

GODS OF ANGKOR

Bronzes from the
National Museum of Cambodia

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Ganesha. Cambodia, Angkor period, 13th century. Bronze. National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh.

GETTY MUSEUM PRESENTS ANCIENT CAMBODIAN BRONZE MASTERPIECES FROM THE KHMER EMPIRE

First International Exhibition to Focus Specifically on
the Skills and Achievements of Khmer Bronze Casters

Gods of Angkor: Bronzes from the National Museum of Cambodia

At the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian
Through January 23, 2011

At the J. Paul Getty Museum, Getty Center
February 22 – August 14, 2011

LOS ANGELES—Bronze (*samrit* in Khmer) is of enduring significance in Cambodian culture. A noble material, it is indicative of prosperity and success, in addition to being a hallmark of Cambodian artistic achievement. A mixture of metals consisting primarily of copper and tin, bronze was used to give form to the Hindu and Buddhist divinities worshiped in Angkor and throughout the Khmer Empire. The Cambodian mastery of the medium will be highlighted in a focused exhibition at the J. Paul Getty Museum, *Gods of Angkor: Bronzes from the National Museum of Cambodia*, on view February 22—August 14, 2011 at the Getty Center.

The ancient capital of the Khmer people at Angkor, located in northwest Cambodia, once formed the heart of a large sphere of influence that extended over much of mainland Southeast Asia. Culled entirely from the collection of the National Museum of Cambodia in Phnom Penh, *Gods of Angkor* features 26 magnificent sculptures and ritual objects. It includes bronzes created during the Angkor period (9th—15th centuries), as well as a small group of works from the pre-Angkor period and some recently excavated works. Among the Angkorian pieces are some of the finest and most beautiful Cambodian bronzes in existence.

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"We are delighted to give visitors to the Museum this rare opportunity to see these exquisite Khmer bronzes on the West Coast, particularly given the local presence of the largest Cambodian community in the United States," explains David Bomford, acting director of the J. Paul Getty Museum. "We are deeply grateful to our colleagues at the National Museum of Cambodia for lending us so many important pieces for this exhibition."

This exhibition is the result of an ongoing partnership between the Smithsonian's Freer and Sackler Galleries and the National Museum of Cambodia that began in 2003, when the National Museum approached the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C., for help in the conservation of the bronze works. In 2005, the Getty Foundation provided the support for a conservation survey of the bronzes, which had suffered due to lack of resources and years of political turmoil. During the Khmer Rouge regime in the 1970s, the museum was abandoned with much of the bronze collection left in its basement. Since the 1980s, the museum had been working to document and conserve their holdings and to enhance storage conditions, at times collaborating with international experts. Many pieces, however, had yet to be examined.

The grant from the Getty Foundation enabled the Smithsonian to have conservators survey the condition of the collection and to perform conservation treatment on the most at-risk projects, but perhaps more importantly, to help the National Museum develop a long-term strategic plan for its bronze conservation program. The greatest result of this international collaboration is the National Museum's new Metals Conservation Laboratory—the first in Cambodia. Seven of the works on view, which were discovered in 2006, are among the first bronzes conserved in the laboratory by the staff of the National Museum of Cambodia.

Some highlights of the exhibition include:

Vishnu-Vasudeva-Narayana

Angkor period, late 11th–first half of 12th century

The god Vishnu has numerous aspects, each of which has a different name. *Vishnu* is associated with the god's regency over the directions of space, symbolized by the attributes borne by the four arms. *Narayana* refers to the god as the cause of the evolution of matter and sound, as represented by the magical syllable *o* on the headdress. The garment, which gathers into a butterfly-like shape at the back, likely reflected the palace fashion of the day.

Crowned Buddha

Angkor period, 12th century

This figure was excavated in nine pieces on the grounds of the temple of Angkor Wat in 1931. Once joined, the two hands subsequently became separated from the body again; only recently were they located and reattached by staff at the National Museum's Metal Conservation Laboratory. The restoration revealed the figure's distinctive pose, with both hands gesturing the expression for "fear not." The standing, crowned Buddha in bronze was a common icon in the western territory of the expanded Khmer empire (present-day central Thailand).

Naga-protected Buddha with Avalokiteshvara and Prajnaparamita

Angkor period, late 12th-early 13th century

This triad—the cosmic Buddha protected by the serpent (Naga) and flanked by the bodhisattvas of compassion (Avalokiteshvara) and wisdom (Prajnaparamita)—was the chief icon worshiped by King Jayavarman VII. The king's appearance is known from temple reliefs and portrait sculptures, and his features are reflected in these figures of the Buddha and the Avalokiteshvara.

Shiva's bull, Nandin

Angkor period, 12th–13th century

This figure of Nandin, the bull that serves as the mount or vehicle of the god Shiva, was recovered west of Angkor Wat. At temples dedicated to Shiva, large-scale icons of Nandin were installed for worship in an anteroom or freestanding pavilion facing the central sanctuary housing Shiva's image.

Ganesha

Angkor period, 13th century

A son of Shiva, Ganesha has an elephant head on the body of a boy. In India, he is the lord of Shiva's troops and the lord of beginnings. Here Ganesha's yogic posture of meditation and the esoteric gestures of his hands suggest that he was intended to be worshiped in a religious environment with strong Tantric leanings. Secret Buddhist and Hindu rituals passed on from master to pupil, Tantric doctrines were significant in Angkor and throughout Asia at the time this figure was made.

Gods of Angkor: Bronzes from the National Museum of Cambodia is organized by the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, in collaboration with the J. Paul Getty Museum and the National Museum of Cambodia. The Getty's presentation is curated by Jeffrey Weaver, associate curator of Sculpture and Decorative Arts, the J. Paul Getty Museum, in collaboration with Michael Brand, former director of the J. Paul Getty Museum. The Sackler's presentation is co-curated by Louise Allison Cort, curator of Ceramics, and Paul Jett, head of the Department of Conservation and Scientific Research. A larger version of the exhibition is currently on view at the Sackler Gallery in Washington, D.C. through January 23, 2011, and will then travel to the J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Center, where it will be on view from February 22–August 14, 2011. The exhibition is accompanied by a 160-page illustrated exhibition catalog, which includes essays by four senior scholars illuminating the significance and development of bronze sculpture and ritual objects in the Khmer world.

About the National Museum of Cambodia

The National Museum of Cambodia was founded in 1917 in the capital city of Phnom Penh, and its distinguished building—designed by the French archaeologist George Groslier and loosely based on traditional Khmer palace architecture—was inaugurated in 1920. When Cambodia achieved independence in the early 1950s, oversight for the museum passed from the French to the Cambodian government; the first Cambodian director, however, was not appointed until 1966. The museum was closed during the Khmer Rouge era (1975–79), but the collection and the building survived that volatile period relatively intact.

Over the past 20 years, the museum has enjoyed a period of new vitality, and significant improvements have been made to its organization, operation, and physical structure. Today, the National Museum houses the world's largest collection of Khmer art from various historical periods and all regions of the country. Stone and bronze sculptures are the highlights of the collection, which has been developed through direct acquisition of objects found in the course of official surveys and excavations as well as the transfer (for safekeeping) of sculptures and other materials formerly housed at historical monuments.

Note to editors: Images available upon request.

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