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Reginald Le May
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A CONCISE HISTORY OF
BUDDHIST ART IN SIAM



Limestone Head of Buddha, from Lopburi.
Môn-Gupta type. *Author's Collection.*

A CONCISE HISTORY
OF
BUDDHIST ART IN SIAM

by
REGINALD LE MAY
Ph.D (Cantab.)
*Late Economic Adviser to the
Siamese Government*

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TO THE SIAMESE PEOPLE
in grateful remembrance of
many happy years spent in
their beautiful country

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FOREWORD

THESE are few of those who are interested in the cultural history of the Middle and Far East who will not give a warm welcome to this latest book of Dr le May, which furnishes us for the first time with a connected and comprehensive account of the art of Siam, and has many sidelights also to throw on the intimately connected arts of India, Burma, Cambodia and other neighbouring countries. The subjects of Siamese art and Siamese history have received attention from not a few distinguished writers, and to these Dr le May tenders full acknowledgement, those to whom he is specially indebted being the French savants, Pelliot, de Lajonquière, Parmentier, Claeys and, above all, Cœdès, of whose brilliant labours it would be difficult to speak in overstrained praise. But with all the valuable help afforded by these scholars in connexion with different phases of the subject, the task before Dr le May has been unusually complex and difficult: for, on the one hand, most of the history of Siam is still so wrapped in obscurity that it is impossible to trace with any degree of accuracy the racial and dynastic changes which have left their impress on the national culture; on the other, the art of Siam was for so long dependent for its inspiration on outside countries, that it seldom exhibits a markedly original and distinctive character of its own, and its historian, therefore, has more often than not to seek for the solution of his problems elsewhere than in Siam itself.

This dependence on foreign, and particularly on Indian, teaching is, of course, useful to the historian, in that it provides him with a variety of chronological data which would otherwise be lacking; but when, as in Siam, the various streams of foreign influence overlap one another or operate concurrently in different parts of the country, the difficulty of tracing out their several courses seems at times well nigh insuperable. That out of all this complexity Dr le May has succeeded in putting together a reasoned and convincing account of Siamese art over a period of some 1500 years is an achievement for which everyone labouring in the field of Indian and Indonesian studies will be sincerely grateful; and their gratitude to him will be all the greater because of the eminently sane and temperate language in which he expresses himself. The cause of Indian art, as is well known, has suffered much from the hysterical outpourings of some of its critics, and it is a relief, therefore, to find in Dr le May a writer of restrained and well-balanced judgment, who, like Dr Coomaraswamy (whom he quotes with just approval), can express his admiration for a work of art without going into ecstasies over its supposed cosmic or transcendental qualities.

MB

b

In a pioneer work such as this, particularly in one covering so large a field, there must necessarily be many points inviting controversy; indeed, there are several relating to Indian art and architecture on which I myself hope elsewhere to offer some remarks; and doubtless there are others connected with Burmese, Cambodian and Javanese archaeology which may provoke discussion among specialists in those fields. As time goes on, too, we may be sure that exploration among the ruined cities and temples of Siam, which has hardly yet begun, will throw new light on many problems of her history and art. But whatever fresh discoveries the future may bring forth, and however much the story of Siamese art may be elaborated, we can rest assured that the foundations of that story have been well and truly laid by Dr le May, and that no material disturbance of them is ever likely to be needed.

May I add that, though I have devoted a lifetime to the study of Indian art, the reading of this book has helped me to realize more than ever its amazingly vital and flexible character. Whatever may be thought of the relative merits of Greek and Indian art—a subject on which the author has something to say in the first chapter of this book—it must be admitted that they had this much, at least, in common: that they could adapt themselves to suit the needs of every country, race and religion with which they came into contact. To know Indian art in India alone, is to know but half its story. To apprehend it to the full, we must follow it, in the wake of Buddhism, to Central Asia, China and Japan; we must watch it assuming new forms and breaking into new beauties as it spreads over Tibet and Burma and Siam; we must gaze in awe at the unexampled grandeur of its creations in Cambodia and Java. In each of these countries Indian art encounters a different racial genius, a different local environment, and under their modifying influence it takes on a different garb. Therefore the art of each and every one of these countries is complementary to the rest and a knowledge of each, such as this book provides, is indispensable to our understanding of the whole.

JOHN MARSHALL

PREFACE

THE aim of the present volume is to give a connected history of the different forms of Buddhist Art which have flourished in Siam from the early years of the Christian era up to the end of the sixteenth century.

The only works known to me which have hitherto been published dealing specifically with this subject are two: the first in English entitled *Sculpture in Siam* by Herr Alfred Salmony, formerly Director of the Far Eastern Museum at Cologne, and the second in French entitled *Les Collections Archéologiques du Musée National de Bangkok* by Professor Georges Cœdès, formerly Secretary-General of the Royal Institute of Siam and now Director of the École Française d'Extrême-Orient at Hanoi, French Indo-China. The first of these works, *Sculpture in Siam*, appeared in 1925, and, although no doubt praiseworthy as a first brief attempt to shed some light on a little known subject, has unfortunately, owing to an insufficiency of data, confused the problems at issue, which are exceedingly complex; on the other hand, Professor Cœdès' volume on the Siamese National Museum, although only a monograph, has been of inestimable value in indicating the lines most profitable for research, and I owe him a debt of gratitude which I have acknowledged with pleasure in the work itself.

Now, I am no "jargonneur" and those who look in this work for the jargon of many modern writers on art will be disappointed. But I am profoundly interested in all forms of art, and I set myself the task of trying to explain this one phase of Eastern art in simple language, because, after twenty-five years' residence in the East, I believe that no one, whether Western or Eastern, can have any true knowledge of the basis of Art itself until he has absorbed the underlying concepts of Eastern art. This is perhaps "a hard saying", but I am convinced that it is true, and the urge to write this work has been reinforced, since my return to Europe in 1933, by the widespread ignorance of, and indifference to, Eastern art which I have found among many of the established artists in England to-day.

Fortunately, there are signs of an awakening among the younger generation of artists to the importance of studying Eastern art forms, without attempting to imitate them slavishly, and this has encouraged me to persevere in a task which might otherwise have appeared hopeless.

As the origins of all the forms of Buddhist Art found in Siam are to be sought in India (and Ceylon), it is essential to obtain a thorough knowledge of Indian Buddhist art as a groundwork for study, and I have thought it best, therefore, to divide my bibliography of works consulted, which runs to some hundred and

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seventy-five in number, into two main categories, namely (*a*) GENERAL, in which are listed all those works dealing with Indian and Sinhalese art which I consider suitable for study, and (*b*) SPECIAL, which contains those works actually bearing directly on art forms found in Siam. Where any doubt has arisen as to the category in which a volume should be included, I have placed it in the second. To these two lists a third has been added, giving the names of the principal Journals dealing with Far Eastern Art. Naturally I do not claim that the bibliography is complete, but I hope that no serious omission has been made from the second, or Special, list given.

The text of this volume is accompanied by 80 plates, containing 208 photographs, selected to illustrate the different phases through which the art forms in Siam have passed, and containing examples from India, Ceylon, Burma and Cambodia for purposes of comparison.

Two maps are also attached, the first designed to show the relations and sea-routes between India and the Indo-Chinese Peninsula, and the second showing Siam and the adjoining countries. Every place mentioned in this work is included in one or other of these two maps.

The question of the transliteration of Siamese words and names has been for many years, and still is, a controversial one, and until a suitable system has been evolved and universally accepted, I have thought it best to use as phonetic a system as possible. For the transliteration of Chinese names I have used the Wade system, and I am greatly indebted to Professor Ellis H. Minns, Litt.D., F.S.A., Disney Professor of Archaeology in the University of Cambridge, not only for his invaluable help in this regard but also for much useful criticism of the body of the work.

My thanks are also due to the Master and Fellows of Pembroke College, Cambridge, for receiving me as a member of their ancient and renowned college, and for making my stay in Cambridge such a happy one.

I should also like to express my warm thanks to Mr E. J. Thomas, Under-Librarian of the University Library at Cambridge, and the chief authority on Buddhism in England, for allowing me access at all times to his vast stores of knowledge of Indian life and thought. Both he, and Dr Perceval Yetts, O.B.E., Professor of Chinese Art at the Courtauld Institute, London, to whom I am also much indebted, have examined the whole work thoroughly and made a number of valuable criticisms and suggestions. I must also not omit to mention Prof. G. H. Luce of Rangoon University both for the interest he has shown in this work and for the help he has given me concerning ancient Burmese history.

The illustrations contained in this volume have been drawn from a variety of sources, and I wish to offer my grateful thanks to the following authorities,

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Societies, Journals, and individual owners for their courtesy in granting me permission to publish them:

- The Siam Society, Bangkok: Figs. 1, 2, 3, 6, 68, 69, 70, 167, 168, 196, 197.
- The Royal Institute, Bangkok: Figs. 4, 13, 14, 17, 18, 21, 22, 25, 27, 31(A) and (B), 32, 34, 39, 40, 43, 44, 45, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 64, 65, 85, 92, 112, 115, 117, 118, 129, 130, 131, 144, 145.
- The Director of the École Française d'Extrême-Orient, Hanoi: Figs. 5, 59, 60, 61, 62, 66, 108, 152, 160.
- The Trustees of the British Museum: Figs. 15, 16, 110, 121, 124.
- The Director of the Pnompenh Museum, Cambodia: Figs. 19, 20, 46, 47, 80, 88.
- Major Erik Seidenfaden: Figs. 23(A) and (B), 36, 37, 38, 102, 159, 161, 162, 194, 195.
- The Burlington Magazine*: Figs. 125, 149, 155, 188.
- The India Society (*Indian Art and Letters*): Figs. 29, 30, 114, 147, 157, 171, 183.
- The Burlington Magazine* and the India Society (combined): Figs. 24, 77, 81, 175, 200.
- Dr H. G. Quaritch Wales: Figs. 41, 42.
- Mr H. Foster Pegg: Figs. 96, 98, 135, 136, 138.
- Rev. Kenneth E. Wells: Figs. 101, 103, 104, 105.
- Mr E. W. Hutchinson: Figs. 106, 107, 119, 123, 126, 153.
- The Secretary of State for India: Figs. 111, 116, 120.
- Mr Gunnar Seidenfaden: Figs. 127, 128, 154.
- Mr S. Paranavitana (Colombo Museum): Figs. 132, 133, 134.
- Dr A. K. Coomaraswamy: Figs. 139, 140.
- Mr K. de B. Codrington: Fig. 63.
- Messrs R. Lenz and Co., Bangkok: Figs. 71, 72, 73.
- The Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington: Figs. 84, 204, 205.
- Professor Georges Coëdès: Figs. 169, 170, 187, 203.
- Rt. Hon. Lord Lee of Fareham: Fig. 174.
- Messrs E. W. Heffer and Sons, Cambridge: Figs. 158, 163, 164, 165.

The remaining illustrations, with the exception of those taken from the book published by the late Nai Hong Navanagruha of Bangkok (which I have acknowledged in the text), were supplied by myself. All the photographic reproductions required were executed by Messrs Kidd and Baker of Cambridge.

Finally I must express my keen sense of obligation to Sir John Marshall, Kt., C.I.E., Litt.D., F.B.A., F.S.A., late Director of the Archaeological Survey of India, first, for his kindness in writing a Foreword to this volume; secondly, for his help in transliterating Sanskrit names, and, thirdly, for certain valuable criticisms. I have fortunately no need to labour insistence on his suitability for the task, and I have reason to hope that, whatever my own shortcomings may be, with him as my sponsor, this work will be assured of a welcome in all Eastern art circles.

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“The extensive and long-continued emigration from India to the Far East—including Pegu, Siam and Cambodia on the mainland, with Java, Sumatra, Bali and Borneo among the islands of the Malay Archipelago—. . .and the consequent establishment of Indian institutions and art in the countries named constitute one of the darkest mysteries of history.

“The reality of the debt due to India by those distant lands is attested abundantly by material remains, . . . by Chinese history and by numerous traditions preserved in India, Pegu, Siam and the Archipelago. But when the attempt is made to transmute vague, conflicting traditions and imperfectly known archaeological facts into orderly history, the difficulties in the way of success appear to be largely insurmountable.”

VINCENT SMITH, *History of Fine Arts in India and Ceylon* (1911), p. 259.