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Arts in Thailand**

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# **INDIAN RELIGIOUS INFLUENCES ON ARTS IN THAILAND**

by  
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The Indian religious influences on arts in Thailand can be divided into 4 periods after the chronology of the Indian art:

1. The Amaravati art (2nd - 4th century A.D.)
2. The Gupta art (4th - 6th century A.D.)
3. The Post-Gupta art (6th - 8th century A.D.)
4. The Pala art (8th - 12th century A.D.)

Southeast Asia might have received the Indian civilization from about the beginning of the Christian era or a little before that period but for architecture and sculpture it might be dated only around 4th-5th century A.D.

A few Amaravati Buddha images were discovered in Southeast Asia. In Thailand one can refer to the two small statues in bronze. One was found in Narathiwat in the southern part of Thailand. It represents a standing Buddha image wearing a pleated monastic robe leaving the right part of the body, a billow of folds going up to pass around the left shoulder and the left wrist and then falls down on the left side of the body. The right hand is in the attitude of preaching and the left hand holds the end of the robe. Behind the body, once the robe passes over the left shoulder it falls straight to the ankles. The head has no halo but is covered with small hair-curls. The cranial protuberance is quite low (fig.1). This type of Buddha images flourished at Amaravati in southern India and Sri Lanka during the early Anuradhapura period so some scholars say that these Buddha images in Thailand might have come from Sri Lanka rather than Amaravati. The other one was found in Khorat (Nakhon Ratchasima) in northeastern Thailand.



**Figure 1:** Buddha preaching. Bronze. Found at Narathiwat, southern Thailand. Amaravati or early Sri Lankan (Anuradhapura) style. About 4th century A.D. Private collection of H.R.H. Prince Bhanubandhu Yugala.

As for Amaravati influences in Thailand one has to mention about three terracotta pieces found at U-thong in central Thailand. They represent a Buddha image protected by the Naga, a group of monks going out begging food in the morning (fig.2) and a kinnari. The Buddha wears a monastic robe leaving the right shoulder bare and sits in an Amaravati style. The monks wear a pleated monastic attire covering both shoulders and the kinnari wears an Amaravati head-gear. They were probably fabricated *in situ* to decorate the architecture as they are in terracotta and have a brick attached to the back.





**Figure 2:** Buddhist monks holding alms-bowls. Terracotta. Ht. 16.56 cm. Found at U-thong, Suphanburi, western Thailand. National Museum of U-thong, Suphanburi. Funanese art (?). 4th century A.D. (?).

Hinduism came into Southeast Asia at the same time as Buddhism. One stone statue of Vishnu was found at Chaiya in southern Thailand. The god is wearing a decorated cylindrical hat and long tussle ear-rings. The upper right hand is behind the lower one and the upper half of the long club that he holds is still there. The lower right hand displays the attitude of dispelling fear. The upper left hand is broken but formerly he would probably hold a discus. The lower left is grasping a conch-shell on the hip. Vishnu is adorned by a necklace. He is wearing a long robe with a vertical fold in the middle. A horizontal scarf is tied around the waist forming an attached loop in front. On the left side the end of the scarf extends down to the base. The genital organ of the god can be seen because the cloth that the god is wearing is very thin but this characteristic disappears quite fast in Southeast Asia.

This image can be compared to those in late Mathura art of northern India or late Amaravati style in the south. The date would be about the 4th century A.D. So in Southeast Asia it would be about 4th - 5th century and is not only the earliest Hindu image found in Thailand but also in the whole of Southeast Asia (fig.3).



**Figure 3:** Vishnu. Stone. Ht. 69 cm. Found at Chaiya, Suratthani, southern Thailand. Bangkok National Museum. Early Hindu image style. 4th - 5th century A.D.

One stone Buddha image should be mentioned here. It is now preserved in the Bangkok National Museum but its provenance is unknown. The Buddha wears a monastic dress in the Amaravati mode but without pleats. His right hand is



broken but the scar on his right shoulder is still there. His left hand is resting on his left shoulder. Though the front part of the face is broken but one can still see the hair-curls on the head and some parts of the aureole on the back. This statue shows the transitional period between the Amaravati and Gupta influences in Thailand and might date back to the 4th -5th century A.D. According to Professor Jean Boisselier, an expert on Southeast Asian arts, this stone statue might be the first Buddha image to be carved in Thailand (fig. 4).



**Figure 4:** Standing Buddha. Stone. Ht. 52 cm. Bangkok National Museum. 4th - 5th century A.D.

For the Gupta art we have found at least two Buddha images of the Gupta style in Thailand. One was found in the south and is a small stone effigy standing in *tribhanga* (triple

flexion). The Buddha is wearing a monastic dress covering both shoulders. His right hand is in the attitude of giving boon or benediction whereas his left one which lifts up and holds the end of the robe is broken. He has an aureole around his body. So the image is in high-relief and not carved in the round. The date is probably 5th - 6th century.

The other standing small bronze statuette was discovered at Nakhon Pathom, west of Bangkok. The Buddha is wearing a pleated monastic dress covering both shoulders. The pleats are however different from those of the Amaravati style but are closer to the Gandhara type in northwestern India (1st - 5th century A.D.). So the date of this image (fig. 5) might be a little earlier than the previous one. Both of them were probably imported by Indian merchants.



**Figure 5:** Standing Buddha. Bronze. Found at Nakhon Pathom, central Thailand. Bangkok National Museum. Dvaravati style. 5th - 6th century A.D.



For Indian Gupta motifs we have found quite a number of them in the Dvaravati art in central Thailand which is the earliest historical kingdom of the country, from about the 7th -11th century A.D. The conspicuous motif is a *kudu* or horse-shoe arched window with a human face peeping out. Two of them in terracotta were found at U-thong in central Thailand. They were probably used to decorate the architecture. Though the *kudu* is more or less the same as the Indian prototype but the human face inside is already an indigenous one with a peculiar hair-style, a flat face, curved and connected eye-brows, protruding eyes, a flat nose and thick lips (fig. 6).

Another Indian motif that was popular during the Dvaravati period is the flower designs intersected with lozenges. This type of motif flourished during the Gupta and Post-Gupta periods in India. In Thailand one can see it figure such as on the rim of the stone Wheel of the Law (fig. 7).



**Figure 6:** Kudu. Terracotta. Found at U-thong. National Museum of U-thong. Dvaravati style. 8th century A.D.

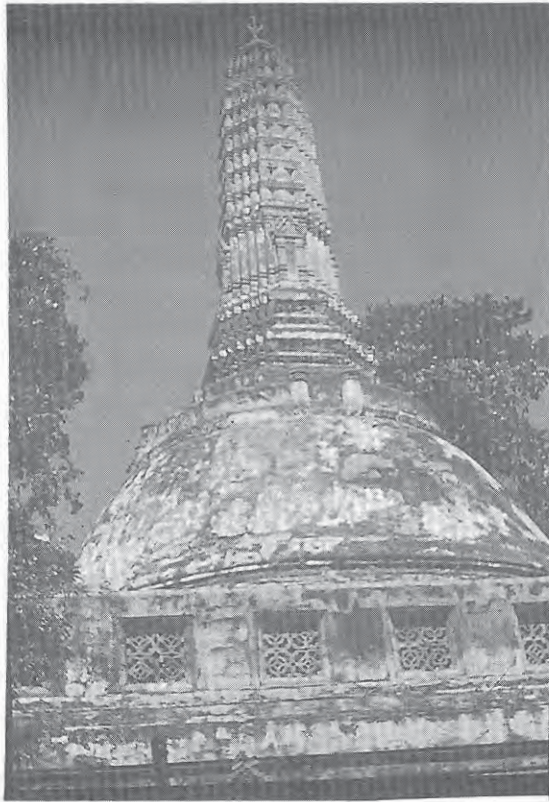


**Figure 7:** Wheel of Law. Stone. Found at Nakhon Pathom. Bangkok National Museum. Dvaravati style. 7th - 8th century A.D. Loaned by H.R.H. Prince Bhanubandhu Yugala.

During the Dvaravati period many traces of the *vihara* containing Buddha images have been found. They are in brick with clay mortar. Most of them are in the square or rectangular plan with small *stupa* at the four corners.

There is one *stupa* or *chedi* (a solid monument built to enshrine the relics of the Buddha) at Nakhon Pathom, central Thailand, that has caused a lot of controversy. The original *stupa* is now encased in a huge yellow *pagoda* built in the middle of the 19th century. Fortunately the model of the original one was built quite close by to the south (fig.8). If one looks





**Figure 8:** Model of the original Phra Pathom Chedi. South of the Present *stupa*. Nakhon Pathom. 19th century A.D.

at the model of the original *chedi* one will perceive that it was constructed at least twice. The tower or *prang* on top was probably added later by the Khmer or the Thai. The lower part in the form of an inverted bowl looks very much like the earliest *stupa* at Sanchi in India built by King Asoka the Great about 300 years B.C. That is the reason why some Thai scholars emitted a theory that Buddhism might have come into the present-day Thailand at 300 years B.C. as above-mentioned and they use this lower part of the original



Phra Pathom Chedi to be an evidence supporting their hypothesis. It has already been mentioned that the rim of the stone Wheel of the Law is decorated by a Gupta motif, about 600 years after the time of King Asoka the Great and the original Phra Pathom Chedi is now encased in a later *stupa* erected in the middle of the 19th century. So this hypothesis that King Asoka sent two Buddhist missionaries into Suvarnabhumi (the Land of Gold) which should be at the middle of the present-day Thailand is still a conjecture.

For Dvaravati Buddha images, they display the Indian Gupta and Post Gupta influences during the early phase which might date back to the 7th century A.D. One stone standing Buddha might be here referred to. The body looks very much like one Buddha image in front of the Ajanta Cave no. 19 in central western India. The Buddha is wearing a monastic robe covering both shoulders. The robe is thin, transparent and clinging to the body. The Master is standing in *tribhanga* (triple flexion). The right hand is in the attitude of giving boon or benediction. Though the left hand is not there but one can surmise that he is holding the end of the robe. The head however shows the indigenous element such as large hair - curls, a flat face, curved and connected eyebrows, protruding eyes, a flat nose and thick lips (fig. 9). This image might be dated back to the early 8th century A.D. The second period of Dvaravati Buddha images will show stronger indigenous influence by standing straight and performing the same gesture of preaching or dispelling fear by both hands. This type would date probably from the 8th - 10th century A.D. The last phase denoting Khmer influence by having a square face and a cleft on the chin dates probably in the 11th century.

For the Post - Gupta influence one should mention a small standing bronze Buddha image found at Pong Tuk in western Thailand. Originally this effigy was thought to display the Amaravati influence because the image wears a pleated monastic robe covering both shoulders and his nose is rather



**Figure 9:** Buddha giving benediction. Stone. Ht. 1.47 m. Found at Wat Raw, Ayutthaya, central Thailand. Bangkok National Museum. Dvaravati style. Early 8th century A.D.

tall but recently the late Professor Pierre Dupont, a French scholar, put out a new theory that this image should belong to a later period denoting the Post - Gupta influence as the end of the robe on the back part of the image instead of falling down to the ankles similar to the Amaravati Buddha image, is brought to wind around the left wrist like Buddha images in northern India. Another characteristic of the Post - Gupta style is that the hem of the robe on the left side of the body falls down in a straight line instead of in a zigzag one like in the Gupta art. As for the pleated robe Professor

Pierre Dupont insists that in the Indian Gupta and Post - Gupta arts some Buddha figures still wear a pleated monastic robe such as on the mural paintings at Ajanta (fig. 10).



**Figure 10:** Buddha preaching (?). Bronze, Ht. 20.5 cm. Found at Pong Tuk, Kanchanaburi, western Thailand. Bangkok National Museum. Indian Post-Gupta style. 6th - 8th century A.D.

Many Hindu images in Thailand show the Pallava influence from southern India during the Post-Gupta period about the 7th century. A.D. Remarkable stone statues used to be at Takuapa, Pang - nga on the western coast of the southern part of Thailand. There were three statues, two male and one female. After the excavation because the three heads had

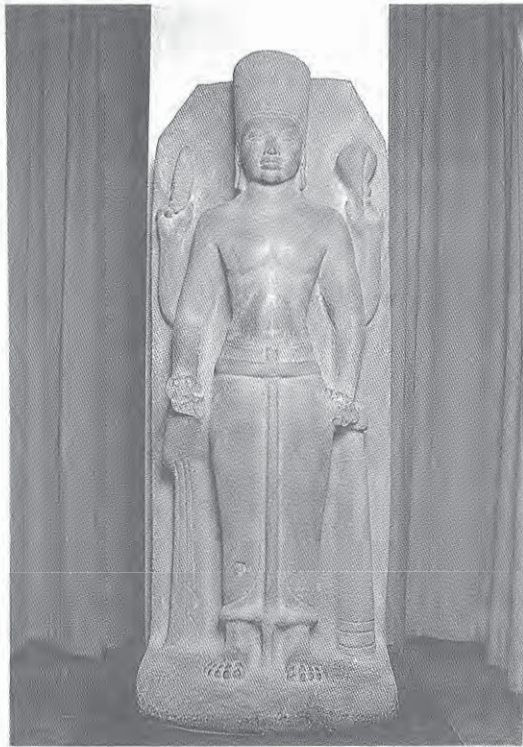


been stolen, it appears that the central image represents Vishnu wearing a decorated cylindrical hat standing among two kneeling attendants, a male and female. Vishnu originally had four arms but now the upper left one has been broken. He is wearing a typical Pallava dress with a long robe showing a middle vertical fold. The belt forms a semi-circle loop in front of the body and tied into a knot on each side of the waist with each end falling down on the lateral side of the body (fig. 11). Now the image of Vishnu is displayed at the Thalang Museum on the island of Phuket whereas the body of the male attendant and the feminine head are at the Nakhon Si Thammarat Museum in the southern part of Thailand.



**Figure 11:** Vishnu. Stone. Found at Takuapa, Pang - nga, southern Thailand. Thalang Museum, Phuket, southern Thailand. Indian Pallava style. 7th - 8th century A.D.

A group of stone standing Vishnu images in the southern and eastern parts of Thailand also denote Pallava influence from southern India. They wear a cylindrical hat and a long robe with a median fold. The two upper hands have a discus and a conch - shell as attributes whereas the two lower ones hold a club and a lotus or a lump of earth (fig. 12). They can be divided into three styles: a group having a diagonal scarf across the body, the second group with a scarf tied horizontally and the third one having no scarf at all but with a muscular body. The first group might be the earliest and show the mixture between the influences from southern and northern India.



**Figure 12:** Vishnu. Stone. Ht. 131 cm. Found at Ayutthaya, Bangkok National Museum. Early Hindu image style. 7th - 8th century A.D.



From an excavation at Khu Bua in southern central Thailand, many terracotta figures have been unearthed. They probably date back to the 7th century A.D. in the Dvaravati style. Their headgear is decorated with short pendants (fig. 13) like the head of Uma, consort of Siva, in the figure of Mahesamurti in Elephanta Cave, in front of the town of Bombay, dating back to the early Post - Gupta period about 6th century A.D.



**Figure 13:** Divinity Head. Stucco. Found at Khu Bua, Ratburi, southern central Thailand. Bangkok National Museum. Early Dvaravati style. 7th century A.D.

Another item about architecture should be here mentioned. At Mamallapuram south of the town of Madras in southern India there are Hindu temples hewn out of large boulders. A few of them are prototypes of later Tamil architecture with a rectangular or square plan and a receding tiered roof. Each tier is decorated by a model of its own architecture. This is also the prototype of a *mandapa* (a square structure) in Thailand. But in Thailand the roof has turned to be a sharp



triangular spire. However the use of small pediments as the decoration on each tier of the roof still indicates that it derives from the model of an architecture in southern Indian style. Here a photograph of the library in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha in the Grand Palace, Bangkok, is shown. This building, however, was built only in the late 18th century (fig. 14).

For the Pala influence from northeastern India one should mention about a small gilt stone Buddha image found in the crypt of the main *prang* or tower of Wat Ratburana in Ayutthaya, central Thailand. The *prang* was built in the early 15th century by the king of Ayutthaya. The Buddha image



**Figure 14:** The Library in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, Bangkok. Late 18th century A.D.

belongs to the Pala style about the 8th or 9th century A.D. It represents the Buddha displaying his important eight miracles (in clockwise position): the nativity, the display of double miracles, the descent from Tavatimsa Heaven, the Parinirvana (dying), the taming of the elephant Nalagiri, the first Sermon, the reception of a bowl from a monkey and in the centre the subduing of Mara (the evil spirits) before the Enlightenment (fig. 15). So this image might have come into Thailand a long time ago or in the early 15th century before the construction of the *prang*.



**Figure 15:** Eight Miracles of the Buddha. Gilt stone. Ht. 15.5 cm. Found in the crypt of the main *prang* of Wat Ratburana, Ayutthaya. Bangkok National Museum. Indian Pala style. 8th - 9th century A.D.

Then one should talk about the early northern Thai Buddha images from about the 11th or 13th century down to the 15th century. Bronze Buddha images of this style recall the Pala image by having a halo in the form of a lotus bud or a gem, a round face with arched eyebrows, a prominent chin and a slight smiling expression. The body is rather stout with a developed chest and a short end of the robe above the left nipple. The Buddha usually wears a monastic robe leaving the right shoulder bare. He is usually in the attitude of subduing Mara (the evil spirits) before his Enlightenment by putting his right hand over his right knee. The seated posture is usually in the crossed - leg fashion with both soles of the feet turned up. The base is decorated with two rows of lotus petals with stamen on top (fig. 16).



**Figure 16:** Buddha subduing Mara. Bronze. Ht. 73 cm. Bangkok National Museum. Early Northern Thai style. 11th or 13th century A.D. (?)



Some scholars are against this conception of the Pala influence as in Pala images the right hand of the Buddha is placed at the middle of the right leg not on the right knee as in Thai images. However if one will look at bronze Burmese Buddha images at Pagan in Burma one will notice that quite a few of them will place the right hand on the right knee. The town of Pagan in Burma flourished greatly during the 11th - 12th centuries. So the Pala influence from northeastern India might have come to Pagan first and then descended to the northern part of Thailand.

For architecture one can talk about Wat Chet Yot at Chiangmai in northern Thailand which is a copy of the Maha Vihara at Bodh Gaya, the Enlightenment place of the Buddha in India (fig. 17). However there is now a controversy about the date of this Buddhist temple. Originally it was thought to be built around the 11th century but now there is a new theory that it might be built by King Tiloka, a great king of Chiangmai, about the middle of the 15th century to celebrate the 2,000 years of Buddhism.



**Figure 17:** Wat Chet Yot, Chiangmai. Laterite decorated with stucco. Northern Thai style. 11th or 15th century A.D.

There is a small stone model of a *stupa* which probably belongs to the late Dvaravati style about the 10th - 11th century A.D. and shows the Pala influence. The base of the *stupa* is square and the central part is in the form of a dome shape. The spire is in a triangular pinnacle (fig. 18).



**Figure 18:** Model of a *stupa*. Stone. Ht. 48 cm. Found at Wat Chantharam, Saraburi, central Thailand. Bangkok National Museum. Dvaravati style. 10th - 11th century A.D.

In southern Thailand three stone statues of Hindu gods showing the Chola influence from southern India (11th - 12th century) were also discovered. They are Bhairava (Siva in anger) (fig. 19), Vishnu and Surya (the sun god). These three statues are small and were probably imported by Indian merchants.



**Figure 19:** Siva Bhairava (Siva in anger). Stone. Ht. 50 cm. Found at Wiengsa, Suratthani. Bangkok National Museum. Indian Chola style. 11th - 12th century A.D.

One should also mention at the end of this article that some aspects of the Indian civilization still exist in Thailand but they have been already adopted and adapted according to the Thai taste. One can give as an example the Hindu epic, the Ramayana, which was composed in the Thai language and entitled in Thai "Ramakien (Ramakirti)". We have both the mask dance and the puppet show portraying this story (fig. 20).





**Figure 20:** Puppets showing the story of Ramakien (Ramayana). Bangkok National Museum. Bangkok style. 19th century A.D.

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