South and Southeast Asian Sculpture
7th–9th Century

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1 Jina Rishabhanatha. India, probably Bihar. 7th century. Chlorite. Height 66 cm. Purchased with a gift from Steven M. Kossak, B.A. 1972, 2000.36.1
THE PERIOD between the 7th and the 10th century, which saw the rise of regional polities throughout South and Southeast Asia, was characterised by innovations in religious imagery and the emergence of both pan-regional and localised artistic traditions. The powerful, youthful torso, depicted in a 7th century rendering of the Jina Rishabhanatha (1), typifies renderings of deities in all Indic religions. Rishabhanatha is the first of the twenty-three Jinas (or tirthankaras) thought to have crossed the torrent or rebirth before Vardhamana Mahavira (circa 599–572 BC) formalised the religion of Jainism. Stressing asceticism and renunciation, Jainism shares the Buddhist and Hindu emphasis on liberation, or escaping from the torrent of life and death that is the fate of sentient beings. Unlike Buddhism, which had spread throughout Asia by the 6th century, or Hinduism, practised in Southeast Asia, Jainism did not travel beyond India, partially the result of a distaste for proselytising.

Rishabhanatha, who is also known as the “lord of the bulls”, is identified by the two bulls represented on the base of the sculpture to either side of a wheel, a symbol of teaching in both Jainism and Buddhism. He sits in a posture indicative of meditation, holds his hands on his lap in a gesture that also refers to meditation, and has downcast eyes. Rishabhanatha is nude or sky-clad, a reference to both certain Jain practices and to his complete detachment from the world. His long hair, gathered in a top-knot, falls in curls above the shoulders. He sits beneath a parasol on a square throne decorated with pearls or jewels. A small attendant flies above his head at the right.

Rishabhanatha’s short torso, long legs and arms, and large hands echo the treatment of the Buddha (2) and other deities that developed in north India during the rule of the powerful Gupta dynasty (320–600). His round face, with its plump features, straight hairline and large square ears, also parallels artistic traditions from that time. The sculpture is carved from black chlorite, a type of stone more commonly found in the north-east,¹ and is a rare example of an early religious image from that part of India.²

The short torso, long legs and arms, of an 8th century

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²Another early example from around the same period that was made using the same stone is a sculpture of the Hindu god Vishnu in the collection of the Asia Society Museum. For an illustration, see Denise Patry Leidy, *Treasures of Asian Art: The Asia Society’s Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection*, New York: Abbeville Press, 1994, fig. 11.
sculpture of Vishnu (3) also derive from idioms first developed under the Guptas. The four-armed god stands in his characteristic frontal rendering and holds a conch and a wheel, two of his attributes. He wears a crown, a necklace and armlets. A large beaded halo encircles his head. While the style of the crown and the beading appear earlier, the square face and strong features, particularly the large almond-shaped eyes, characterise works of art produced in the Kashmir region during the rule of the Karkota dynasty (circa 625–855). The stylised curls of the hair and the geometric rendering of the ends of the sash over the long sarong are also typical of works of art made in the region from the 7th to the 10th century.

The leaner proportions and oval face depicted in a sculpture of the Buddhist goddess Tara (4), identified by the blue lotus in her lowered left hand, illustrate the reworkings of the Gupta idiom in Nepal and other north-eastern centres in the 9th and 10th centuries. The thumb and forefinger of Tara's right hand grasp a small round object, presumably a medicinal fruit. She stands before an oval mandorla, defined by pearls or jewels, and is encircled by flames. Tara is one of several goddesses incorporated into Buddhism, as both independent deities and as attendants, between the 5th and the 8th century as part of the innovations in practice that led to the development of traditions now classified as tantric. She can take multiple forms. In her two-armed manifestation, she is worshiped as the green Tara, a saviour from a group of eight perils that includes demons, lions, bandits, stampeding elephants, poisonous snakes, floods, fires and being imprisoned in foreign lands.

The angular physique and features, shown on a small bronze sculpture of Shiva and Parvati (5), illustrate the further development of north-eastern styles in the 10th and 11th centuries, particularly during the rule of the powerful Pala kingdom (circa 750–1100) centred in Bihar and Bengal provinces. Images in which Shiva embraces Parvati as she sits on his knee, accompanied by their two children, Ganesh at the right and Kartikeya to the left, are termed Uma-Maheshvara, a reference to avatars of the two deities. The couple, encircled by an oval mandorla, sit on a two-tiered lotus. A bull and a lion, their respective mounts, and a small kneeling figure of a donor attend them. They both wear sarong-like garments with elaborate belts as well as earrings, a necklace, and bracelets. Shiva's long hair is gathered into a braided topknot, a coiffure known as a jatamukuta that alludes to his ascetic nature.

Although more often used in representations of Hindu gods, the jatamukuta also appears in depictions of bodhisattvas, particularly Avalokiteshvara in India,4 and Avalokiteshvara and Maitreya in Southeast Asia during the 7th, 8th and 9th centuries.5 It is worn, for example, by a 9th century bronze sculpture of Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (6) identified by the image of Buddha Amitabha on his head, and the lotus held in his central left hand. Another hand holds a ritual object, and a third a rosary.

The rigid posture of the bodhisattva and his multiple arms illustrate iconographic changes first recorded (or preserved) in Indian cave temples, such as those at Aurangabad (7) in the 6th and the 7th century, as does the representation of bodhisattvas as ascetics with long matted hair, scant clothing and no jewellery. This sculpture of Avalokiteshvara wears a diadem around his head and has no additional adornments, but has an antelope skin over his left shoulder and a tiger skin wrapped around his waist. Animal skins are longstanding Indic symbols for ascetic practices and their use, as well as that of long matted hair, in representations of bodhisattvas from the 7th to the 10th century suggest that such renunciants practices had become more valued within Buddhist traditions at that time.6 The
appearance of ascetic or renunciant bodhisattvas in the visual arts, as well as that of goddesses such as Tara, illustrate some of the changes in practice embedded in the development and spread of the early esoteric traditions that contributed to the coalescence of tantric Buddhism.

5 Shiva and Parvati as Uma-Maheshvara. India, Bihar or Bengal. Pala period (circa 750–1100), late 10th–11th century. Bronze. Height 13 cm. Gift of Michael de Havenon, B.A. 1962 and Georgia de Havenon, 2017.53.2a-b


7 Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara with four arms, detail from Cave 9. India, Maharashtra province, Aurangabad cave-temples. 6th–7th century

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Maritime trade played a significant role in the transmission of Buddhist practices and imagery during the period from the 7th to the 10th century. Economic, political and cultural ties between polities, such as the Pala kingdom, with access to the Bay of Bengal, and burgeoning Southeast Asian centres, such as that of Srivijaya (7th–13th century), based in the Malacca and Sunda straits, also facilitated the travel of pilgrim monks. The wide-ranging voyages of the Indian master, Vajrabodhi (671–741), his disciple Amoghavajra (705–774), the Chinese monk Yijing (635–713) and others, contributed significantly to the rapid dissemination of new, and often esoteric, practices throughout Asia.

Features on this sculpture, such as the Avalokiteshvara's slightly awkward pose, his ovoid face, broad nose, slight smile and large belt buckle, show parallels to Buddhist sculptures cast in Sumatra during the rule of the enigmatic kingdom of Srivijaya. One of the most powerful polities in Southeast Asia from the 7th to the 9th century, and a stopping point for pilgrims travelling between India and China, the maritime-based Srivijaya had centres near both the city of Palembang in Sumatra and that of Chaïya on the Malay Peninsula. Both regions produced local variants of Indic styles and iconographies that were circulating in Southeast Asia at the time.

The rulers of Srivijaya, a dynasty known as the Sailendras, also controlled parts of central Java from the 7th to the 10th century, spurring the construction of monuments such as the great Borobudur and other sites on the Kedu Plain. A four-armed Javanese representation of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (8) shares the Indian-inspired short torso and long legs and arms shown on the sculpture from Sumatra discussed above. Both the Javanese and the Sumatran bodhisattvas wear the hair in a long matted topknot that falls across their shoulders. Both bodhisattvas stand on lotus-shaped bases. Both wear a long skirt and have diadems with raised panels, however, that from Java is thicker and more elegantly embellished. The Javanese Avalokiteshvara, who holds a lotus and a rosary in his two upraised hands, also wears an elaborate necklace, armlets, bracelets and a jewelled belt. Both the face and the physique of the Javanese bodhisattva are fuller and rounder than those of that cast on the island of Sumatra, and the depiction of his clothing and jewellery is more detailed.

Rounded faces and features, and the meticulous rendering of clothing, are also seen in the sculptural reliefs that fill the surface of the Borobudur (9), and in Hindu sculptures produced in the region at the same time. While the relationship between Srivijayan kings responsible for the construction of Buddhist monuments and other rulers in
central Java, who practised Hinduism, remains unclear, the strong stylistic similarities between works of art representing both Buddhist and Hindu gods in the region suggest that these polities may have patronised the same workshops or artists.

A sculpture, depicting Parvati in her manifestation as Durga (10), shares the rounded face and physique seen on the Javanese sculpture of Avalokiteshvara discussed above. Durga, shown in her manifestation as the slayer of the buffalo demon Mahisha, or Mahishasuramadini, grasps the tale of the demon in her lowermost right hand, and the hair of his demonic form, emerging from the animal, in her right. The other six of her eight arms hold implements, some of which, such as the sword at her right and the arrow at the left, illustrate her embodiment of the powers of other gods, such as Vishnu and Shiva respectively. Because of her incorporation of these powers, Durga was able to defeat the powerful demon Mahisha when other gods had failed.

The extra braids, looping at the side in her coiffure, parallel those found in that of the Javanese Avalokiteshvara discussed above. She wears a diadem with ornamental panels, two necklaces, armlets, bracelets, anklets, an elegant belt, and two complicated sashes. The style of beading on some of the jewellery parallels that found on gold necklaces (11) and other adornments used by elite individuals in Java from the 3rd to the 10th century.\(^6\)

Gold, not found in Java, was imported to make jewellery and other adornments, and also woven into clothing, particularly that worn during common rites such as marriages, funerals and promotion to higher status. Gold ornaments also embellished religious sculptures. A large gold cover (12), either the top of a crown or an adornment for a statue, is strikingly similar to the depiction of the headdress worn by a bronze sculpture of a seated Buddha (13). Both are conical in shape, and covered with the snail shell-shaped curls that are one of the physical marks of an enlightened being, or Buddha. Both have a round element supporting the three finials at the top; that on the gold ornament is crystal.

The Buddha sits on a lotus base set on a rectangular base, He wears a large monastic shawl that falls from his left shoulder and leaves the right bare. He holds his left hand in a meditative position, and his right raised with the forefinger and thumb touching, a gesture symbolic of teaching, known as the vajra mudra. His physique and face are broader than those of the Javanese Avalokiteshvara and Durga, discussed earlier, and his features are more prominent, as is his navel, characteristics that help date this sculpture to the late 9th or the 10th century.

These features, and the thick snail shell curls, are also found in the gold sculpture of a standing Buddha that is the centre of a rare altarpiece (14), most likely used for personal devotion. The Buddha wears a monastic shawl that covers both shoulders, stands within an oval mandorla, and has a halo. His raised right hand displays the gesture of teaching, and he holds the edges of his shawl in the left, an artistic device that can also be traced to the Gupta period in India.

The gold Buddha and his attendant bronze bodhisattvas were cast separately prior to the assembling of the altarpiece (15). The two bodhisattvas are distinguished from one another by their clothing and hairstyles, and by the attributes that they hold. That to the Buddha’s left appears to wear a cap over his head, has flower-shaped armlets, and a shorter garment that wraps around his waist and falls in folds. The vajra, a type of ritual implement, in his upraised right hand identifies him as the Bodhisattva Vajrapani, one of the earliest bodhisattvas represented in the visual arts who served initially as a protector of this Historical Buddha Shakyamuni. Over time, Vajrapani, who reappears as an important figure in India in the 6th and 7th centuries, became an emblem of esoteric knowledge and a revealer of tantric texts. The bodhisattva at the Buddha’s right has matted hair, a longer skirt, and holds a lotus in his upraised left hand, a symbol of padmapani, or the lotus-bearing bodhisattva, one of the many forms of the


Base of (14)
Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. Groupings of a Buddha with the bodhisattvas Vajrapani and Avalokiteshvara, found in India in the 6th and 7th centuries, particularly in cave temples such as those at Aurangabad, were also important in Java during the 8th to the 10th century, a possible reflection of burgeoning esoteric practices at that time.

A small gold image of Avalokiteshvara (16), also identified by a lotus at the right, is the centre of a small devotional piece that also combines gold and bronze. The bodhisattva sits on a round cushion with his left leg crossed in his lap, and his pendant right leg supported by a lotus, a posture symbolic of royal ease. Two lions decorate his throne and he sits against a throne back with round columns and the heads of mythical creatures, known as makaras, facing outwards. An oval halo and flames encircle his head. As was the case with the altarpiece discussed above, the gilt bronze throne back was fabricated separately from the base, and the remains of an attachment for a parasol (17) are visible at the back.

Avalokiteshvara's broad physique and features, which also date this sculpture to the late 9th or the 10th century, illustrate a regional Javanese reinterpretation of the idealised forms used for representations of Buddhist and Hindu deities throughout all of Asia. It is interesting to note, however, that features such as the cushion upon which the Buddha sits, and the square throne back with makara head-shaped finials can ultimately be traced to 4th to the 6th century Indian traditions, a seminal period for the development of the visual idioms that served as the basis for later South and Southeast Asian sculpture.

11 An example in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (accession number 2004.259) can be viewed on The Met’s website.
12 The Sarnath Buddha, the most famous Indian sculpture of the Gupta period, also sits before a square throne back with makara head finials. For an illustration, see Susan L. and John C. Huntington, *The Art of Ancient India*, New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1985, fig. 10.2.