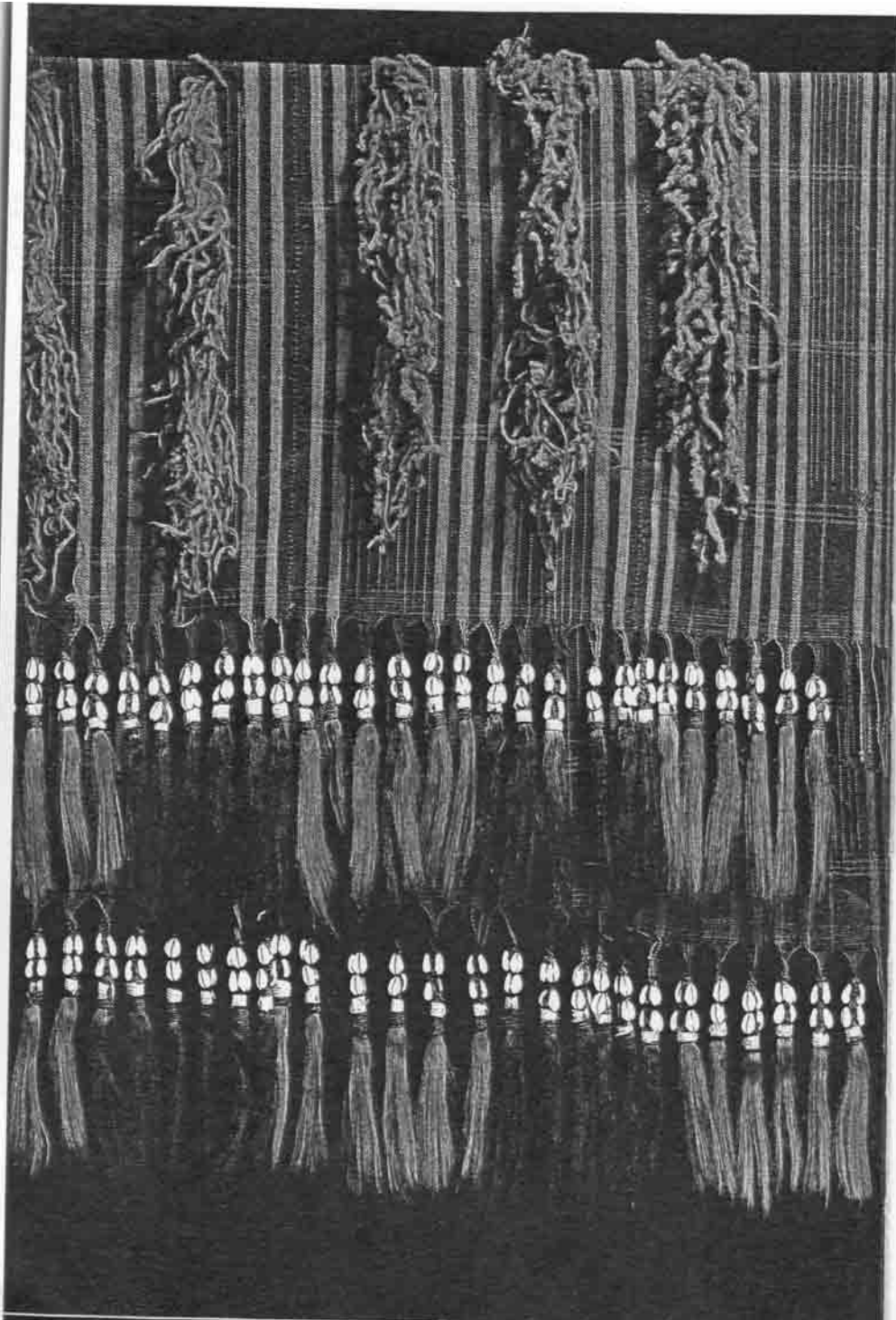


Fiona Kerlogue

Arts of Southeast Asia

183 illustrations, 102 in color





2 Aspects of the material culture of the Naga people of Assam have clear links with other groups in Southeast Asia. The symbolic opposition of textiles and headhunting occurred also among the Iban of Borneo, and the feathers of the hornbill have a similar importance in headdresses, for example. Cloth of merit normally worn as a mantle: cotton and cowrie shells. 1505 x 876 mm.

3 The Prehistoric site at Ban Chiang in northeast Thailand, discovered in 1966, is thought to have been occupied for some 5,000 years. The most well known finds are the baked-clay pots painted with elegant swirling designs, dating from the period 300 BC to AD 200.

Introduction

In the last forty years or so there have been great changes in our understanding of the art of Southeast Asia. Perspectives have altered in the light of fresh research and there has been an increasing appreciation of work that falls outside the confines of the old Hindu-classical evaluation of Southeast Asian art. The work of writers from within the region has also broadened the scope of critical debate. New insights into the artistic worlds of early inhabitants of the region have been made possible through recent archaeological excavations and technical developments in the analysis of finds. The range and extent of the bold patterns on the prehistoric pottery found at Ban Chiang in Thailand [3], for example, was unimaginable until the site was excavated in the 1970s. The Neolithic site of Peinan in Taiwan, discovered at the end of the nineteenth century, was not fully investigated until 1980. With the restoration of peace and the opening up of countries like Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam in the late twentieth century, western scholars have also been able to share new research relating to ancient monuments and works held in





4 View of the main tower of Prasat Phnom Rung, a 12th-century Shivaite Khmer sanctuary, seen from the west. A replica of the Shiva lingam can be seen in its original position at the centre of the principal prang.

museums within the region. The rapprochement with China has also led to opportunities to study more closely the relationship between the art of that great country and that of Southeast Asia. Political and social changes in the region have also given rise to a new generation of artists who have brought fresh vigour and energy into the field, both drawing on and challenging existing traditions. At the same time, the thrust of western analysis of art has changed, with a stronger emphasis on the role of context and culture – political and social – in framing the articulation of ideas. It is these developments which have provided the impetus for this book.

The term 'Southeast Asia' is now generally used to refer to the countries belonging to the organization ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Whether it is appropriate to consider this group as a whole in terms of its art and culture is another question. Geography and language divide the region into

two main parts: the maritime region, which includes the insular and peninsular parts of Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, the Indonesian archipelago and the Philippines, and the mainland, which includes Burma, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. Political boundaries do not correspond precisely with cultural patterns however, which derive in part from ancient patterns of migration. In the prehistoric period, speakers of Austronesian languages from Southwest China moved southwards through the islands, bringing with them cosmological beliefs, language, kinship systems, material culture and artistic forms that left a lasting legacy. Later, speakers of the Tai group of languages, again from the north, travelled and settled along the valleys of the mainland. Cultural links extend to some of the people of the Assam hills in India to the northwest [2], to indigenous people of the Andaman islands and to some of the peoples of the islands of Oceania. Neither should Taiwan's part in the spread of Austronesian culture during the Prehistoric period be overlooked.

The influence of world religions has forged links between some cultures within the region and defines differences between others. Hinduism and Buddhism [4], two faiths so closely connected that they are in many ways inseparable, were brought to both mainland and insular Southeast Asia at around the same time, coexisting in many early kingdoms for a period. But the degree to which they took root varied considerably. In the mainland, Buddhism became established in many centres, gathering adherents until it became the dominant religion from Burma in the west to Vietnam in the east. The majority of the people of the islands, on the other hand, subsequently adopted either Islam or, in lesser numbers, Christianity [5]. Indigenous beliefs retain their strong hold in many societies, often inextricably intertwined with elements of the newer religions. The island of Bali has developed its own distinctive form of Hinduism.

While broad similarities of language and religion define the respective cultures of the mainland and the islands, there is considerable diversity in underlying patterns of culture, which affect artistic expression both materially and in symbolic ways. There are hundreds of ethnic groups, identifiable by their different languages, costumes, beliefs or practices. Patterns of kinship, economic activity, social governance, custom and ritual vary widely across the region, and these differences are often expressed artistically in material form as well as in performance.

Nonetheless, there are enough features common to peoples and cultures across the region to justify considering it as a whole.

5 An image of Christ is set against a traditional Kenyah design so that the two merge in an expression of life and resurrection. Such seamless incorporation of imagery from the outside world into existing artistic discourse is typical of the syncretism of Southeast Asian art. Church of Long San, upper Baram river, Sarawak.



Both the islands and the mainland lie squarely on two major trade routes, maritime and overland, between East and West. Since at least the start of the first millennium AD, ships carrying cargoes between China and India have stopped at ports along the coast of Southeast Asia to barter and exchange, providing a rich source of revenue to local rulers. An abundance of natural products – timber, resins and animal products from the forests of the hinterland, precious stones and metal ores from the mountains and river beds, and spices from the eastern islands – have also supplied overseas demand and brought wealth to the region. Rich rulers close to the mouths of the rivers (early ports) controlled the overseas trade, exchanging luxury imports for the products supplied from upstream. This pattern of interaction with foreigners and the resulting relationships between downstream rulers and upstream inhabitants was repeated throughout Southeast Asia, resulting in a plethora of shared artistic forms influenced by the trade in overseas goods.

Differences of geography have created contrasting patterns of agriculture and thus social systems across the region. In the mountainous uplands the land lent itself to swidden cultivation, in which fields were cut from the forest, planted for a few seasons and then left fallow to recover. The land needed to provide for each family stretched a considerable distance, so the size of community that could govern itself as a stable unit was relatively small. These upland regions thus evolved patterns of chieftaincies, usually dominated by lineage heads. In contrast, the lowland plains and valleys were fed by rivers carrying rich and fertile waters, allowing for wet rice cultivation, which yielded much heavier crops. Denser populations grew up, and with them the opportunity for leaders to accumulate surplus rice and so power: individuals, families or villages could specialize in craft production or other activities, their products exchanged for food grown by others. Armies could be fed and workers enlisted to build irrigation systems, towns and later, cities. It was from these lowland settlements that highly stratified societies began to develop, and these eventually grew into city states with courts. Much of the early artistic production that has survived from Indonesia as well as Cambodia, Vietnam, Burma and Thailand originated from these courts.

Studies of Southeast Asian art once focused almost entirely on the monumental architecture and sculpture of these ancient kingdoms [6]. Underpinning this focus was the assumption, sometimes unexplored, that artistic sensibilities are confined to a

6 Stone image of the Buddha in situ at Wat Rathchanabura, Ayutthaya. Images such as these retain their sacredness, even though the building is in ruins.



particular sector of society. The result was a concentration on rare treasures made for the ruling classes or the courts to the exclusion of an enormous range of material produced by and for other sectors of society. Yet Southeast Asian rulers often drew the craftsmen who worked for them from outlying rural areas, and the dichotomy between fine and folk art that is recognized in the western world is not always so clear nor so significant. Most



7 The main features of images of the Buddha have remained constant over many centuries, based on descriptions from the scriptures. This bronze figure from northern Thailand is in the earth-touching mudra, representing the moment of victory over Mara, the forces of delusion, and the attainment of enlightenment. Height 760 mm.

critics now embrace in their definition of art a much wider field of media, including those from both court and countryside, and a broader time span, from the Bronze Age to the present day.

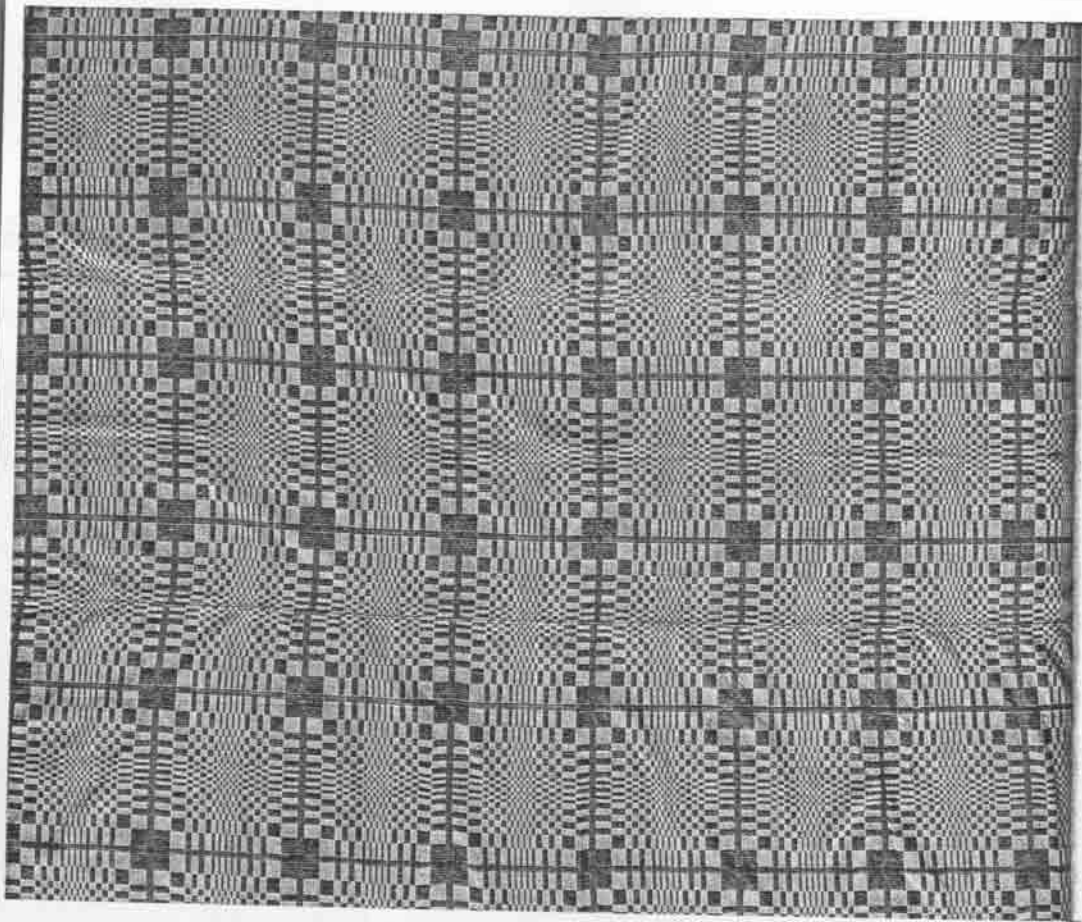
Early studies by western scholars of the Hindu-Buddhist art and architecture of Southeast Asia placed it very much in relation to Indian prototypes, an emphasis that is now seen to have been too heavy. From the early centuries of the first millennium, ideas from India were introduced and incorporated into Southeast Asian cultures, but the term 'Indianization', once widely used to describe this process, is now regarded as far too sweeping. The integration of Indian concepts was neither so deep nor so pervasive as was once thought, and there is evidence of a long and subtle interplay in which the flow was not entirely in one

direction. Nevertheless, the elements of expression that did find their way from India into the repertoire of Southeast Asian culture have been long-lasting and pervasive and must be recognized in any account of the arts of the region. In contrast, although there have been points where the histories of Europe and Southeast Asia have intersected, European influence has until recently been negligible.

Southeast Asian artists were always selective in adopting and adapting the ideas, techniques and materials that reached them over the centuries, whether from India or China, from within the region or from further afield. These artists already had strong local traditions, which even now continue to form the base from which more recent modes of expression have developed. However, these traditions were never static. Iconography, processes of manufacture, ritual practices and their associated material culture were in an almost continual state of flux and innovation.

Questions of chronology, of tracing the development of style, also present particular problems in the examination of Southeast Asian art. Architectural styles are eclectic, and where documentary evidence is scarce it is sometimes hard to date buildings or sculptures with accuracy. The construction of monuments founded many centuries ago may have taken place over a long period of time. Many have been added to or partially demolished in the intervening centuries, with results that are often at variance with the concepts underlying the original building. Their functions have often changed over time, and while many ancient places of worship continue to serve a religious community, this may be one practising a different religion. Some still serve as places of pilgrimage, but not all pilgrimages today will have the same goals.

Sculptural forms, especially on the mainland, tended to follow established norms, often deliberately reproducing long-established models [7]. The imagery of ancient art is often reformulated in contemporary work so that past ages have a continuing presence. In such a context, the assignation of a date to a particular work on the basis of style as if there had been a clear line of development, a kind of artistic evolution that echoes the evolution of species, is clearly not relevant and certainly not useful. In many Southeast Asian contexts, such notions of linear progression in art or attempts to identify a work in terms of its place of origin, its human creator or the date it was made would be regarded as an irrelevant and fruitless undertaking.



8 Detail of a binakol blanket from the Abra region of the Philippines. 2185 x 1670 mm.

Ideas about how to approach a work of art, especially the art of non-western cultures, have changed enormously over the last few decades. When a western person looks at the art of Southeast Asia, there are some aspects that might be appreciated by a local observer in much the same way. The presence of balance, harmony, contrast and symmetry, for example, can be recognized by any observer, since humans seem to share psychological responses to such phenomena. Similarly, the perception and aesthetic appreciation of repetition, of combinations of colour, of subtleties of line and curve, and of contrasts of light and shade seem to be less a matter of culture than of basic human cognition. The meanings assigned to such artistic phenomena may vary, however. The striking *binakol* blankets of the Tinguian of Northern Luzon [8], for example, which so dazzle the eyes that a spectator may go into trance and enter the spirit world, are very different in context from Op Art

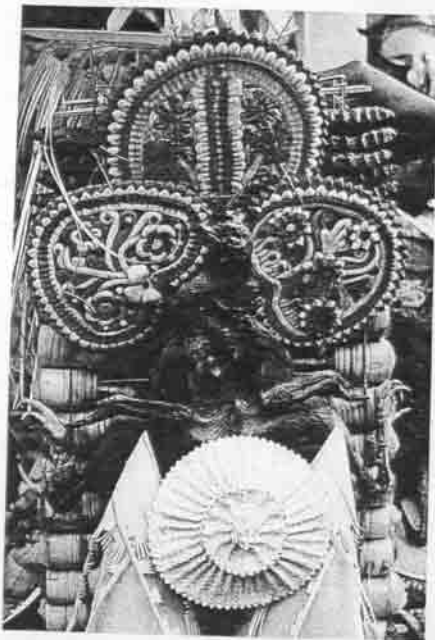
designs produced by twentieth-century western artists, despite a sometimes strong superficial resemblance.

For some aspects of artistic meaning there are marked correspondences across cultures. The significance of the planets, especially the sun and moon and their associations with day and night, life and death, man and woman, carry similar resonances in most parts of the world. The association of white with purity, red with blood and black with death occurs frequently but not universally. In Southeast Asia the occurrence of all three of these colours together is associated in some places with the Hindu trinity of Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma, in others with the basic substances from which human life is formed; in many places the three together represent totality [9].

The western observer thus needs to recognize that Europeans and Southeast Asians have very different understandings about the world and the place of art within it, which derive from different environments and different histories. Both traditions recognize the ability of aesthetics to create power, value and meaning above the everyday. In the west, this category of 'art' has come to relate to material objects that may be appreciated in isolation from social context and which serve no utilitarian function. In Southeast Asia the category is both broader and more elusive. Aesthetic criteria and spiritual power there might equally be associated with ephemeral media such as the multicoloured rice-paste constructions [10] offered at temple festivals in Bali or the tattoos on the legs and arms of a Bornean man or woman [11]. Where an



9 Images of roosters carved on a house in Tana Toraja in Sulawesi. The combination of black, red and white carries symbolic significance throughout the region.



10 The women who make this type of household offering have considerable freedom of artistic interpretation within the basic conventions. Once the gods and demons have extracted the essence, the material remains of the offering are eaten by the family, Karangasem, Bali.

art object is substantial, it may be regarded primarily as a shell to be entered by a spirit, and the surfaces of artefacts conceived in part as a kind of screen behind and beyond which a deeper reality operates.

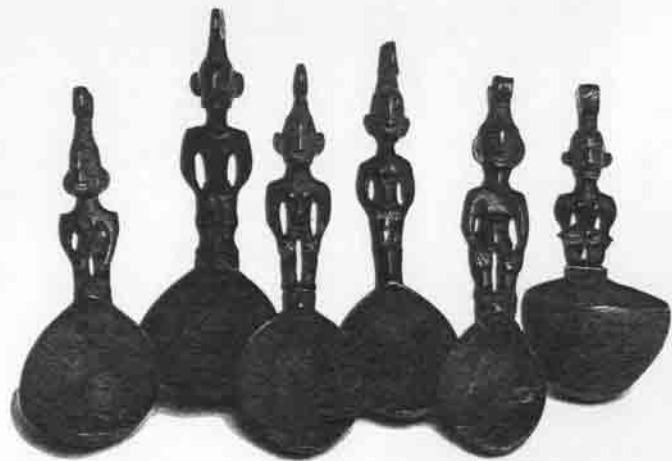
There is also a disparity in ideas about what materials and media constitute the stuff of artistic heritage. Where western notions of art have been founded on ideas from the Greco-Roman Classical period and developed during the Renaissance, Southeast Asian understandings derive more from Indian treatises and from indigenous concepts relating to supernatural power. In the absence of a body of painting ascribed to individual artists, western studies of Southeast Asian art have tended to focus on architecture and sculpture from the ancient period, which could be seen to correspond with ancient Indian artworks. Other media of artistic expression that did not fit into this kind of classification were ignored or categorized as craft rather than art. The tendency for artists not to sign their work, and for artefacts to be produced collaboratively by a number of contributors, also led to such work being largely excluded from western accounts. Neither did the idea of art as the product of creative genius find much correspondence with traditional Southeast Asian attitudes to the artist's role, although works of art were at times undertaken by

11 Tattoos on the legs of a Kenyah woman. Hendrik Tillema took this photograph on his journey to the Apo Kayan in Borneo, 1931–33. He wrote that after death the soul is examined by a watchman, before crossing the bridge into the next world, where it is reunited with the souls of ancestors. For this, the tattoos must be complete, so that they radiate light to show the way.

individuals who had reached a heightened state of some kind, whether in terms of religious purity or connection with other worlds through trance [15]. In Bali the view was widely held that the producer of fine work was acting as a medium for a higher power (*taksu*) which was the true originator of that work. This idea is reiterated in similar forms throughout the region, and does have some resonance with past attitudes in Europe, where artists were sometimes believed to be acting under divine inspiration; indeed, the shift from a belief in divine inspiration to the recognition of creative genius may be an expression of the growing secularization of western society.

The idea that art is something separate from the everyday world is in Southeast Asia a relatively recent introduction. In the majority of cultures in the region art has been seen for the most part as an integral part of daily life, in which the products of skilled craftsmanship have been appreciated in stylistic and aesthetic terms but their role has been primarily functional. Artefacts have never been made simply to be admired for themselves. Although the application of elaborate decoration to an object may indicate that its primary function is ceremonial, this is not always the case [12].

One distinctive aspect of approaches to art in Southeast Asia lies in attitudes to visibility itself. Where the western tradition privileges the visual sense over others and criticism of a work has focused on its visible attributes, in Southeast Asia it is often the invisible, what is being alluded to, that is the most important element. The unseen non-material world, in Bali referred to as



12 Ifugao wood carvers decorate a range of everyday objects, especially those associated with feasting, such as bowls and spoons. Philippines. Heights 163–193 mm



13 Carved wooden figure, Southeast Maluku, Indonesia. In the past, squatting figures were placed at the top of altars, some carrying bowls for offerings to ancestors; some might represent founders or guardians of the village. Height 585 mm.

14 Bronze drums continue to have significance in many parts of Southeast Asia, whether at royal temples in Cambodia or in village contexts. Luang Island, eastern Indonesia.

niskala, is inhabited by all kinds of gods and demons, spirits and monsters of earth and sky, and is both real and ever-present. These beings may be addressed through material objects, the importance of which is not in what they look like but how well they can communicate with the world beyond. Thus the primary intention behind the bronze gongs of Dong Son [14], usually referred to as drums, was probably not for them to be looked at but to be struck, so that the reverberation of the sound would summon the spirits of the ancestors. The drums became items of prestige and developed new meanings in different contexts; among the Lamet of Laos, for example, they were a sign of the wealth and thus status that gave their owners access to membership of the ruling group in the community. The sound which they evoked, however, like the aromatic smells of incense and the fragrance of flowers, could penetrate the unseen world inhabited by spirits who could influence the lives of the living. The invisibility of these spirits is regarded as key to their potency, and insubstantiality is to some extent key to the power of art.

The distinction between art and the everyday is probably less clearly demarcated in Southeast Asia than it is in the west. Indeed the words used in Indonesia, Thailand and other parts of the region that are normally translated as 'art' have different

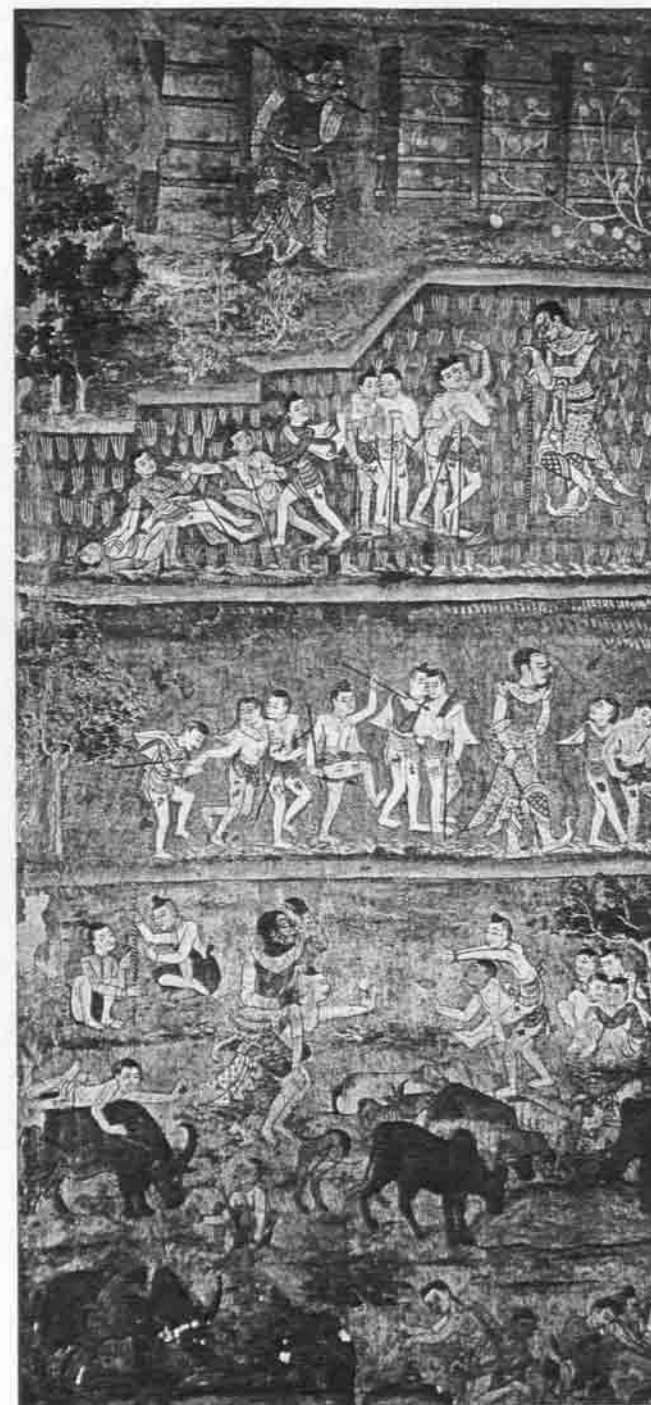


15 Trance dancer, Wonosobo, East Java. The dancer is possessed by a spirit that has entered his body; the mask allows him to take on its persona.

16 Parompa sadum from Sumatra, c. 1991. 2262 x 720 mm.



connotations and tend to stretch much further than they do in the west. Such words generally refer as much to craftsmanship and decorative art, and performances such as music and dance, as they do to the so-called 'fine arts'; art can be ephemeral, evanescent, and it can be found at all levels of society. However, where societies became stratified the upper echelons often set down standards by which artistic expression was judged. In Java, it was the *priyayi*, the gentry, who were most concerned with matters of artistic discrimination, and many of the concepts that traditionally shaped their worldview became criteria of aesthetic judgment in wider society. The terms *alus* and *kasar* refer to a range of metaphysical and social qualities, whether they relate to etiquette, language, a piece of batik cloth or a dancer's performance. *Alus* describes something refined, smooth, finely worked, subtle or allusive, while *kasar* is its opposite: something rough, crude or vulgar. These classifications are still used in judgments about art, with members of the *priyayi* class or its modern equivalent generally deferred to as arbiters of taste. In the stratified societies of mainland Southeast Asia too, as art becomes a commodity it is regarded increasingly as the preserve of the aristocracy, the landed gentry or the newly rich. In lowland Buddhist societies on the mainland the connection between art and the ruling class was more prominent, through the sponsorship of *wat* or temple building, the embellishment of the *wat* with murals [17], and the donation of Buddha images and other religious artefacts, but other members of society undertook work with a similar purpose



17 Scenes of hell from the walls of Wat Phra Singh, Chiang Mai, northern Thailand. Such murals convey moral messages to devotees, as well as conferring merit on the sponsor.



18 A *Bes Musang* (civet cat) wood carving by Yaman. This nocturnal forest spirit causes various kinds of pain. During the 1960s, the Jahut people were encouraged to produce replicas of their sickness figures. Pahang, Malaysia. Height 210 mm.

(albeit on a smaller scale). Throughout the region there is vigorous production of work by and for all classes and in a range of media, judged and valued according to artistic criteria.

Critics from outside the region seeking elucidation of iconographic references have in the past been beset with problems of interpretation. The propensity in Southeast Asia for importing motifs and transforming their meanings has caused untold confusion to those expecting to find that Indian or Chinese readings have been transplanted intact. Further, as elsewhere in the world, images and iconography are interpreted by different groups in different ways, and interpretations often vary also from one individual to another within a group. Thus human figures may represent ancestors or slaves [13], or they may be vehicles into which a sickness spirit is invited to enter, before it is dispatched to the waters of a river or to flames in order to destroy the disease [18]. The depiction of a serpent may refer to a Hindu deity or a figure in Buddhist legend, or it may refer more loosely to the watery domain or ancestral beings. The idea that meanings can be 'read' from motifs as if in a codified language is not always appropriate to Southeast Asian art, in which efficacy may be more important than meaning. This is not to say that such codification does not exist: in some cases an object contains messages expressed in a precise syntax which can be elucidated by an expert. In North Sumatran weavings such as the *abit godang* or 'great cloth', or the *parampa sadum* [16], a cloth used by the Angkola Batak people to hold a baby, moral messages and references to events in the life of the owner are clearly embedded in the motifs and their arrangement. In other cases the meaning lies not in the motifs but in how the item is used, where it is placed or to whom it is given. Meanings may be multilayered and complex; they may even be deliberately elusive. In some cases, the power of the object lies precisely in its inscrutability.

One core idea that is widespread throughout Southeast Asia is the belief that art objects may be invested with power. Many figures are crafted with the intention that invisible entities may enter them so that they can then be addressed in some way [19]. The entity may be the spirit of an illness, in which case the figure can be destroyed (and with it the disease). Or the entity may be a deity, invited to enter the figure so that offerings and prayers may be made to it. Other artefacts may be permanently imbued with some kind of intrinsic power, and protective talismans are common throughout mainland Southeast Asia and in the archipelago.

Notions concerning the nature of art vary not just between western audiences and those of Southeast Asia, but also within the region itself. But what is clear is that the interpretation of these products of Southeast Asian makers requires an approach that recognizes local understandings and underlying beliefs. That most of the art of Southeast Asia is closely linked to religious and spiritual life makes it especially difficult for someone unfamiliar with those cultures to fully comprehend it. The peoples of this region have a complex history of religious syncretism with myriad variations across the region. Most of the population of the mainland now adheres to Buddhism, while in the archipelago the majority follows Islam, but there are a great many exceptions. At the same time these major religions have taken different forms over the centuries, subsuming pre-existing beliefs and variously adapting to influences from the world beyond, so that the result is a complex melding of ideas which interlock and overlap in an endless variety of permutations. For this reason, an analysis that takes as its starting point the earliest examples of artwork to survive, and then traces the religious themes that run as threads through the region's histories and cultures, is as likely as any to successfully guide the reader to an appreciation of the region's art.



19 A Taoist priest paints the eyes of an image of the opium god to signify that its spirit has entered the effigy. Festival of the Hungry Ghosts, Penang, Malaysia, 2000.