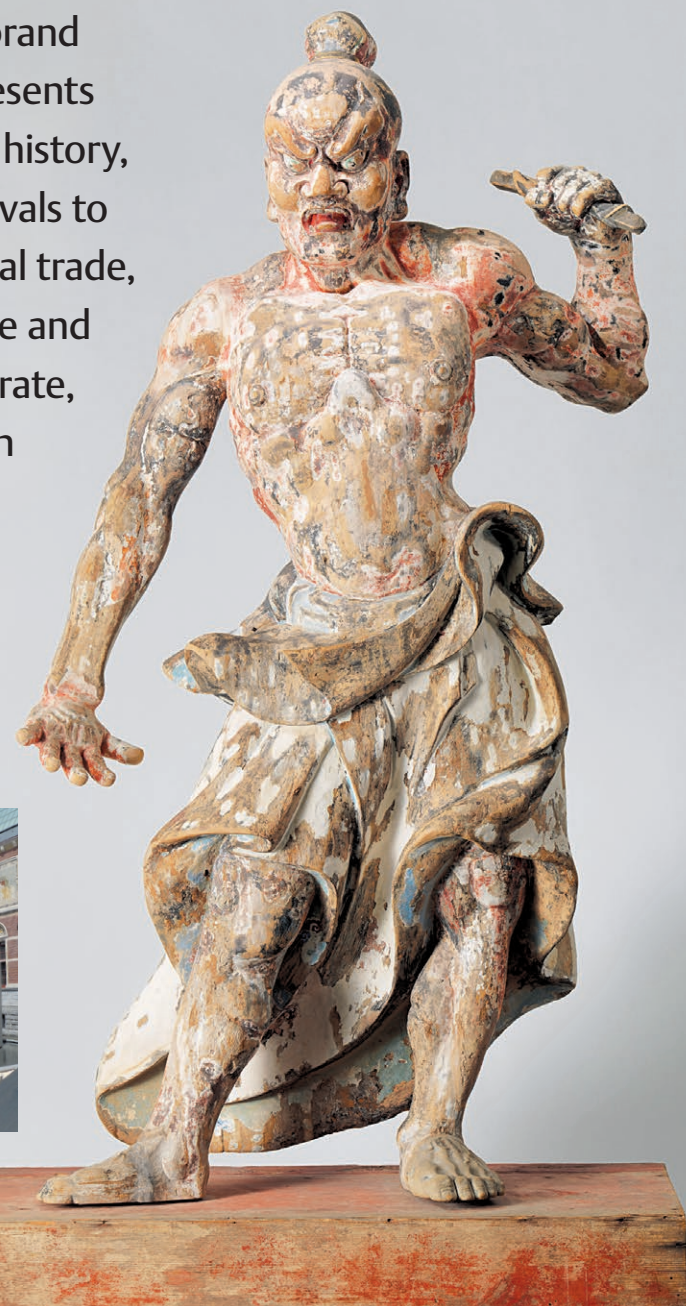


A pavilion for Asian art in the new Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

After a prolonged period of extensive renovation, the Rijksmuseum reopened its doors to the public in April with a redesigned interior and brand new displays. The main building now presents a chronological overview of Dutch art and history, with attention being paid at various intervals to objects that were produced for international trade, such as export lacquer ware or Delftware and porcelain from China and Japan. A separate, newly built pavilion houses the main collection of Asian art.

Menno Fitski, Anna Slaczka & William Southworth



SPANISH ARCHITECTS Cruz y Ortiz have created an original structure whose playful lines contrast with the straight and majestic walls of the main museum building (inset image right). Both the architecture and the interior fittings have been designed by the same architects, so that the pavilion forms an entity that is consistent in style and is notably different from that of the main building and galleries. In this way, the visitor's transition from one to the other is marked by a change in surroundings. The atmosphere is one of simplicity and clarity (inset image left), contiguous with the vision of the architects and the nature of the Asian art collection.

Many of the objects on display were collected by the Society of Friends of Asian Art, founded in 1918, and are on long term loan to the Rijksmuseum.¹ The aim of the Society was not to try and create a full overview of Asian art, but rather to focus on the acquisition of a select group of objects that exemplified a particular region, style, type or period. As a result, the collection may well include only a single, but particularly fine, example of a certain object type. Thus, rather than arranging objects thematically, an order based on place of origin allows the visitor to get an impression of the aesthetics and stylistic elements that are relevant to the various regions of Asia.

India and Indonesia

The Indian and Indonesian collections are displayed on the upper floor of the two-tiered pavilion. This section of the pavilion is provided with windows that allow daylight to enter. This choice was a natural one, as the artefacts primarily consist of bronze and stone statues that benefit from being viewed in natural light.

Almost all the sculptures displayed here have a religious function and significance: they are either cult images made to be used in worship at a temple or domestic shrine, or are architectural fragments that formed part of a religious monument. By displaying Indian and Indonesian art together we hope to show some of the ways in which Hindu-Buddhist art developed and transformed when these religions, originating from the Indian subcontinent, travelled east to other parts of Asia. Several motifs, such as the *makara* or water monster, deities and mythological stories, can be observed in both their Indian and Indonesian versions.

A good example of a myth travelling east is the story of the goddess Durga killing the buffalo demon (Durga Mahishasuramardini), represented in the pavilion by an image from Bengal and another from East Java.

A number of true masterpieces were already bought during the first twenty years of the Society. Among them, the monumental dancing Shiva (h. 154 cm; ca. 1100 CE), purchased in 1935 from the Paris dealer C.T. Loo. One of the largest Chola bronzes ever made, it is now displayed as the centrepiece of the upper floor gallery. Also worth mentioning is the stone sculpture of a celestial nymph (*apsaras*), originating from the well-known Lakshmana temple in Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh (consecrated 954 CE), which was bought in 1934. The window behind allows sunlight to play on the lacework-like details of the sculpture.

The Indonesia section is dominated by a stone sculpture from Central Java (ca. 800-930), comprising perhaps the finest collection of this region and date in the Netherlands and perhaps in any museum outside Indonesia. The display includes five monumental sculptures carved freely from volcanic stone: two *kala* or monster heads, placed high above the doorway and window overlooking the stairs; two *makara*; and a statue of the *bodhisattva* Manjushri. These sculptures were sent to the Society in 1931 from the former Archaeological Service of the Netherlands East Indies and are a testament to the close personal ties between the two institutions and the involvement of several key members of the society in the restoration and reconstruction of Hindu-Buddhist temple remains on Java.

Other important statues and artefacts from Indonesia have been gradually added to this collection as a result of private donations and purchases. Foremost among these are a series of statuettes made of bronze, silver and gold, including a superb silver image of the Buddhist deity Vajrasattva. The South Indian art collection was recently enriched with the purchase of a bronze Somaskanda group (late Chola period, ca. 1100). This composition highlights another aspect of Shiva, one that contrasts with that of the violent dancer. Shiva is shown surrounded by his family: his wife Uma and their child Skanda, the god of war. Fine decorative arts in ivory, gold and glass also flourished in South and Southeast Asia. These, together with a number of ritual objects, can be seen among the artefacts from China and Japan in the 'treasure room' downstairs.

China and Japan

The natural focal point that the Shiva provides for the Indian collection is absent for the selection of Japanese sculptures. Although it counted some fine pieces, the existing group was one of tranquil Buddhas and bodhisattvas with serene expressions and poses – the characteristics that tend to dominate the wider audience's view of Japanese Buddhist sculpture. More dynamic deities were very much under-represented and a 2007 purchase set out to remedy this

with the purchase of a pair of 14th-century temple guardian figures, which now form one of the highlights of the display on the lower floor section of the Pavilion (main image above). A line of sculpture accentuates a long display case that during the opening months houses a selection of kimono. Over the past years, various acquisitions have thus complemented existing groups within the collection. Some additions, however, have opened up new, unrepresented areas. One such field was early-20th century Japanese art and the Rijksmuseum has been extremely fortunate to be the beneficiary of a most generous gift from two collectors of that period. Jan Dees and René van der Star have donated over 130 pieces of exquisite Taisho-period textiles that give a comprehensive overview of the various techniques, types and styles.

In the Chinese section, the visitor is met by many pieces that may be familiar to long-standing visitors to the museum. Meeting 'old friends' surely must be one of the joys of recurring museum visits and the display tries to present those pieces with a fresh outlook, such as the group of Tang-period figures of horses and camels, which were previously shown as a parade, evoking a caravan travelling the Silk Route. Now, they are arranged in formation, more akin to the way they are found in burial sites. Research has led to the conclusion that the group was not produced using moulds, but were modelled by hand around a nucleus of plant material (straw) that was strengthened by iron strips to support the legs. The presence of metal within an object of fired clay was a remarkable outcome and the possibility to carry out such important research on the collection has been one of the advantages of the long renovation process of the museum. Satisfying as this may be for research, these past ten years have separated the public from the objects – now the real purpose and pleasure begins.

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Notes

¹ See Rosalien van der Poel, 'The Asian Arts Society in the Netherlands', *The Newsletter* No. 55, Autumn-Winter 2010, p.48.