures as well as a developing interest in stūpa construction, analysed in an article by U Thein Lwin, U Win Kyaing and Janice Stargardt on Pyu civilization and Śri Kṣetra. Pierre Baptisite explores early Cham art, examining its indigenous styles and regional connections as well as its absorption of outside traditions.

This pattern, of detailed consideration of particular objects, all photographed, alongside analytical and historical studies, maintains a successful sense of continuity and background throughout the book. So the next section (Cat. 19–56), focuses on early objects pertaining to Buddhism, represented by the spectacular great hoard of 1926, found within the ancient walled city of Śrī Kṣetra in Myanmar, and also by a number of lifesize Buddha images from Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. These were clearly the product of a particular preference throughout the region at the time, but all, however, display strong locally influenced aesthetics, iconography, types of material composition, and style. The gestures, styles and composition of these Buddha figures make this one of the most interesting for scholars in the field, as the depiction of the Buddha changes so dramatically in different localities, in accordance with different styles.

The third section, ‘The Brahminical World’ (Cat. 57–107), continues the mix of art history, archaeology and aesthetics, by including articles by Pierre-Yves Manguin on early Southeast Asian coastal states; by Agustijanto Indradjaya, assessing evidence for Hinduism and Buddhism in Indonesian regions, by Le Thi Lien on Vietnamese sculpture and by Hiram Woodward on artistic styles 600–800 CE. This demonstrates the prevalence of cults pertaining to Śiva and his family throughout the region, as well as other Indic deities. The fourth section (Cat. 108–130) focuses on state art, with a particular emphasis on the patronage of the Mon rulers of the Dvāravatī kingdom. There are accompanying articles by Robert L. Brown on Dvāravatī sculpture, Thierry Zephir on the Cakra as a Buddhist symbol, and Stephen A. Murphy on architecture and ritual space in Thailand from the seventh to the tenth century. This latter article includes some finely executed depictions of jātakas, a transregional theme, on sema stones. Finally a chapter on ‘Savior Cults’ (Cat. 131–170) explores Bodhisattva depictions and their dissemination, with an accompanying article by Pattatorn Chirapravati. This discusses recent archaeological discoveries in Thai sites and argues that Brahminism and Buddhism were often pursued in tandem in a number of regions.

Two extensive appendices complete the volume, with a survey of sculpture and sculpting techniques in pre-Angkor in Southeast Asia by Federico Caro and Janet G. Douglas, and a technical study of casting procedures by Lawrence Becker, Donna Strahan and Ariel O’Connor. There are also three good size maps and a glossary of sites in First-Millennium Southeast Asia.
The objects in the exhibition each have their own story, peculiar to time and place, specific texts, iconography, and ritual application. This work recognizes this and the matching of distinguished scholarly essays as background to consideration of the objects is a successful mix. So as a history the book is readable and accessible, without glossing over the nuance and importance of particularity to time and place, and allowing space for material from a number of disciplines such as philology, manuscript reading and the study of material culture each to have full scholarly study. For all of these features it is really invaluable. Art books can sometimes seem vague about the area outside the author’s expertise. Conversely, books on Buddhism can neglect visual culture completely, thus ignoring the ‘texts’ that in practice would have been most meaningful and significant for often non-literate, but not necessarily ill informed, societies, where each object would be ‘read’ with an intentness we perhaps lack now. A fuller picture can only really be obtained by accurate and recently researched information from a number of different disciplines. This book, by drawing on material derived from art history, philology, history, anthropology, archaeology, numismatics, and inscriptive evidence, gives a closely argued, yet also easily assimilated account of the way each of the material objects at the time reflected its own culture, textual base, religious practice and ritual usage. Aesthetic considerations, as some of the pieces are just so skilled and full of feeling in their execution, are also explored: the photographs are of course why many people will want to buy the book, with justification.

As Guy notes, acknowledging the enormous advancements of recent years in field archaeology, study of sectarian imagery, historical study and art-historical evaluation, there is now, as he says, the chance to ‘pursue a more holistic approach to the history of the region and to its forms of cultural expression’ (p. ix). Cooperation between disciplines is key, and this book gives ample evidence of this working. It is to be hoped that this work, which deals so exhaustively with so many areas of study relating to the material objects it shows, will be read and consulted not just by those who study art history, but by all those interested in the early history of Buddhism as it interacted with the local cultures where it was absorbed and took root. And of course it is in the end the artefacts themselves that are the prime area of interest, and the spectacular beauty of so many pieces, including some masterpieces, reproduced to the highest quality, is awe-inspiring.