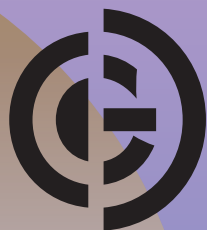


Angkor Royal Bronzes

Art of
the Divine



Guimet
Musée national des arts asiatiques

Exhibition
30 April
8 September
2025

Visit guide

Angkor Royal Bronzes

“Angkor”, the capital of the Khmer kingdom which dominated Mainland Southeast Asia for over six centuries (9th-14th/15th centuries), has kept the vestiges of its past glory, monuments of unparalleled beauty and scale. These Hindu and Buddhist shrines used to host deities and objects of worship made of precious metals: gold, silver and bronze (often gilded), which appeared furtively on the stone bas-reliefs, or were mentioned in inscriptions. This exhibition focuses on one of these metals, bronze, and the close relationship between the Khmer ruler and his dedicated bronze craftsmen.

Thanks to recent archaeological work conducted by the French School of Asian Studies (École française d’Extrême-Orient / EFEO), and technological research led by the Centre de recherche et de restauration des musées de France (C2RMF), “Angkor Royal Bronzes, Art of the Divine” takes visitors on a journey to major Khmer heritage sites to discover the evolution of bronze art in Cambodia.

With exceptional loans granted by the Royal Government of Cambodia, as part of the collaboration between the Cambodian Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, the C2RMF, the EFEO and The Guimet, this exhibition brings together Khmer art masterpieces around a national treasure, the highlight of this exhibition, the Reclining Vishnu of West Mebon, which is presented in all its glory in the Khmer courtyard on the ground floor.

The origins of copper metallurgy

Around 1100-1000 BCE, sedentary farming communities of Mainland Southeast Asia began extracting copper ore, and producing and consuming small quantities of utilitarian objects made of copper or bronze (a copper-tin alloy). Yet, protohistoric remains from this "Bronze Age" are still rare on the territory of present-day Cambodia. In addition to a recently discovered copper mine, a number of sites have yielded bronze tools, weapons and ornaments, as well as objects related to copper production (crucibles, bivalve moulds). From 500-400 BCE, the increased use of iron for utilitarian objects marked the advent of the "Iron Age". Over the next millennium, the use of copper and its alloys was reserved for personal or ritual use. The number of copper objects increased steadily, while their morphologies became more varied and their manufacturing techniques more sophisticated. Several Iron Age cemeteries have been discovered on the Cambodian territory. Despite the looting of these sites, they hosted a variety of metal funerary offerings, including jewellery, bells, bowls, discs, and mirrors. Additional objects from museum and private collections

also suggest the presence of large-scale production, probably in Cambodia itself. Among these artefacts are the earliest "monumental bronzes" (vessels and bells), examples of remarkable craftsmanship which attest to the use of substantial material, logistical and decision-making resources.

Lost-wax casting

Ith Sopheap is a renowned Cambodian master founder based in the Siem Reap region who regularly works for the Royal Palace. He was invited to illustrate the so-called "lost-wax casting process" commonly used by the Khmers from at least the 6th century to the present day. For this exhibition, he created a replica of a statue of the *bodhisattva* Maitreya dating from the 8th century. This bronze, whose production techniques have been well understood since it was examined and analysed at the Centre de recherche et de restauration des musées de France (C2RMF), was made using one of the many variants of lost-wax casting, the direct process. The creation of the sculpture was divided into seven work sequences:

1. Assembly of the iron armature
2. Shaping the core (clay, sand and rice husk)
3. Making the wax model and setting up the spruing system (wax and solid tree resin)
4. Setting up the clay-based investment (three successive layers: clay, sand and cow dung; clay and sand; clay and rice husk)
6. Firing the investment
7. Breaking out the investment
7. Finishing

Early statuary traditions:

Buddhist and Hindu bronzes

It is now widely accepted that Buddhism and Hinduism were adopted by the elites of Southeast Asia concurrently, in the first centuries of our era. This gradual process of acculturation, or "Indianisation", was facilitated by trade with India. In Cambodia, as in neighbouring countries, this cultural

exchange led to the adaptation of Indian cultural fundamentals and scriptures, including the Sanskrit language which was reserved for addressing the deities and for official use. The oldest bronzes from the Cambodian territory provide compelling evidence of this, both in terms of their iconography, which bears the influence of Indian art, and the technique employed, namely lost-wax casting – a method that continues to be the preferred practice among the Khmers even today.

Phnom Bayang: the hilltop of Shiva

Phnom Bayang hill is home to several religious buildings, including Phnom Bayang Temple, which was constructed in the pre-Angkorian period (7th century). This temple is known in epigraphy as Shivapura (the 'city of Shiva'), and it was a major holy site in ancient Cambodia, distinguished both by its steep position and the ongoing veneration of its deity, known locally as Utpanneshvara (the 'Lord of Beings'). The architectural remains, inscriptions and donations, particularly of metal objects and decorative elements, demonstrate that the Shiva of Shivapura was honoured throughout the Angkorian period, at least until the 13th century, by sovereigns and high-ranking ascetics. The Shaivite temple was later converted into a Theravada Buddhist shrine.

Casting for the king

The study of inscriptions from ancient Cambodia, written in Sanskrit and/or Old Khmer, helps identify individuals who commissioned metal sculptures and objects, frequently of high rank (king or dignitaries), and the beneficiaries of these artefacts. These texts also contain lists of donations offered to the temple deities, many of which

were utensils made of precious metals. Few sources, however, document the artisans who crafted these objects. Nevertheless, Angkorian epigraphy does attest to the activity of 'royal craftsmen' who were called upon by the sovereign to create the great foundations of his reign and new instruments to legitimise his power. During the early years of the 12th century, these artisans were divided into four categories, which were numbered in Sanskrit, as were the official positions at the time. Thus, certain communities of specialized craftsmen, like the kingdom's administration, would have been subject to the same process of structuring and centralization, particularly active in the 10th and 11th centuries. It was in the context of this enhanced interdependence between the artisanal sector and royal authority that a foundry was established in the capital's central district, on a land close to the Royal Palace. This development marked the beginning of a 'golden age' in bronze production during the 11th century.

The royal foundry at Angkor

A metal-working workshop was discovered in Angkor Thom, to the north of the Royal Palace, in the heart of the ancient capital, in 2012. It was identified as a "royal foundry". The workshop was primarily active during the 11th century, and it was one of the primary centres of bronze production in the Angkorian kingdom. The site's significance is further underscored by the wealth of archaeological documentation available, including the work structures (i.e. floors, furnaces, pits) and the associated materials (primarily waste: foundry and hammering waste, slag, fragments of objects, crucibles, moulds, furnace walls and *tuyères*). This documentation has facilitated the rediscovery of a wide range of skills and techniques, including lost-wax casting and hammering, as well as identifying how founders organised their work for the king and the palace.

Honouring the gods

While most surviving Khmer sculptures are made of stone, many archaeological and epigraphic testimonies refer to metal images. Sometimes these images made of gold, silver or bronze, often gilded, took their place as the main deities in the temple cella. The precious nature of these images regularly led to their disappearance, either because they were looted or because they were remelted, often in conjunction with the creation of new images.

Depending on their size, metal images could play very different roles within the same sanctuary. The largest pieces served as statues of worship, while medium-sized works, used as substitutes for monumental statues, could be carried in palanquins in processions to mark special festivals. The smaller pieces were votive statuettes or domestic objects of worship.

Although bronzes are less common than stone statues, they can be more detailed, allowing for more precise identification, particularly the smaller pieces, whose attributes are well-preserved.

The triumph of Hinduism

Hinduism and Buddhism, two major religions of Indian origin, were both embraced in ancient Cambodia. The deities Vishnu and Shiva, in the case of Hinduism, and Buddha, in the case of Buddhism, benefited in turns from royal favour. During the Angkorian period (9th-14th/15th centuries), the dominant belief system of all great Khmer kings – and the people with them? – was Hinduism, with Shiva being the primary deity of worship. He was regarded as the ideal embodiment of the notions of sovereignty and prosperity for the entire country. During the reign of King Suryavarman II (r.1113/1114-1149/1150), this

role was assumed by Vishnu, and during the significant reign of Jayavarman VII (r. 1182/1183 - circa 1220), it was the Buddha who became the pre-eminent spiritual figure in the Khmer kingdom.

Under the protection of Buddha

In India, the iconographic association of Buddha with a serpent (*naga*) is linked to a famous episode in the life of the Blessed One. In Cambodia, this iconography first appeared in the Angkorian period, gradually becoming the predominant icon of Khmer Buddhism, and hundreds of reproductions are known to exist. This unparalleled success can be attributed to a new perception of the image's significance, which is now recognised as a representation of a 'primordial' Buddha integrated into intricate iconographic compositions involving other deities from the pantheon of Tantric Buddhism, including Lokeshvara, the *bodhisattva* of Compassion, Prajnaparamita, the Goddess of Supreme Wisdom, and gods who accompany practitioners on the path to Enlightenment, such as Hevajra.

The renaissance of temples

The rituals performed in Khmer temples consisted of a careful cleansing process, followed by the meticulous dressing and adorning of the deity. Offerings of food, flowers, song and dance were also integral components of the worship practices. To honour the divinity, utensils made from precious metals such as gold, silver or copper, depending on the financial resources available, were clearly favoured. These utensils often bore a resemblance to Indian models. The inscriptions, in the form of lists, sometimes very detailed, in which the various activities that punctuated the life of sanctuaries can be discerned, offer a comprehensive view of the goods present in the temples, providing names of objects, their materials, weights, and decorative features.

Architectural decoration

The use of metal in Angkorian architecture is corroborated by epigraphic and archaeological sources, predominantly for the 12th and 13th centuries. However, few traces remain of these installations, despite the substantial quantities of material employed (several tonnes of metal are estimated for certain temples). While architectural copper and bronze were used in the construction of buildings, most of the metal was used to decorate temples in the form of massive plates or thin sheets, which were often gilded. These decorative cladding elements were affixed to brick and sandstone walls, as well as to the wooden components that constituted the joinery. The metal coverings reproduced the entire ornamental vocabulary of Angkorian temples, from the mouldings on the bases, to the bas-reliefs on the lintels, and the pediments.

New world, new places, new faith

Cambodia's history is interwoven with the rise and fall of great maritime trade networks that coincided with the expansion of the great empires of the modern era, from China to Portugal and from the Netherlands to Mughal India. This period of slow decline in Cambodia reflects a time in which the country found itself torn between the technological and civilisational contributions of foreigners, whether from Asia or Europe, and its attachment to the prestige and grandeur of the kings of the past.

Following the capture and occupation of Angkor by the armies of the Siamese kingdom of Ayutthaya in the 15th century, the Cambodian court moved south of the Tonle

Sap, successively to Basan (Srei Santhor), Phnom Penh (Catumukh) and other locations, before settling in the 16th century at Longvek, and finally at Oudong. After Cambodia's entry into the French protectorate, in 1865, King Norodom I (r. 1860-1904) definitively established Phnom Penh as the capital.

Over these few centuries, Khmer products were renewed (firearms, coins) and Khmer art was significantly influenced by the styles and aesthetics of the neighbouring kingdom of Siam, which replaced Cambodia as the dominant power in Mainland Southeast Asia at the time. Theravada Buddhism (Lesser-vehicle) became the dominant religion, and the image of Buddha taking the Earth as witness (Maravijaya or 'conqueror [of the demon] Mara') replaced almost all other iconography.

Post-Angkorian continuities

During the period referred to as 'post-Angkorian' or 'middle' (1431-1863), metal images of Buddha, deities and ancestors were used in worship and as a form of legitimacy for those who commissioned them. Chronicles systematically associate the removal, destruction and installation of metal sculptures with changes in political power and in the country, emphasising their symbolic importance. The existence of metal workshops, always in close relationship to kings and dignitaries, and the enduring mention of bronze in written sources, confirm the cultural, political and technical continuity of the craftsmanship of copper and its alloys, which remained central to Cambodia's royal authority and religious practices.

The School of Cambodian Arts

In 1917, at a time when the royal workshops had gradually been outsourced, the French painter George Groslier (1887-1945) set up the School of Cambodian Arts, a sort of 'conservatory' for Khmer craftsmanship. This institution, which was detached from direct royal patronage,

trained craftsmen who were now able to respond to official commissions as well as to produce for a wider public. The School is located next to the palace, continuing a tradition that goes back up to ancient times. Metalworkers play an important role in the institution. Even today, Khmer craftsmen, including founders, are perpetuating an ancient tradition, and see themselves as the direct successors to their Angkorian predecessors. Ith Sopheap, the son of a former student of the School, also a founder, created the pieces shown at the start of the exhibition to illustrate lost-wax casting.

of Cambodia and celebrated the world over as the masterpiece of Khmer bronze art, this reclining statue of Vishnu has benefited from the exceptional cooperation between the National Museum of Cambodia, the EFEO, the Centre de recherche et de restauration des musées de France (C2RMF) and The Guimet. Prior to its restoration at the Arc'Antique laboratory in Nantes, the sculpture was studied by scientists from the C2RMF and other collaborators. Displayed for the first time with some important fragments found along with the bust, the Vishnu from the West Mebon Temple is presented in its most complete possible appearance on the occasion of the exhibition.

The West Mebon Vishnu: A rebirth

In December 1936, the Angkor Conservator Maurice Glaize (1886-1964) reported an astonishing story: "Chhit-Lat, from Phum Kuk Thnot, came to declare that Buddha had instructed him in a dream to free him from the earth that was suffocating him and the stones that were crushing him. He went straight to the central platform of the Mebon and, digging approximately one metre down, unearthed part of the head, shoulder and hand of a colossal bronze statue."

When researchers from the French School of Asian Studies (EFEO) arrived at the site, they realised the true extent of the discovery: the bust of a large bronze Vishnu in a reclining posture had just been uncovered. This representation, a prevalent motif in Khmer art, portrays the deity in a state of slumber upon the serpent Ananta, following the destruction of the universe. Upon awakening, the god Vishnu gives birth to a lotus flower, and the god Brahma manifests and enunciates the Veda, the spiritual foundations of the new creation. Exhibited at the National Museum



1. **Bodhisattva Maitreya**

Cambodia, Kompong Chhnang province, Kompong Tralach district, Vat Ampil Teuk Buddhist monastery

Angkorian period, early 10th century

High-tin bronze

Phnom Penh, National Museum of Cambodia, deposit from the Royal Library, 1926, Ga.2024

2



2. **Ganesha**

Cambodia, Siem Reap province, Puok district, Angkor, Prasat Yeay Moea

Angkorian period, 13th century

Copper-based alloy

Phnom Penh, National Museum of Cambodia, Ga.5987

3. **Buddhist triad: Naga-enthroned Buddha, surrounded by Lokeshvara and Prajnaparamita**

Cambodia, Siem Reap province, Prasat Bakong district, Roluos, Veal Kralanh

Angkorian period, late 12th - early 13th century

Bronze, mercury gilding

Phnom Penh, National Museum of Cambodia, deposit from Angkor Conservation, 1970, Ga.2424

3





4

4. Kneeling Female Figure (mirror stand?)

Cambodia, Siem Reap province and district, Angkor Thom, Bayon (?)

Angkorian period, first half of the 12th century

Leaded bronze

Phnom Penh, National Museum of Cambodia, deposit from the Angkor Conservation, 1921, Ga.5476

5. Door guardian

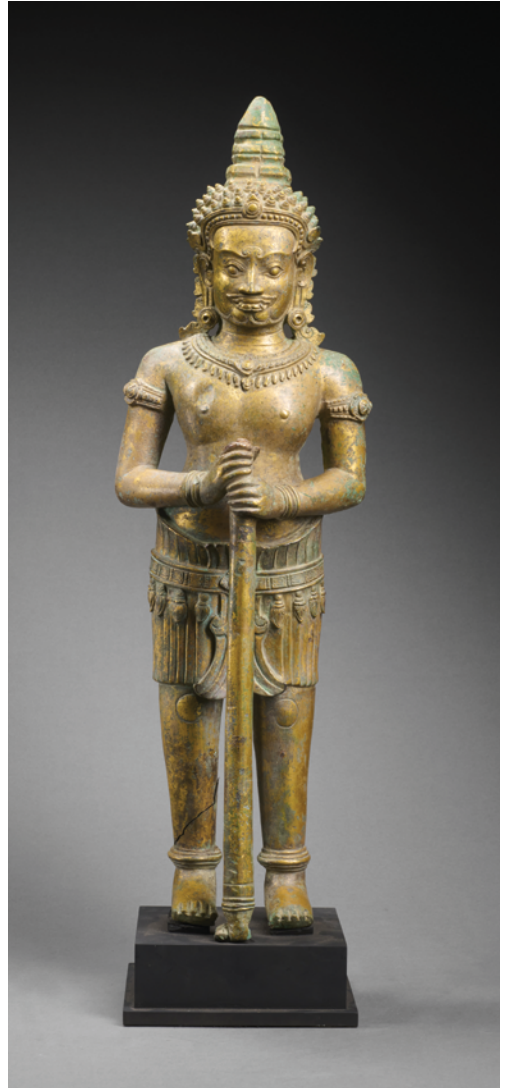
Exact provenance unknown, Cambodia or neighboring countries

Angkorian period, late 12th – early 13th century?

Bronze, mercury gilding

Phnom Penh, National Museum of Cambodia, restitution from Douglas Latchford, 2023, NMC.2691

5



6

6. Betel set in the shape of a peacock

Cambodia, Kompong Chhnang province, Kompong Tralach district, Longvek

Modern period, 20th century

Copper

Phnom Penh, National Museum of Cambodia, 1924, Ga.5576





7

7. Bust of Vishnu Anantashayin

Cambodia, Siem Reap
province, Puok district,
Angkor, West Mebon

Angkorian period,
second half of the 11th
century

Bronze, mercury gilding,
silver, lead, cinnabar

Phnom Penh, National
Museum of Cambodia,
deposit from the Angkor
Conservation, 1950, Ga.5387

Cover Image:

Adorned meditating Buddha

Cambodia, Preah Vihear
province, Sangkum
Thmei district, Preah
Khan of Kompong Svay
/ Bakan

Angkorian period, third
quarter of the 12th
century

Leaded bronze

Phnom Penh, National
Museum of Cambodia,
donation from the residents
of Lovea Krasang, 1962,
Ga.3378

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Exhibition

Angkor Royal Bronzes, Art of the Divine

30 April – 8 September 2025

Curators

Pierre Baptiste, Musée Guimet
David Bourgarit, Centre de recherche et de
restauration des musées de France (C2RMF)
Brice Vincent, École française
d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO)
Thierry Zéphir, Musée Guimet

Exhibition catalogue

Bronzes royaux d'Angkor, un art du divin
A co-publication by Musée Guimet /
In Fine éditions d'art
304 pages, 270 illustrations, €39 (in French)

Around the exhibition

Programming information available at guimet.fr

MEET THE EXHIBITION CURATORS (in French)

Sunday, June 1st | 3.30pm |

GUIDED TOURS OF THE EXHIBITION (in French)

Adult Discovery Tour

From May 9 to July 5, on Monday, Thursday,
Friday, and Saturday (except May 29,
June 7, and June 9) | 4pm | From July 7
to September 8, only on Saturdays | 4pm |

Family Tour (in French)

Sunday, May 11 and Sunday, June 8 | 11am |

Descriptive Tour (in French)

Saturday, May 17 | 11am | and Friday,
July 4 | 2.30pm |

Lip-reading Tour (in French)

Saturday, May 24 | 11am |

SYMPOSIUM

Angkor Royal Bronzes: rediscovery of a sacred art from Cambodia

Saturday, June 7 | 9.30am - 4.30pm |

EVENTS

The Golden Sleep

Cinema: Screening and meeting with
film director Davy Chou
Wednesday, April 30 | 8pm |

Angkor Wat Project

Performance (world premiere) followed by
a discussion with the choreographer, painter,
photographer and poet Shen Wei
Wed, May 14 | 8pm |

Apsaras Dancers

Dance performance on the music of Mathias
Delplanque *as part of the European Night
of Museums*
Saturday, May 17 | 8pm |

Gorgone

Documentary: Screening and meeting with
the film director, Jenny Teng
Friday, May 23 | 8pm |

Campop, traditional music and Asian Core
Performances, DJ set, and guided listening *as
part of the Fête de la Musique, in partnership
with the CESE*
Saturday, June 21

Amplifying Voices of Indigenous Women and Discriminated Groups

Short documentaries, in partnership with
Bophana Center
Thursday, June 26 | 8pm |

Practical Information

Open every day except Tuesday | 10am - 6pm |
Closed on January 1st, May 1st and December 25

The Guimet –

National Museum of Asian Arts, France

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