

Theories of Buddhist Art in Thailand: a Study on Some Indian Sculptures of Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism Discovered in Thailand before Mid 10th Century A.D.¹

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Abstract:

Thailand's early sculptors had the advantage of being able to copy images brought into the country by visitors from India, where a perfection of style had been reached by the 5th century A.D. Although very little is known about the early sculptors themselves, by studying their religious sculptures can be understood the connection of Buddhism between Thailand and its origins.

The iconography of some sculptures before mid 10th century A.D. discovered in Thailand also refers the connections which linked back to Buddhism in India. We have found that between the 5th – 7th centuries A.D. Hīnayāna Buddhism from India which used the Sanskrit texts, the Mahāsaṅgika for example, was flourishing in Thailand. Later the Sukhāvātī sect of Mahāyāna Buddhism also flourished between the 6th – 8th centuries A.D. In the period of the 8th – 10th centuries A.D. there are some influences of Vajrayāna Buddhism in Thailand directly from Nālandā in India and indirectly from Java in Indonesia. This article also infers the continuity of theories of Buddhist Art history in Thailand from the traditional to the current theories which relate to many sects in Buddhism.

Key words: Art Theory, Thai Art History, Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna

Introduction

In the opinion of the National Museum Volunteers, the early sculptors of Thailand were faced with an awe-inspiring task. For it was their responsibility to capture the intangible, invisible gods and translate their power, their beauty and their spirituality into figures of stone or bronze. Fortunately, a number of guidelines existed to help them. Since most of the early images carved in the region were representations of either Hindu deities or the Buddha, the sculptors were obliged to follow certain rules which were originally devised in India, the source of both religions (N.M.V. 1995, 12).

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