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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.

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

## PREFACE

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,

## PREFACE

xi

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.  
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*The Burlington Magazine* and the India Society (combined): Figs. 24, 77, 81, 175, 200.  
 Dr H. G. Quaritch Wales: Figs. 41, 42.  
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 Mr S. Paranavitana (Colombo Museum): Figs. 132, 133, 134.  
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 Mr K. de B. Codrington: Fig. 63.  
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 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.

REGINALD LE MAY

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## CONTENTS

LIMESTONE HEAD OF BUDDHA (Môn Type)	<i>frontispiece</i>
FOREWORD, by SIR JOHN MARSHALL, Kt., C.I.E., Litt.D., F.B.A., F.S.A.	<i>page vii</i>
PREFACE	ix
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	xv
<i>Chapter I</i> Introductory	1
II The Different Schools of Art in Siam	13
III The Dvāravatī (Môn-Indian) Period in Siam	21
IV The Kingdom of Çrīvijaya and the Indo-Javanese School	35
V Funan, and the Khmer Period in Siam	50
VI The Khmer Period in Siam (continued)	67
VII The Origins of the Tai and Relations with Burma	82
VIII Further Relations with Burma and India, and the Rise of the Chiengsen School	97
IX The Rise of the Tai in Siam and the Origin of the Suk'ōt'ai School	109
X The Suk'ōt'ai School	120
XI The Schools of U-T'ong, Lopburi (Tai) and Ayudhya	135
BIBLIOGRAPHY: A. General	151
B. Special	152
C. List of Journals dealing with Far Eastern Art	155
INDEX	159
TWO MAPS: (1) showing relations and sea-routes between India and the Indo-Chinese Peninsula	
(2) showing Siam and the adjoining countries	<i>following p. 166</i>
also available for download at <a href="http://www.cambridge.org/9781107619463">www.cambridge.org/9781107619463</a>	
ILLUSTRATIONS	<i>at end</i>

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Reginald Le May  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

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## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

### FIG.

1. Excavations at Pong Tük. Steps of Sanctuary.
2. Excavations at Pong Tük. Plinth of Sanctuary.
3. Bronze Buddha (standing), Amarāvati type. From Pong Tük. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)
4. Bronze Buddha (standing), Amarāvati type. From North-east Siam. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)
5. Bronze Buddha (standing), Amarāvati type. From Dong Dūang, Annam. (École Française.)
6. Bronze Buddha (standing), Gupta style but locally made. From Pong Tük. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)
7. Bronze Buddha (seated with halo), origin unknown (? North-east India). Found in Siam. (Priv. Coll. Bangkok.)
8. Bronze Buddha (seated), origin unknown (? Ceylon). Found in Siam. (Priv. Coll. Bangkok.)
9. Bronze Buddha (seated), origin unknown (? Kāngra, India). Found in Siam. (Priv. Coll. Bangkok.)
10. Bronze Buddha (seated), origin unknown. Found in Siam. (Priv. Coll. Bangkok.)
11. Bronze Buddha (seated), origin unknown. Found in Siam. (Priv. Coll. Bangkok.)
12. Bronze Buddha (seated), origin unknown (probably Pagān). Found in Siam. (Priv. Coll. Bangkok.)
13. Bronze Buddha (seated in "European" fashion, with halo, on throne decorated with figures), origin unknown. Found in Siam. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)
14. Bronze Buddha (seated cross-legged on lotus-throne with halo and attendants), origin unknown (? North-east India). Found in Siam. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)
15. Stone Buddha (seated in "European" fashion, with halo), Gupta type. From India. (Brit. Mus.)
16. Stone Buddha (standing, with halo), Gupta type. From India. (Brit. Mus.)
17. Stone Buddha (standing), Dvāravatī-Gupta (Môn) type. Outside Temple of Benchamabopit, Bangkok.
18. Stone Buddha (standing), Dvāravatī-Gupta (Môn) type. Outside Temple of Benchamabopit, Bangkok.
19. Stone Buddha (standing), pre-Angkor type. From Angkor Borei, South Cambodia. (Pnompenh Mus.)
20. Stone Buddha (seated), pre-Angkor type. From Angkor Borei, South Cambodia. (Pnompenh Mus.)
21. Stone Wheel of the Law, Dvāravatī (Môn) type. From P'rapatom. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)
22. Stone Deer (representing the Buddha), Dvāravatī (Môn) type. From P'rapatom. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)

- 23 (A). *Stūpa* at P'rapatom, 380 feet high, as restored by King Mongkut.  
 23 (B). *Stūpa* at P'rapatom, 380 feet high, as seen at the present day.  
 24. Stone Head of the Buddha, Dvāravatī (Môn) type. From P'rapatom. (Author's Coll.)  
 25. Stone Buddha (standing), Dvāravatī (Môn) type. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)  
 26 (A). Stone Head of Buddha, Dvāravatī (Môn) type. Front view. (Author's Coll.)  
 26 (B). Stone Head of Buddha, Dvāravatī (Môn) type. Side view. (Author's Coll.)  
 27. Stone *Stela*, depicting Miracle of Srāvastī, Dvāravatī (Môn) type. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)  
 28. Stone *Stela*, depicting Buddha with disciples on Rāhu, Dvāravatī (Môn) type. (Priv. Coll. Bangkok.)  
 29. Stone Head of Buddha, Dvāravatī (Môn) type. (Author's Coll.)  
 30. Stucco Mask of Buddha, Dvāravatī (Môn) type. From P'rapatom. (Author's Coll.)  
 31 (A). Terra-cotta Head of Buddha, Dvāravatī (Môn) type. From P'rapatom. Front view. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)  
 31 (B). Terra-cotta Head of Buddha, Dvāravatī (Môn) type. From P'rapatom. Side view. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)  
 32. Stone Slab, depicting the Buddha under seven heads of Nāga King, Dvāravatī (Môn) type. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)  
 33. Bronze Buddha (standing), Dvāravatī (Môn) type. (Priv. Coll. Bangkok.)  
 34. Bronze Buddha (seated cross-legged), Dvāravatī (Môn) type. From North-east Siam. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)  
 35. Bronze Buddha (seated), late Dvāravatī (Môn) type. (Author's Coll.)  
 36. Temple of Na P'ra Tāt, in Javanese style, at Jaya, South Siam.  
 37. *Bōt* (Consecrated Hall) of Temple of Na P'ra Tāt, in Tai style, at Nakon Sritammarāt, South Siam.  
 38. *Stūpa*, in Sinhalese style, of Temple of Na P'ra Tāt at Nakon Sritammarāt, South Siam.  
 39. Stone Viṣṇu (standing), pre-Khmer type. From South Siam. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)  
 40. Bronze Head and Torso of Lokeṣvara, Pāla style. From Jaya, South Siam. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)  
 41. Three stone Deities, two male and one female, Pallavan style, *in situ* near Takuapā, South Siam.  
 42. Female Deity (right figure in No. 41).  
 43. Stone Lokeṣvara, possibly from Buddh Gayā, Pāla type. From South Siam. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)  
 44. Bronze Lokeṣvara (standing), Pāla style. From South Siam. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)  
 45. Bronze Buddha, seated on Nāga King, Môn-Khmer type. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)  
 46. Stone Hari-Hara (Viṣṇu and Çiva in one), standing, pre-Angkor type. From Cambodia. (Pnompenh Mus.)  
 47. Stone Hari-Hara, standing, with arch-frame, pre-Angkor type. From Cambodia. (Pnompenh Mus.)

## ILLUSTRATIONS

xvii

48. Stone Viṣṇu, standing, pre-Khmer type. From Vieng Sra, South Siam. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)
49. Stone Ardhanari (Çiva and Umā in one), seated, pre-Khmer type. From North-east Siam. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)
50. Stone Head and Torso of Yakṣi, pre-Khmer type. From Çrīdeb, North-east Siam. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)
51. Stone Viṣṇu, standing, pre-Khmer type. From Çrīdeb, North-east Siam. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)
52. Stone Torso of Deity, pre-Khmer type. From Çrīdeb, North-east Siam. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)
53. Stone Inscription (in Sanskrit), fifth to sixth century A.D. From Çrīdeb, North-east Siam. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)
54. Buddha, with an Apsaras above on each side and devotees below. Carving on Brick at Tāt Panom, North-east Siam.
55. Elephant with Rider. Carving on Brick at Tāt Panom, North-east Siam.
56. Horse, galloping, with Rider. Carving on Brick at Tāt Panom, North-east Siam.
57. Elephant with Rider. Carving on Brick at Tāt Panom, North-east Siam.
58. Men, with umbrellas, in Procession. Carving on Brick at Tāt Panom, North-east Siam.
59. The Temple of Angkor, aerial view.
60. Sanctuary (one of three) at Banteai Srei, Cambodia, tenth century A.D., as now restored.
61. Stone Pediment at Banteai Srei.
62. Stone Pediment at Banteai Srei, depicting fight between two Asuras for the Apsaras, Tillottamā.
63. Brick Sanctuary at Kharod, Central Provinces, India, late Gupta type.
64. Stone Buddha (seated), Khmer type. From Pimai, North-east Siam. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)
65. Stone Buddha (seated), Khmer type. From Lopburi, Central Siam. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)
66. Two Stone Heads of Buddha, Khmer type. From Angkor, Cambodia, eleventh century. (École Française.)
67. Bronze Buddha (seated), Môn-Khmer type. From Lopburi. (Priv. Coll. Bangkok.)
68. Stone *Stela*, depicting woman with attendants, Khmer type. From Panom Rung, North-east Siam.
69. Ruins of Khmer Temple (or Palace) at Panom Rung. Exterior view.
70. Ruins of Khmer Temple (or Palace) at Panom Rung. Interior view.
71. Stone Lintel, depicting Buddha with attendants. Over doorway of Khmer Sanctuary at Pimai, North-east Siam.
72. Stone Lintel, depicting Mahāyānist Deity. Over doorway of Khmer Sanctuary at Pimai, North-east Siam.
73. Stone Carving, showing details of decoration. At Khmer Temple of Pimai, North-east Siam.
74. Khmer Sanctuary in Temple of Mahā-Tāt at Lopburi, Central Siam.

c2

75. Khmer Temple of P'ra Prāng Sām Yôt at Lopburi, Central Siam.
76. Stone Buddha (seated on Nāga King), Khmer type with lacquer Tai face superimposed, in Temple of P'ra Prāng Sām Yôt, Lopburi.
77. Stone Buddha (seated on Nāga King), Khmer type with lacquer Tai face superimposed. (Author's Coll.)
78. Stone Buddha (seated on Nāga King), Khmer type with lacquer Tai face superimposed. Back view. (Author's Coll.)
79. Stone Buddha (seated), Khmer type, *in situ* at Temple of Mahā-Tāt, Lopburi, Central Siam.
80. Stone Buddha (seated), Khmer type. From Angkor (Bayon), Cambodia. (Pnompenh Mus.)
81. Stone Head of Buddha, Khmer type. From Lopburi. (Author's Coll.)
82. Stone Head of Bodhisattva, Khmer type. From Lopburi. (Author's Coll.)
83. Stone Head of Buddha, Khmer type. From Lopburi. (Author's Coll.)
84. Stone Head of Buddha, Khmer type. From Lopburi. (V. and A. Mus.)
85. Bronze Buddha (standing), late Khmer type. Outside Temple of Benchamabopit, Bangkok.
86. Bronze Buddha (seated on Nāga King), Khmer type. From Lopburi. (Author's Coll.)
87. Bronze Buddha (seated), Khmer type. (Author's Coll.)
88. Bronze Buddha (seated on Nāga King), Khmer type. From Angkor. (Pnompenh Mus.)
89. Bronze Buddha (standing), Khmer type. From Lopburi. (Priv. Coll. Bangkok.)
90. Bronze Buddha (standing), Khmer type. From Lopburi. (Priv. Coll. Bangkok.)
91. Bronze Buddha (standing), Khmer type. From Lopburi. (Priv. Coll. Bangkok.)
92. Bronze Head and Torso of Woman, Khmer type. Provenance unknown. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)
93. Temple of Çulamāni, Pitsanulōk, Khmer type. Southern Entrance.
94. Temple of Çulamāni, Pitsanulōk, Khmer type. Eastern Entrance.
95. Temple of Mahā-Tāt at Sawank'alōk, Tai-Khmer type. Sanctuary Tower.
96. Temple of Mahā-Tāt at Sawank'alōk, Tai type. Ruins of *Vihāra*.
97. Temple of Mahā-Tāt at Sawank'alōk, Môn *Stūpa*, Eastern face.
98. Temple of Mahā-Tāt at Sawank'alōk, Stone Gateway, Khmer type.
99. Stone Pillar, with stucco decoration, at Temple of Mahā-Tāt, Sawank'alōk.
100. Stone Buddha (seated on Nāga King) in niche at Temple of Mahā-Tāt, Sawank'alōk.
101. Chinese Temple at Müang Hai, north-west of Chiengrung, Yunnan.
102. Tai Temple of P'ra Sing at Chiengmai, North Siam.
103. Tai Temple near Müang Hai, west of Chiengrung, Yunnan.
104. Tai-Burmese Temple at Chiengtung, Southern Shan States.
105. *Sālā*, or resting-place, at Müang Yong, Southern Shan States.
106. Temple of Sī Liem, at Wieng Kūm-Kām near Chiengmai.
107. The Great *Stūpa* at Lamp'ūn, Tai type.
108. Temple of Kūküt, near Lamp'ūn.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

xix

109. Temple of Küküt, Lamp'un; details of Buddha images in niches.
110. Stone Buddha (seated on lotus-throne). From Buddh Gayā, Bihar. Pāla type. (Brit. Mus.)
111. Bronze Buddha (seated on lotus-throne). From Pagān, Burma. Pāla style.
112. Bronze Buddha (seated on lotus-throne), Tai (Chiengsen) type, Pāla style. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)
113. Bronze Buddha (seated on lotus-throne), Tai (Chiengsen) type, Pāla style. (Author's Coll.)
114. Bronze Head of Buddha, Tai (Chiengsen) type, Pāla style. (Author's Coll.)
115. Bronze Head of Buddha, Tai (Chiengsen) type, Pāla style. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)
116. Bronze Buddha (seated). From Pagān, Burma. Pāla style.
117. Bronze Buddha (seated), Tai (Chiengsen) type, Pāla style. In Temple of Benchama-bopit, Bangkok.
118. Bronze Buddha (seated), Tai (Chiengsen) type, Pāla style. In Temple of Benchama-bopit, Bangkok.
119. Stone Buddha (standing, with Elephant and Ānanda). Pāla type. From Buddh Gayā, Bihar. Now at Chiangmai.
120. Stone Buddha (standing, with two Elephants and two Disciples). Pāla type. From Buddh Gayā, Bihar. (Ind. Mus. Calcutta.)
121. Stone Buddha (seated on lotus-throne), decorated style. Pāla type. From Buddh Gayā, Bihar. (Brit. Mus.)
122. Bronze Buddha (seated on lotus-throne), Pāla decorated style, Tai (Lü) type. From North Siam. (Priv. Coll. Bangkok.)
123. Lacquered Earthen Buddha, Pāla decorated style, Tai type. From North Siam.
124. Stone *Stela*, depicting Pari-Nirvāna of Buddha, with disciples mourning below. Pāla type. From Buddh Gayā, Bihar. (Brit. Mus.)
125. Stone Head of Buddhist Saint, Tai (Ayudhya) type. From Cave near Chiengrai, North Siam. (Author's Coll.)
126. Temple of Chiengmān, in Chiangmai. Pagān style.
127. Temple of Chet Yôt (Seven Spires), near Chiangmai. Pagān style.
128. Buddha, in Brick and Stucco, Tai type, on exterior of Temple of Chet Yôt, Chiangmai.
129. Bronze Buddha (seated), Tai (Suk'ōt'ai) type. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)
130. Bronze Buddha (walking), Tai (Suk'ōt'ai) type. In Temple of Benchamabopit, Bangkok.
131. Bronze Buddha (seated), P'ra Sihing, Tai (Suk'ōt'ai) type. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)
132. Bronze Buddha (seated), Sinhalese type. (Colombo Mus.)
133. Stone Buddha (seated), at Anurādhapura, Ceylon.
134. Rock-hewn Buddha (seated), at Galvihāra, Polonnāruwa, Ceylon.
135. Ruins of Temple of Mahā-Tāt at old Suk'ōt'ai.
136. Stone and stucco Buddha, with Scene of Pari-Nirvāna above, Tai type. At Temple of Mahā-Tāt, old Suk'ōt'ai.
137. Ruins of Temple of Çri Chüm at old Suk'ōt'ai.
138. Façade of Temple of Çri Chüm at old Suk'ōt'ai.

139. Stone Carving with Inscription (Devadharma Jātaka), Tai type. At Temple of Çri Chūm, old Suk'ōt'ai.
140. Wall painting in Cave (Apsaras with attendant) at Sigiriya, Ceylon, fifth century.
141. Temple of Chāng Lôm (Elephant-surrounded) at old Sawank'alök.
142. Stone Buddha (seated on Nāga King), Tai (Suk'ōt'ai) type. At Temple of P'rajedi Chet Teo (Seven Rows of *Stūpas*) at old Sawank'alök.
143. Bronze Head of Buddha, found at Temple of Chāng Lôm, old Sawank'alök. Tai-Khmer type. (Author's Coll.)
144. Bronze Buddha (seated), Tai (Suk'ōt'ai) type. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)
145. Bronze Head of Buddha, Tai (Suk'ōt'ai) type. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)
146. Bronze Buddha, Tai (Suk'ōt'ai) type, in Temple of Mahā-Tāt, Pitsanulök.
147. Bronze Head of Buddha, Tai (Suk'ōt'ai) type. (Author's Coll.)
148. Bronze Head of Buddha, Tai (Suk'ōt'ai) type (modified). (Author's Coll.)
149. Bronze Buddha (walking), Tai (Suk'ōt'ai) type. (Author's Coll.)
150. Votive Tablet (probably Tin), showing Walking Buddha, Tai (Suk'ōt'ai) type. (Author's Coll.)
151. Bronze model of *Stūpa* (with Ivory Spire), Tai (Suk'ōt'ai) type (probably of Temple of Chāng Lôm). (Author's Coll.)
152. Temple of P'ra Yün (the Standing Buddha) at Lamp'ün.
153. Temple of Siriküt, near Chiengmai.
154. *Stūpa* with Buddha in ruins of the Royal Temple at Chiengsen.
155. Silver Buddha (seated), late Tai (Chiengsen) type, dug up at Chiengsen. (Author's Coll.)
156. Bronze Head of Buddha, Tai (Chiengsen-Suk'ōt'ai) type. (Author's Coll.)
157. Bronze Head of Buddha, Tai (Chiengsen-Suk'ōt'ai) type. (Author's Coll.)
158. Tai Temple at Nān.
159. *Stūpa* of Tai Temple of Cha Heng at Nān.
160. Bronze Buddha (seated), Tai (Chiengsen-Suk'ōt'ai) type. At Chiengmai.
161. Four Brick and Stucco Buddhas (seated back to back), Tai type. In Temple at Nān.
162. Carved Teak Door, facing one of the four Buddhas in Temple at Nān.
163. Tai Temple at Lampāng Lūang. General view.
164. Tai Temple at Lampāng Lūang. Front of *Vihāra*.
165. Tai Temple at Lampāng Lūang. Side view of *Vihāra*, with *Stūpa* behind.
166. Group of Buddhist Priests and Acolytes in North Siam.
167. The "Emerald" Buddha, Tai (Chiengsen) type. In the Royal Temple at Bangkok.
168. Bronze Buddha (seated), Tai (early Ayudhya) type, in imitation of Khmer. In Temple of Benchamabopit, Bangkok.
169. Stone Buddha (seated), Tai (early Ayudhya) type, in imitation of Khmer. In Temple on K'ao T'ammamūn, Supanburi district.
170. Bronze Buddha (seated), Tai (U-T'ong) type. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)
171. Bronze Head of Buddha. Khmer-Tai. First U-T'ong type. (Author's Coll.)
172. Bronze Head of Buddha. Khmer-Tai. First U-T'ong type. (Author's Coll.)

## ILLUSTRATIONS

xx

173. Bronze Head of Buddha. Khmer-Tai, with flame-top. Second U-T'ong type. (Author's Coll.)
174. Bronze Head of Buddha. Khmer-Tai, with flame-top. Second U-T'ong type. (Lord Lee of Fareham Coll.)
175. Bronze Head of Buddha. Khmer-Tai, with flame-top (missing). Second U-T'ong type. (Author's Coll.)
176. Bronze Head of Buddha. Khmer-Tai, with flame-top (missing). Second U-T'ong type. Deep-set features. (Author's Coll.)
177. Bronze Head of Buddha. Khmer-Tai. Second U-T'ong type. Peculiar flame-top. (Author's Coll.)
178. Bronze Head of Buddha. Tai-Khmer. Third U-T'ong type. (Author's Coll.)
179. Gilt Bronze Head of Buddha. Tai-Khmer. Third U-T'ong type. (Author's Coll.)
180. Bronze Head of Buddha. Tai. Fourth U-T'ong type. (Author's Coll.)
181. Bronze Head of Buddha. Tai. Fourth U-T'ong type. (Author's Coll.)
182. Bronze Head of Buddha. Tai. Fourth U-T'ong type. (Author's Coll.)
183. Bronze Head of Buddha. Tai. Fourth U-T'ong type. (Author's Coll.)
184. Bronze Head of Buddha. Tai. Fourth U-T'ong type. (Author's Coll.)
185. Bronze Buddha (walking). Tai. Fourth U-T'ong type. (Author's Coll.)
186. Stone Head of Buddha. Tai (Lopburi) type. Khmer influence. (Author's Coll.)
187. Stone Head of Buddha. Tai (Lopburi) type. Suk'ot'ai influence. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)
188. Stone Head of Buddha. Tai (Lopburi) type. Later style. (Priv. Coll. London.)
189. Stone Head of Buddha. Tai (Lopburi) type. Last style. (Author's Coll.)
190. Ruins of Temple of Çri Sarap'et at Ayudhya.
191. Great Bronze Buddha. Tai (Ayudhya) type, near ruins of Çri Sarap'et at Ayudhya.
192. Ruined Brick and Stucco *Stūpa*. Tai (Ayudhya) type, near Temple of Mahā-Tāt at Lopburi.
193. Ruined Brick and Stucco *Stūpas*. Tai (imitation Khmer) type, at Lopburi.
194. Row of Disciples in Stucco. Tai (Ayudhya) type, on ruined brick *Stūpa* at Lopburi.
195. Ruined *Stūpa*. Tai (imitation Khmer) type, at Temple of Nakon Kosā T'ibodi, Lopburi.
196. Bronze Buddha (standing). Tai (Ayudhya) type. In Temple of Benchamabopit, Bangkok.
197. Bronze Buddha (standing). Tai (Ayudhya) type. In Temple of Benchamabopit, Bangkok.
198. Bronze Buddha (standing). Tai (Ayudhya) type. (Author's Coll.)
199. Gilt Bronze Head of Buddha. Tai (Ayudhya) type. (Author's Coll.)
200. Bronze Head of Buddha. Tai (Ayudhya) type. (Author's Coll.)
201. Bronze Head of Buddha. Tai (late Ayudhya) type. (Author's Coll.)
202. Wooden Head (lacquered) of Buddha. Tai (late Ayudhya) type. (Author's Coll.)
203. Bronze Çiva (standing). Tai (Ayudhya) type. From Kampengp'et. (Nat. Mus. Bangkok.)
204. Bronze Çiva (standing). Tai (Ayudhya) type. (V. and A. Mus.)
205. Bronze Head and Torso of (?) Vişnu. Tai (Ayudhya) type. (V. and A. Mus.)

“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.