Characters from the Mahabharata: The Great Chronicle of the Bharata Dynasty

Perhaps 1800–1900
Indonesia; Tegal, Central Java
Wood, cloth, and mixed media
From The Mimi and John Herbert Collection

These rod puppets (wayang golek) depict characters from the Mahabharata, an Indian epic involving the battle between the Pandava (Pandawa) brothers and their cousins the Kaurava (Kaurawa) brothers. The Mahabharata has been known for centuries in Indonesia and has been adapted and embellished there with the addition of new characters and episodes. The jesters Semar, Cepot, Petruk, and Togog are purely Javanese creations.

Note: The characters’ Indian names are followed in parentheses by their Indonesian names.
More Is More: Massing Revered Objects in a Temple

TO LEFT OF THRONE

1. **Offering container**
   - **Approx. 1875–1925**
   - **Myanmar (Burma)**
   - Bamboo with lacquer, gilding, inlaid glass, and inlaid mirrored glass
   - **Gift of George McWilliams**, 2008.92.a–c

   At important ceremonies, the Buddhist faithful in Myanmar present food and other donations to monks, sometimes in extremely elaborate containers such as this.

2. **Crowned male figure, making a gesture of respect**
   - **1850–1925**
   - **Myanmar (Burma)**
   - Wood with paint, lacquer, and gilding, and mirrored glass
   - **Gift of the Donald W. Perez Family in memory of Margaret and George W. Haldeman**, 2008.87.2

   Who is this figure, with his princely garments, posture of respect, and rather wistful expression? It must be a minor deity or celestial being of some sort because in traditional Burmese contexts mortals, even kings, were rarely represented in sculpture. He might be one of the thirty-seven nats—a group of powerful spirits who need to be pacified with offerings—but his characteristics do not match those of any of the thirty-seven as recorded in manuals.

   Other possible identities are the deity Indra, who reverently accompanies the Buddha at a number of moments in his legendary life, or one of the Four Guardian Kings of the cardinal directions.
The monk Shariputra, the chief disciple of the Buddha

Approx. 1850–1925
Myanmar (Burma)
Wood with lacquer and gilding, and colored glass
The Avery Brundage Collection, B60S599

In Myanmar (Burma) and Thailand, the Buddha is sometimes shown flanked by two of his chief disciples. In Myanmar they were often differentiated by their body positions. Both faced the Buddha, sitting respectfully with their legs to one side. Shariputra, the disciple shown here, was placed on the Buddha’s right and leaned forward as if listening attentively; the other chief disciple, on the Buddha’s left, held his hands together in reverence.

These disciples, though they were contemporaries of the historical Buddha and legendary for their piety and power, may have seemed to sculptors more approachable than the Buddha and the celestial deities. Sometimes, as here, the sculptor imparts a sense of youthful tenderness.

Sculptures such as this are difficult to date with precision, as artists continue to make them today.

Shrine

Approx. 1875–1925
Northern Thailand
Wood with lacquer and gilding, mirrored glass, plain glass, and ferrous and nonferrous metal
Gift from Doris Duke Charitable Foundation’s Southeast Asian Art Collection, 2006.27.55

Shrines like this were used to hold objects of religious reverence such as Buddha images, relics of important persons, scriptures, or other sacred objects. This shrine came to the museum empty. We have placed inside it a twentieth-century Thai urn from Thailand to give a suggestion of what it might once have contained.

The structure of the shrine is topped by several tiers of tapering roofs, a stupa-like element, and a tiered honorific parasol. The shape of this shrine and its decoration indicate that it was made in the northern region of Thailand.

Several of the roof decorations were broken and have been replicated and replaced. Following standard museum conservation practices, all the changes are documented in detail and are made to be easily reversible.
More Is More: Massing Revered Objects in a Temple

The throne shrine and the arrangement of art objects around it are meant to evoke, in a general way, the feeling of being in a Buddhist temple in Myanmar (Burma) or Thailand. In temples, the main Buddha image is often densely surrounded by all sorts of other objects from various regions and time periods, such as sculptures, offering containers, and donations from pious people, sometimes even including items like grandfather clocks.

Such an elaborate throne and Buddha image would have been an important fixture of a nineteenth-century Buddhist temple in Myanmar, and similar ones can still be seen in temples today. The significance of the crowned and bejeweled Buddha image varied in different places and periods. In the region of Thailand and Myanmar, one story explained that the Buddha manifested himself enthroned, wearing a magnificent crown and royal finery, in response to an arrogant king named Jambupati who once attempted to impress the Buddha with his grandeur. The lesson was that the grandeur of buddhahood vastly outshines that of earthly kingship.

This throne shrine and image were purchased in the 1960s by the wealthy art collector (and celebrity) Doris Duke, who assembled a huge group of Southeast Asian artworks with the intention of displaying them for the benefit of the public in a Southeast Asian cultural park. Her plans were never realized in the way she hoped, and eventually this throne and the rest of the collection ended up at Duke's estate in New Jersey, where visitors could sometimes see them. Some years after her death, many of the art objects were given to the Asian Art Museum and the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, and smaller numbers of objects to other museums around the country.

The original crown of this Buddha image disappeared long ago. The one the image now wears was made using traditional techniques and in the traditional style in 2002 by U Win Maung, an expert artisan in Mandalay, Myanmar. It was commissioned and then donated to the museum in memory of M. R. Vadhanathorn Chirapravati. The rest of the Buddha image's royal decorations appear to be original.

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Most Buddhists say that they “take refuge” in the “Three Jewels,” namely the Buddha, the teachings (dharma), and the community of monks (sangha). In this gallery we can see representations of all three: the Buddha in Buddha images, the teachings in this manuscript box that would have enclosed texts of parts of the dharma, and the monkhood in the image of the monk Shariputra, one of the Buddha’s most important disciples.

A beautifully decorated box such as this would have held a handwritten copy of sacred Buddhist texts. The long, narrow format of the text pages dictated the shape of the box.

Handwritten page of the kind that would have been housed in such a box.
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TO RIGHT OF THRONE

6  Standing crowned and bejeweled Buddha
Approx. 1850–1900
Thailand
Bronze with lacquer and gilding
Gift from Doris Duke Charitable Foundation's Southeast Asian Art Collection, 2006.27.5

In the nineteenth century, kings of Thailand commissioned large standing crowned and bejeweled Buddha images of the same type as this one, and with the hands in the same position. The royally commissioned images were set up surrounding the famous Emerald Buddha in the royal chapel in Bangkok, where they can still be seen. Their function was to commemorate specific deceased royal parents and other relatives, both male and female. Thus images like this one, which were made in large quantities in all sizes, were associated with honoring ancestors.

7  Ceremonial alms bowl with stand
Approx. 1850–1950
Myanmar (Burma)
Bamboo with lacquer and gilding, wood, and ferrous metal with mirrored and non-mirrored glass
Gift from Doris Duke Charitable Foundation's Southeast Asian Art Collection, 2006.27.107.a-e

This elaborate object would have been displayed in a Buddhist temple, perhaps having been donated by a pious person. The Buddha carried a bowl in which devoted people could give him food to sustain himself. Still today, Buddhist monks go out every morning to accept offerings of food, carrying an offering bowl of iron or sometimes ceramic.

The alms bowl is a symbol of humility and nonattachment. Here, perhaps paradoxically, a non-functional alms bowl of glass rather than a more inexpensive material is presented on an ornate, glittering stand. A donor would have felt satisfaction in honoring the Buddha’s alms bowl and its meaning with such a luxurious version.
Mythical bird-men and bird-women are among the wondrous creatures that inhabit the Eden-like Himavanta Forest of Buddhist legend. They are frequently depicted in Thai sculptures, paintings, and other mediums. Wooden figures of bird-men such as this were used in several sorts of royal ceremonies. One such statue is mentioned in the description of the coronation of King Rama IV in 1851, where it is said to have contained a relic of the Buddha. The custom of using such figures in royal ceremonies most likely went back centuries. Such statues have rarely survived, and only a handful are known. Several are in the National Museum, Bangkok.

The spire of this figure’s crown was replaced at some point, presumably in the twentieth century.