

**Gilles Béguin (English translation by Narisa Chakrabongse), *Buddhist Art: An Historical and Cultural Journey*. Bangkok: River Books, 2009, 400 pp., 680 colour illustrations, 22 maps and 78 plans**

*Reviewed by Nicolas Revire*

Gilles Béguin's new, voluminous and richly illustrated book, originally published in French (2009), and skillfully translated into English by Narisa Chakrabongse, represents a rare and successful attempt to draw on the large panorama of Buddhist art over the Asian continent in a single volume penned by a sole author (for another recent attempt, see Leidy 2008). Ten years in the making, the book is the result of a life's work and celebrates the culmination of a career dedicated almost entirely to the study and conservation of Asian arts in such prestigious collections as the Guimet (from 1971 to 1994) and the Cernuschi museums (1994–2011) in Paris. It is a valuable contribution to the field, due to the wealth of information and illustrations that it presents. The clarity and straightforward style of Béguin's writing, through the English translation, also helps to ensure that his work is accessible to new readers in the field, as well as undergraduate students. As such, it will serve well in introductory courses on Buddhist and Asian art, just as the issues that it engages may surely be of interest to Buddhist scholars, monks and laity, since the latter are overwhelmingly focused on textual or *dharma* studies and often neglect artistic production.

A first, general essay on the Buddhist "doctrine" (pp. 9–25) is immediately followed by a section on "Buddhism and Art" (pp. 27–61), which lays down the basic theories and principles of art and iconography. This is followed by a long chapter on Buddhist art in India (pp. 63–106), the art's motherland, and then a brief section on the expansion of Buddhism into the rest of Asia (pp. 107–110). These introductory chapters, in which the terminology and definitions are properly presented item by item, pave the way for the rest of the volume and should be read by everyone, especially the neophyte, before moving ahead

to their favourite destination or chapter. As with a travel atlas, the rest of the book is comprised of fourteen geographical chapters that take the reader on a “historical and cultural journey” along the path of Buddhist penetration into Asia. This journey takes us, on the one hand, along the (essentially) maritime routes via Sri Lanka (pp. 111–125) and Java (pp. 127–143), to the rest of mainland or peninsular Southeast Asia including the Khmer empire (pp. 145–163), the kingdom of Campā (pp. 165–167), Śrīvijaya (pp. 169–171), Thailand (pp. 173–189) and Burma/Myanmar (pp. 191–203); and, on the other, along the land route of the “Silk Road” from Gandhāra and West Central Asia (pp. 205–225), to the deserts and oases of the Tarim Basin with their cave temples (pp. 227–245), or the “Himalayan kingdoms” of Nepal (pp. 247–255), Tibet and Mongolia (pp. 257–277), and then to China (pp. 279–331), Korea (pp. 333–347), and eventually to Japan (pp. 349–387). The book ends with a carefully selected bibliography, arranged thematically in accordance with the previous chapters, and a general index.

Some broad considerations to be addressed in this review include the relationships between Buddhist art, rituals, and texts in different contexts and periods across Asia. As Béguin states (p. 27):

It is paradoxical that one of the major manifestations of spiritual art was born of a religion that initially needed no buildings to assemble the faithful nor possessed a fundamental liturgy. Even more disconcertingly—when the majority of the components of Buddhism are justified by sacred texts, themselves a continuation of oral teachings—nothing, at first glance, would seem to lead to the creation of any artistic practice.

In fact, as I argue below, this constant dialogue between the material and ritual cultures should be approached in tandem. The textual tradition, often produced much later, does not always have to explain or justify the presence (or absence) of a material object such as a Buddha image or painting.

For several centuries the Buddha was not portrayed anthropomorphically. This phase is generally called “aniconic” in art historical literature, including the volume under review. This common assertion is somewhat problematic, not least because a Buddha footprint (*buddhapāda*), a Bodhi tree, or a *stūpa*, for instance, can also serve as a focal point for worship and commemoration, and hence function as a sort of “icon” or image on its own. The issue at

stake is rather that the Buddha was not initially represented as a human figure but only symbolically through what Béguin calls “non-manifested images”, perhaps echoing ancient Vedic traditions of not representing gods anthropomorphically (p. 39). Bodhi trees, *stūpas* and Buddha footprints as cult objects are widespread in Sri Lanka and mainland Southeast Asia. Hence it would be wrong to believe, as the author seems to hold, that there was once an “aniconic” phase that would have preceded an “iconic” period, for such representations could often be used side by side. In other words, Buddha images did not suddenly replace *stūpas* and other indexical symbols of the Buddha—rather they have coexisted over a long period of time up until this day.

Another important factor to consider, and one which Béguin seeks to avoid, is the possible impact of art on narrative texts concerned with the life of the Buddha. Indeed some of the earliest Buddhist narratives in India are not literary texts, but sculpted low reliefs from Bhārhut and Sāñcī (*circa* second–first centuries BCE). A case can be made that these works of art chiseled in stone could easily have influenced the biographical and oral tradition dealing with the Buddha’s life. For example, one of the pillars at Sāñcī *stūpa* no. 1 has a representation of a monkey making an offering of a bowl of honey to the Buddha, whose presence is suggested by a tree and an “empty throne” (p. 71, fig. 22). This of course brings to mind the miraculous episode that supposedly took place at Vaiśālī, commonly found in the art of India, but not in the literary texts until centuries later. Étienne Lamotte (1976: 738) has pointed out that often “artists” drew their inspiration from the texts, but then in turn the texts were sometimes influenced by the works created by the sculptors in ancient India. Another possible bearing of artworks on texts relates to the peculiar characteristics of the great man (*mahāpuruṣalakṣaṇa*), that is, the Buddha, of which Béguin does not dare to explain the complex origins (p. 41). Several of these distinctive marks, such as the cranial protuberance said to be like a turban (*uṣṇīṣa*) or the tuft of hair between the eyebrows (*ūrṇā*), have elicited much speculation among scholars. One physical sign, in which the explanation is found in many texts, is that the Buddha had “webbed fingers (and toes)” like the feet of a swan. This is probably the result of some confusion caused by the technical exigencies of the sculptural medium, which must leave a “web” of stone between the unfolded fingers of the Buddha image to avoid breakage. It thus appears clear that texts may have been regularly revisited and interpreted in light of these artistic practices.

However, Béguin draws a crucial distinction between “style” and “iconography”. Buddhist iconography is prescriptive and fixed, and so does not easily change from one region to another except when certain “iconographic” innovations are introduced. Conversely, style reflects the diversity of regional aesthetics and cultures, as well as historical developments. In essence, it is quite fluid, depending on the date and the geographical origin of the material object or structure, although some Indian artistic schools, such as the Gupta or Pāla styles, enjoyed “international” fame. So the architectural structure of the *stūpa*, for example, has widely spread across Asia, taking on many diverse forms and names as details specific to different regions were incorporated into the design. Yet the *stūpa*’s overall function remains the same, a tomb-like structure where sacred relics can be kept safe and venerated. In the same vein, Buddha or Bodhisattva images, irrespective of where or when they were created, are normally clearly identifiable by Buddhists as such, thanks to iconographic devices or specific attributes. According to the textual tradition, the representation of the Buddha, for instance, should convey the ideals of the thirty-two major characteristics of the great man, although two of these distinctive marks are not publicly visible and many others are rarely depicted on Buddha images or sculptures. While all Buddhas are alike, and I agree with the author when he writes that the iconography of Śākyamuni conditioned those of past Buddhas, I disagree, however, with his following statement that Maitreya, the Buddha of the future, has an iconography of his own, frequently represented seated with his legs pendant (p. 52). As I have written elsewhere (Revire 2010, 2014, 2016), this peculiar posture (*bhadrāsana*) is not exclusively reserved for Maitreya or any other Buddhas. Positive identification of such pendant-legged Buddhas remains problematic, unless backed by epigraphic or textual evidence, since each case also depends on its specific cultural and archaeological context (e.g. Griffiths, Revire and Sanyal 2013).

Presumably for the sake of simplicity, the publisher of the English translation chose not to employ diacritical marks when using either Sanskrit or other indigenous terms, although these diacritics are present in the original French version. In the same vein, Béguin eschews the excessive use of those technical terms that are the hallmark of Buddhist scholars and art historians. However, a glossary of such terms, some of which have passed into common English, would have been a welcome addition for the benefit of the general reader. For example, it would have been useful to make clear distinctions between a *stūpa* (*thūpa*), a *caitya* (*cetiya*)—which apparently gave rise to the words *chedi* in Thailand

and *zedi* in Burma—a *dhātugarbha* (*dägaba* in Sinhalese, later transliterated as “pagoda” by Westerners of the colonial era), and the Tibetan *chörten*. Often these terms are considered synonyms in English, but they are not and should have been explained by the author. A *caitya* (“object of veneration,” pp. 31, 66) is not necessarily a *stūpa*, although all *stūpas* are regarded as *caityas*. A Buddha image or a Bodhi tree can also be regarded as a *caitya*. The word pagoda, on the other hand, seems to have a different etymology. In the strict sense, as a depository location for a relic (*dhātu*), it is the equivalent of the Indian *stūpa*, but stylised as a tiered tower with multiple eaves as commonly seen in Nepal, China, Vietnam, Korea, and Japan. It is uncommon in Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and other parts of South or Southeast Asia except, of course, in modern Chinese temples as a product of the Chinese diaspora. The generic term often refers in English to religious complexes in a broader sense although it would not be an accurate word to describe a Buddhist temple or a monastery in Burma (*kyaung*) or in Thailand, Laos or Cambodia (*wat*).

Similarly, the term “votive”, which Béguin uses extensively, as in “votive tablets” (p. 182), seems equally inappropriate. In fact, these Buddhist artifacts bear no comparison to other objects for which the term is commonly used, such as mediaeval Christian tablets (*ex voto*) expressing gratitude to a saint and crowding the walls of European churches. This terminology, which still dominates art historical literature, is most likely (consciously or not) influenced by the great and pioneering work on Buddhist art by the French art historian Alfred Foucher (1865–1952), whose views were profoundly embedded in the Catholic practices and popular traditions of his day. One such view, expressed by Béguin (p. 201), is that these artifacts were possibly manufactured at the great holy Indian sites for pilgrims and act as souvenirs (*memento*), like those acquired at Lourdes in France. As Peter Skilling has recently stressed (2005, 2009), this interpretation has no basis in Buddhist texts or rituals, or in the archaeological record. Although it is impossible to know what they were originally labelled in India, clay moulded miniature Buddhist images are called *tsha tsha* in Tibetan, possibly deriving from the Sanskrit word *sañcaka*. In Thailand today the images are simply named “holy sealings” or “imprints” (*phra phim*), in Cambodia they are similarly qualified as “sacred” (*brah patimā*), while in Burma they are called “sacred terracotta” (*mye-bon-hpaya*). Other terms, such as “clay sealings, stamped images, moulded images” and so on, have also been used. Employing different terms may also encourage readers to reflect upon, and question, the functions of these artifacts.

This leads me to my next point. Since Buddhism is a living tradition, both religiously, textually and artistically, Buddhist art continues to evolve and be produced. While Béguin understandably focuses on antiquities that have achieved worldwide fame, much Buddhist art may remain hidden, because scholars have not yet been sufficiently attuned to the many contemporary expressions of Buddhism taking place throughout the world today. Many of these have already produced, or have the potential to produce, their own artistic language. Here I am thinking, for example, about the long, painted Vessantara scrolls of northeastern Thailand (for example, Lefferts and Cate 2012), as well as other artistic creations taking place outside the focus of most art historians and urban centres. Any “art historian” of Buddhism ought to be sure to draw attention to this constantly emerging work—otherwise readers will always think that “Buddhist art” is only located in the past.

Moreover, for Buddhists across all traditions, a Buddha image is more than just an image, a souvenir, or a piece of art—it is a substitute for the Buddha. In China and Japan, this is nicely recounted by narrative means through the legend of King Udayana, who, in the absence of the Lord, is said to have ordered the carving of the first sandalwood image of the Buddha in his own likeness (p. 282). This legend is also known in Sri Lanka and mainland Southeast Asia, although the frame story differs in many respects and is always associated there with King Pasenadi the Kosalan (Gombrich 1978; Revire 2017). This alone explains how and why these images are treated by Buddhist devotees with utmost reverence as living beings and are worshiped with offerings of flowers, incense, candles, and sometimes clothes, food and water. In their natural settings of monastery, temple or altar in the home, these Buddha images are generally placed above the heads of worshipers on a special pedestal. Consecration ceremonies govern the making of any Buddha images, regardless of their size or the substance from which they are made. This is done prominently by celebrating the “opening of the divinity’s eyes” (p. 35). The same holds true for all Buddhist artifacts or other indexical (non-figurative) signs of the Buddha, such as *stūpas* (and the relics enshrined therein), Bodhi trees, footprints and so on. Although Béguin—an art historian and museum curator—is silent on this matter, it would have been appropriate for him to mention that “consecrated” Buddhist icons should not be kept outside places of worship. For the enjoyment of western tourists or amateurs, and also for security reasons, many foreign museums or art galleries worldwide forbid the *in situ* worship or even physical contact with these displayed icons. They are presented only to please the eyes. These museum practices, however, infringe

on the basic definition of Buddhist art as a sacred and devotional tradition (Skilling 2012). To conclude on a more idealistic note, a new and innovative approach to studying Buddhist art would seek to bridge the gaps between the various disciplines (textual, art, and anthropological studies), and to challenge artificial boundaries or categories, such as “Theravāda” or “Mahāyāna”. As scholars, we should be cautious about imposing “clean” models based on our own backgrounds which push us into thinking that things are simpler than they are. This “new approach” can only be made through the comprehensive study of sites and objects, taking into account their historical, local and cultural contexts. The rich legacy of Buddhist art and architecture produced in one place is inspired by the ritual and veneration of relics and icons. But then art and rituals are often temporally and culturally specific. While the material record is generally the product of ideologies that can be studied through the examination of liturgies, inscriptions and literary narratives, the material object in front of us does not necessarily have a single or static meaning and value. This in turn raises the question as to whether artwork is a text that can be easily “read”. In fact a single image without epigraphic or archaeological context is often difficult for scholars to interpret, but that should be the subject of further consideration.

As regards the structure of the book, some confusion may arise from its admixture of geographical and historical divisions. Why propose separate, very short, chapters on Campā and Śrīvijaya, known as ancient “Indianised kingdoms”, instead of using the modern nation-state designations of Vietnam, Malaysia or Indonesia? (Note that there is already a chapter on Java.) Is there really such a thing as “Śrīvijayan art”? If there is, why not spend more time discussing the archaeological remains or sculptures in the Sumatran heartlands instead of solely focusing on artifacts found in peninsular Thailand (pp. 169–171)? Similarly, why not dedicate an independent chapter to Laos or Lan Xang, which is dealt with much too briefly in the chapter on Thailand? Béguin (p. 188) all too conveniently assumes that Laos has, over the centuries, suffered too much from the effects of its powerful neighbours (that is, the Khmer empire until the mid-fourteenth century, the later Tai or Siamese Lan Na and Ayutthaya kingdoms, and so on) to have developed its own art with individual characteristics. He does, however, pay attention to the original architectural style presented in the Lao *that* (for example, Phra That Luang in Vientiane, illustrated on p. 189, fig. 35). The same could certainly be said about other Tai or Siamese art schools of Sukhothai, Lan Na, Ayutthaya and so on, which drew heavily on various preceding artistic traditions. For example, the eclectic art and architecture of



Ayutthaya is a subtle combination of U Thong, Sukhothai, Lan Na and Khmer arts. Sukhothai art, in turn, owes a considerable amount to Sinhalese traditions gradually introduced into mainland Southeast Asia, beginning in the thirteenth century, possibly through Burma. If modern designations and entities, such as Thailand and Myanmar, supplied the author's rule for the division of the book into chapters, then these should have been applied throughout. Moreover, if the art of Bhutan, which Béguin admits "should really be accorded a distinct place in the Tibetan world" (p. 275), why did he integrate it into the chapter on Tibet and Mongolia?

These few areas for potential discussion or improvement aside, the present volume enriches our understanding of the diverse ways by which Buddhist art developed over the centuries to become, according to the author, a "truly unifying factor" in Asia. Through this English translation, it now becomes accessible to a broad audience and provides a stimulating read with a wealth of colour illustrations. We should be thankful to Gilles Béguin, and to Narisa Chakrabongse, who has made this book widely available.

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