

Ceremonial Hanging (*Pidan*)

Khmer people, c. 1900

Silk, twill weave, weft ikat (*hol*)

Gift of The Christensen Fund, 2001 (11115.1)

Episodes in the life of Prince Siddhartha, the Future Buddha
“The Great Departure”

Chronicled from left to right, in an event known as the “Great Departure,” the Prince is seen leaving the family palace as an act of renouncing privileged life. He rides out on his white horse, Kanthok (Kanthaka in Pali and Sanskrit), accompanied by his squire, Channa, who holds onto the horse’s tail. The horse’s hooves are supported by the Four Gods of the East so their noise will not awaken the sleeping palace occupants. He is accompanied by the gods Indra, identified by his green body, and Brahma, who bears an offering bowl. Below that scene, the Future Buddha, having dismounted from his loyal horse Kanthok, sets him free by cutting the bridles with a sword. The animal will die of sorrow, to be reborn in Indra’s heaven.

The Prince gives up his princely attire and cuts his hair prior to becoming an ascetic. This scene is one of the most popular events of Buddhist iconography. Miraculously, his hair will never grow again after that.

Mara, the god ruling over the World of Desire inhabited by ghosts, *asuras* (low-ranking deities), and animals, sees the Future Buddha in meditation under the *bodhi* tree and tries to assault him. An army of demons accompanies Mara who rides a war elephant. However, Dharani, Goddess of the Earth, seen standing on a crocodile, intervenes by twisting her hair to produce a flood of water that will drown the army that Mara has sent to destroy the Prince.

After Mara's attack, the Future Buddha ascends to the highest level of meditation. Perceiving the possibility of conquering birth and death, he is now certain of his deliverance. He comes into possession of the Four Noble Truths, and wakes up as a man of perception, an enlightened one. He has become the Buddha Shakyamuni, standing with his 2 disciples, Sariputta and Mogallana, in the top right hand corner. Here, he is preaching principals to his father, the King, and the King's new wife.

Complete narratives such as these are considered to be the most difficult weavings to produce. Older weavers caution younger ones to pray for the spirits to watch over them to insure good health while producing these woven devotions.

Ceremonial Hanging (*Pidan*)
Khmer people, late 19th century
Silk, twill weave, weft ikat (*hol*)
Gift of The Christensen Fund, 2001 (11438.1)

Episodes in the life of Prince Siddhartha, the Future Buddha
“The Great Departure”

The “Great Departure” is again depicted here with the Prince leaving his family palace as seen in the bottom register. He rides off on his white horse, accompanied by Indra holding an incense container and another god who holds a parasol above the Prince. The parasol is a symbol of protection and royalty. Thus the coolness of its shade symbolized protection from the heat of suffering, desire, and other spiritually harmful forces. The umbrella is carried above an important dignitary to indicate that the person below is in fact the center of the universe, and also its spiritual support.

In the upper two registers, repeated images of the iconic green-bodied Indra create a choreographed rhythm emphasizing the graceful arch of his extended pose. Although this *pidan* is not a complete narrative, and the “Great Departure” is only alluded to here, this didactic panel would still provide an opportunity for Buddhists to earn merit by listening to one of the teachings of the monks.

Both end panels on this *pidan* contain paired birds interspersed with *yantras*, which are protective devices against physical or spiritual harm. Traditionally, *yantras* consist of abstract signs, or letters of the Khmer alphabet, or a combination of both. *Yantra* forms protect not only the person, but also the premises. This important and significant Cambodian architectural feature is often seen along the upper edges of fences surrounding temples and even commercial properties.

Three Worlds Cosmology

Three Worlds (Trey Phum) is a pictorial representation of a Buddhist cosmology as developed by Li Thai, a 14th century king of the Siamese kingdom of Sukhothai. This cosmology was devised to assist Buddhist devotees, who did not have access to manuscripts, to lead a life that conformed to the ideals preached by the Master. These 'Three Worlds' refer to different "earths" of which they are composed; earths where "as a general rule, all the beings swept along in the whirlwind of existences will be reborn." These 'Three Worlds' are the World of Desire, the World of Form and the World of the Absence of Form, consisting of a total of thirty-one earths, which constitute the universe. The rebirth of beings into one or the other of these worlds is effected by four types of generation: oviparous, viviparous, exudation, and spontaneous, and by twenty types resulting from voluntary acts.

The destinies are described as those of the "unfortunate" and "fortunate". The four unfortunate include Hells, the Earth of Animals, the Earth of the Dead, the Earth of the *asuras*. The two fortunate destinies are the Earth of Men and the various Earths of the Gods.

A number of motifs on a textile *pidan* serve to identify it as belonging to this Trey Phum genre. These include pavilions floating on clouds, along with the stupa containing the Buddha's relics – his hair and a tooth; the Buddha himself sitting on a pedestal; *hamsa* perched on tall standards; Tavatimsa Heaven, supported on Mount Meru, home to thirty-three gods presided over by the green-bodied god, Indra; kneeling worshippers and *apsara*; objects associated with the pavilions such as lidded ceremonial bowls (*tauk*), incense burners and candelabra that are often depicted in niches in the pavilions; *kinnari* and *kinnara*; a variety of guardian figures and animals such as horses, peacocks, elephants, lions, tigers as well as a range of mythical creatures.

Ceremonial Hanging (*Pidan*)

Khmer people, c. 1900

Silk, twill weave, weft ikat (*hol*)

Gift of The Christensen Fund, 2001 (11114.1)

Three Worlds Cosmology

There are a great number of animals of fantastic character which figure very frequently in the tales and legends of the country. Much of Cambodian mythology is derived originally from early Indian Brahmanism, the precedent of today's Hinduism. These tales are about the mythical Himapan forest high in the Himalayas somewhere near the India/Nepal border. This forest is beneath the Buddhist heaven and invisible to the eyes of mortals who may not approach it.

This chosen habitat for the World of Animals finds all sorts of real and mythical beings, starting with the *garudas*, the *nagas* and the *hamsa*. Also among these fantastic creatures is the *rajasi*, the king of mythical beasts, sometimes referred to as the 'royal lion.' This lion has the power of leaping and flying through the air. Depicted with flames on its head, neck, and back and trailing from each of its feet, it is truly a magnificent creature.

Ceremonial Hanging (*Pidan*)

Khmer people, 19th century

Silk, twill weave, weft ikat (*hol*)

Gift of The Christensen Fund, 2001 (11413.1)

Three Worlds Cosmology

Nearly every inch of this *pidan* is elaborately embellished with one of the Trey Phum motifs. Below the dramatic and dynamic line of *rajasi*, or royal lions, is a row of horses. At a quick glance, these seem to almost gallop across the bottom edge of the textile. The horse is symbolic of energy and effort in the practice of dharma. It also symbolizes the air, which runs through the channels of the body and is the vehicle of the mind. The so-called 'wind-horse', can be ridden upon. Thus we have the possibility of controlling the mind and wind to guide it towards any direction and at any speed.

Interspersed amongst the horses are deer, a direct reference to the Buddha's first teaching in the Deer Park at Sarnath, also known as Dharmachakra Parivartan. The suggestion is that so wondrous was the Buddha's appearance and peaceful his presence that even the animals came to listen. Deer represent natural harmony and fearlessness. Like the solitary rhinoceros, the deer is a symbol of renunciation, as it never sleeps in the same place on consecutive nights.

Ceremonial Hanging (*Pidan*)
Cambodia, Khmer, c. 1900
Silk, twill weave, weft ikat (*hol*)
Gift of The Christensen Fund, 2001 (11113.1)

Three Worlds Cosmology

Pidan are sometimes referred to as “elephant and temple” banners. Legend states that Queen Maya, mother of Buddha, dreamt of a white elephant that flew through the air and touched her right side with its trunk. The white color of the majestic animal adds to this narrative an element of purity and immaculacy. In his former lives, the Buddha had been an elephant several times, as mentioned in the Jatakas, or tales of his previous births. The white elephant is believed to have been the Future Buddha himself who descended from heaven so that he could be born.

In Buddhist iconography we find the lions in their role of dharma protectors supporting the throne of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. In the top register, the lions are the guardians of the temple. They are usually represented in pairs at the entrance of shrines and compounds, and are also used to ward off evil spirits and to protect the stupa. They are kings of the doctrine because they have achieved the power to subdue all beings with their great love, compassion and wisdom.

In the middle register, one finds the *kinnari*, considered to be one of the loveliest of the mythological beings; a beautiful half-woman, half swan, with the head and torso of a woman yet below the delicately tapered waist, she generally has the body, tail and legs of a swan. She also has both human arms and the wings of a swan. The *kinnari* is renowned for her excellence in song and dance and her graceful form is often seen in sculpture and temple murals. While the *kinnari* has a male counterpart, the *kinnara*, and is similar in form, it is less beloved.

Ceremonial Hanging (*Pidan*)

Cambodia, Khmer, c. 1900

Silk, twill weave, weft ikat (*hol*)

Gift of The Christensen Fund, 2001 (11116.1)

The Emerald Buddha

Revered by many, the crown-jeweled Emerald Buddha is depicted here in the center register on this *pidan*. The Buddha, actually of carved jade, has a fascinating historical and legendary past linking many kingdoms and countries to this famed statue.

According to popular belief, the Emerald Buddha was created by Nagasena in Pataliputra (Patna), India, around 43 BC. After remaining in Pataliputra for three hundred years, it was taken to Sri Lanka, formally Ceylon, to save it from a civil war. In 457, King Anuruth of Burma sent a mission to Ceylon to ask for Buddhist scriptures and the Emerald Buddha, in order to support Buddhism in his country. These requests were granted, but the ship lost its way in a storm during the return voyage and landed in Cambodia. When the Thais captured Angkor Wat in 1432 (following the ravage of the bubonic plague), the Emerald Buddha was taken to Ayutthaya, Kamphaeng Phet, Laos and finally Chiang Rai, where the ruler of the city hid it. Cambodian historians recorded the capture of the Buddha statue in their famous Preah Ko Preah Keo legend. However, some art historians describe the Emerald Buddha as belonging to the Chiang Saen style of the 15th century, which would mean it is actually of Lannathai origin.

Historical sources indicate that the statue surfaced in northern Thailand in the Lannathai kingdom in 1434. One account of its discovery tells that lightning struck a pagoda in a temple in Chiang Rai, after which, something became visible beneath the stucco. The Buddha was dug out, and the people believed the figurine to be made of emerald, hence its name. King Sam Fang Kaen of Lannathai

wanted it in his capital, Chiang Mai, but the elephant carrying it insisted, on three separate occasions, on going to Lampang instead. This was taken as a divine sign and the Emerald Buddha stayed in Lampang until 1468, when it was finally moved to Chiang Mai, where it was kept at Wat Chedi Luang.

The Emerald Buddha remained in Chiang Mai until 1552, when it was taken to Luang Prabang, then the capital of the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang. Some years earlier, the crown prince of Lan Xang, Setthathirath, had been invited to occupy the vacant throne of Lannathai. However, Prince Setthathirath also became king of Lan Xang when his father, Photisarath, died. He returned home, taking the revered Buddha figure with him. In 1564, King Setthathirath moved it to his new capital at Vientiane.

In 1779, the Thai General Chao Phraya Chakri put down an insurrection, captured Vientiane and returned the Emerald Buddha to Thailand, taking it with him to Thonburi. After he became King Rama I of Thailand, he moved the Emerald Buddha with great ceremony to its current home in Bangkok, at the Wat Phra Kaew on March 22, 1784. It is now kept in the main building of the temple, the Ubosoth.

(Left)

Hip Wrapper (*Sampot Hol Kbun*)

Cambodia, Khmer, c. 1900

Silk, twill weave, weft ikat (*hol*), supplementary warp weave

Gift of The Christensen Fund, 2001 (11109.1)

The first Buddhist monks sought shelter during the rainy season, which lasted most of the summer. It came to be the practice that groups of monks would stay somewhere together, forming a temporary community. Wealthy laypeople sometimes invited groups of monks to be housed on their estates during the rainy season. Eventually a few of these patrons built permanent houses for monks, which amounted to an early form of monastery.

In much of Southeast Asia today, Theravada monks observe Vassa, a three-month "rains retreat." During Vassa, monks remain in their monasteries and intensify their meditation practice. Laypeople participate by bringing them food and other supplies. Elsewhere in Asia, many Mahayana sects also observe some form of three-month intensive practice period to respect the rains retreat tradition of the first monks.

Textiles with the trio of bird, *nak* (or *naga*), and tree-of-life motifs, have been associated with the end of the rainy season. The trio of bird, *nak*, and tree of life has an archaic cosmological significance not limited to the Cambodian experience. The combination of motifs associated with the underworld, along with those from heaven and earth perpetuate the annual cycle of rain followed by the dry season. This also marks a time when the Vessantara Jataka is recited in the *wat*.

(Right)

Ceremonial Hanging (*Pidan*)

Cambodia, Khmer, late 19th century

Silk, twill weave, weft ikat (*hol*)

Gift of The Christensen Fund, 2001 (I0935.1)

End of the Rainy Season

Textiles also associated with the rains retreat are those with images of sailing vessels. The end of the rainy season is a time for celebration. These celebrations include the preparation of model sailing vessels, large and small, in festivals known as *loy pratib*, or the launching of lights.

Turn of the century photographs show an open canoe supporting a paper-covered structure, which was probably lit with oil lamps or candles. These simple vessels, sometimes involve small banana stem boats holding offerings on the water to transport the departed spirits. Other instances give homage to the full moon that marks the end of rice harvest and to the river that supplies water and life. The image of the *naga* or *nak* under each float is the iconic key that denotes that these craft appear to ride on the back of the beast in pitch darkness radiating light and energy as they glide effortlessly past the spectators to the strains of traditional music. These simple village *pratib* differ from urban vessels which are illuminated floats of brilliant and dazzling electric lights.

Ceremonial Hanging (*Pidan*)

Cambodia, Khmer, late 19th-early 20th century

Silk, twill weave, weft ikat (*hol*)

Gift of The Christensen Fund, 2001 (11418.1)

Cambodia is not a country noted for being a sea-faring nation, although in 1861, Henry Mouhot remarked on the numbers of Chinese junks and European ships in the Cambodian port of Kampot. Several murals dated to 1867 with images of realistic sailing vessels, both foreign ships at anchor on coastlines and estuaries as well as local dugout canoes, used to exist at Wat Chadotes, Udong, the seat of the Cambodian royal court prior to relocating to Phnom Penh.

The artists and designers of 12th century Angkor loved the story of how the Devas, aided by their perennial rivals the Asuras, achieved immortality by churning the Ocean of Milk so as to dredge up the elixir of immortality called Amrita. The combined efforts of the rival divinities greatly stirred up the ocean depths, killing many marine creatures and releasing any number of treasures and wondrous beings, including the *apsaras*, or divine dancing maidens. The story is illustrated in grand style in a bas relief at Angkor Wat and other Angkorian temples, which may be the inspiration behind the aquatic scene on this *pidan*. One could also speculate that the vessel resembles the bas relief of a Cham war boat at Siem Reap.

Cambodian Buddhism

Theravada Buddhism is the religion of virtually all of the ethnic Khmer, who constitute about 90 percent of the Cambodian population. Buddhism originated in what are now India and Nepal during the sixth century B.C. It was founded by a Sakya prince, Siddhartha Gautama, also called the Gautama Buddha, who at the age of twenty-nine, after witnessing old age, sickness, death, and meditation, renounced his high status and left his wife and infant son for a life of asceticism. After years of seeking truth, he is said to have attained enlightenment under a *bodhi* tree. He became the Buddha, “the enlightened” and formed an order of monks, the *sangha*, and later an order of nuns. He spent the remainder of his life as a wandering preacher, dying at the age of eighty.

The cornerstones of Cambodian Buddhism are the Buddhist *bonze* (monk) and the *wat*. Traditionally, each village has a spiritual center, a *wat*, where from five to more than seventy bonzes reside. A typical *wat* in rural Cambodia consists of a walled enclosure containing a sanctuary, several residences for bonzes, a hall, a kitchen, quarters for nuns, and a pond. The sanctuary, which contains an altar with statues of the Buddha and, in rare cases, a religious relic, is reserved for major ceremonies and usually only for the use of bonzes. Other ceremonies, classes for monks and for laity, and meals take place in the hall. Stupas containing the ashes of extended family members are constructed near the sanctuary.

Cambodian Buddhism exists side-by side with, and to some extent intermingles with, pre-Buddhist animism and Brahman practices. Most Cambodians, whether or not they profess to be Buddhists, believe in a rich supernatural world where local spirits are believed to inhabit a variety of objects, and shrines to them may be found in houses, in Buddhist temples, along roads, and in the forests.

Hamsa

More avian in aspect than the half-bird, half-man *garuda* is the *hamsa* (*hong* in Thai), the mount of Brahma. For many, the *hamsa* is the most beautiful of the fantastic animals, a bird of infinite grace. This auspicious, almost swan-like creature has a long slender neck with a luxurious, flowing flame-like tail. According to Brahmanical legend, five species of these ducks reside in the Himalayas and when they do travel to the south countries, they are welcome indeed.

Some of the most elegant appearances of the *hamsa* can be admired over the gateway, doors, or windows of monastery buildings where they meld into the elaborate decoration and become an integral part of the arch. The *hamsa* is also perched on the rooftop pole of a sacred building, where it either dominates the center or waddles along the ridge, accompanied by many siblings. The *hamsa* also tops a *saothong*, which is a tall wooden pillar found in Northern Thailand and bordering countries. From the summit of the *saothong* hangs a long thin wooden or cloth banner called a *thong*, or *tung*. When playing the central role, the *hamsa* would often have an honorific parasol or a crown rising from his back. Considered an intermediary between man and the gods, the *hamsa* often holds a string or vine in its beak from which hangs a bodhi leaf whose movements in the breeze waft the earthbound prayers to the heavens.

Banners and Flags

Banners were originally used in Indian warfare and designed to instill terror in the enemy. The impaled heads and skins of ferocious animals were commonly employed. The crocodile-headed banner was originally an emblem of Kamadeva, the Vedic god of love and desire. Kamadeva is the Hindu counterpart of Mara. As a symbol of Buddha's victory over Mara, the early Buddhists adopted Kamadeva's emblem of the crocodile-headed banner.

These long rippling crocodile banners or waving banners are sometimes suspended at either side of a temple, or from the top of a pole, or from the beaks of paired *hamsas*. Characteristically the banners have a triangular top panel, an elongated body sometimes with limb-like protrusions and one or more fluttering tails. In modern religious practice brightly colored crocodile banners adorn temple grounds or sanctuaries.

The so-called crocodile banners have also been associated with the "Kathin" ceremony, a celebration of the end of Lent or the Rains Retreat. During the three months of the rainy season, Buddhist monks are obliged to stay in the monasteries. The end of this season marks the occasion for monks throughout the country to receive new robes and other necessities in an annual presentation ceremony. This is also an occasion to combine holidays and merit making, as devotees provide support for monasteries throughout the countryside. The crocodile banner is hung as a sign that a particular monastery has been 'reserved' by devotees, and others need to seek another monastery to support.

Another belief is that the ancient Mon people, an ethnic group originating in present-day Myanmar who migrated to north and south Thailand, invented this type of banner. These banners are usually hung on a single bamboo pole, which is inserted into a conical sand pile or hung on a pole topped with a carved swan, which may also represent a stairway for the soul to climb to heaven.

Naga

Nagas are a mythological water serpent with unparalleled magical powers that inhabit the underworld below land and sea, especially in aquatic realms of rivers, lakes, wells and oceans. They have their origin in the ancient snake cults of India, which probably date back to the early Indus Valley civilization. This legacy was absorbed into Buddhism at an early date, with the Buddhist *nagas* inheriting much of their ancient Indian symbolism. The word *naga* is from the Sanskrit and Pali languages; in Lao and Thai, it is called *nak*.

Nagas can assume the form of other beings such as animals and humans. Lao legends tell of love affairs between *nagas* and humans. Generally they are seen as benevolent beings that protect and save humans from illness, hunger and bad spirits. When they are angry, *nagas* use their powers to create floods, storms and other natural disasters, or inflict illness and even death. *Nagas* are a prominent feature in temple design; the spikes you see on temple roofs are in fact the horns of the *naga's* head.

The *naga* is important to animists, as it is believed to be an ancestor spirit, whilst Buddhists revere the *naga* as he saved Buddha from the floods. In Buddhist cosmology they are assigned to the lowest tier of Mount Meru.

Kinnari

The *kinnari* is considered to be one of the loveliest of the mythological beings; a beautiful half-woman, half swan, with the head and torso of a woman yet below the delicately tapered waist she generally has the body, tail, and legs of a swan. She also has both human arms and the wings of a swan. The *kinnari* is renowned for her excellence in song and dance and her graceful form is often seen in sculpture and temple murals. While the *kinnari* has a male counterpart, the *kinnara*, and is similar in form, it is less beloved. In Cambodia, the *kinnari* and *kinnara* are known as *kennorey* and *kennar* and have been used in the arts since the Angkor period, although they have less of a symbolic meaning than the *apsara*, or celestial nymphs.

Rajasi

The *rajasi* is the king of mythical beasts, sometimes referred to as the 'royal lion.' This lion has the power of leaping and flying through the air. Depicted with flames on its head, neck, and back, and trailing from each of its feet, it is truly a magnificent creature.

White Elephant

Legend states that Queen Maya, mother of Buddha, dreamt of a white elephant that flew through the air and touched her right side with its trunk. The white color of the majestic animal adds to this narrative an element of purity and immaculacy. In his former lives, the Buddha had been an elephant several times, as mentioned in the Jatakas, or tales of his previous births. The white elephant is believed to have been the Future Buddha himself who descended from heaven so that he could be born.

Buddhism is based on three concepts: *dharma* (the doctrine of the Buddha, his guide to right actions and belief); *karma* (the belief that one's life now and in future lives depends upon one's own deeds and misdeeds and that as an individual one is responsible for, and rewarded on the basis of, the sum total of one's acts and omissions in all one's incarnations past and present); and *sangha*, the ascetic community within which man can improve his karma.