
Title of Object

Guardian Lion

Photo of Object (Not included. Object is a loan object)



Object Information

Artist: Unknown

Culture: Khmer Empire

Date of Object: Late 12th-early 13th century CE

Country: Cambodia

Accession Number: L94.63.2

File Created: 4/19/2016

Material/Medium: Sandstone sculpture

Author of File: Elizabeth Winga

Department: Chinese, South and Southeast
Asian Art

Reviewer of File: Kara ZumBahlen

Last Updated/Reviewed: 6/28/2016

Tour Topics

Group 3 tour, animals/birds, ancient culture, architecture, power/status, ritual/ceremony, spirituality/sacred, symbolism, Buddhism

Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

What do you see as you look at the face of this sculpture?

As you continue to look at the face of this sculpture, what are you thinking?

Now I'd like to hear about what you're wondering. What questions are you asking yourself?

Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

What do you see? SUBJECT MATTER - The visual emphasis of this sculptural lion is on the head, which has decorative relief designs all over it, compared to the rest of the body which is smooth and plain. The face is surrounded by spiral-like curls to suggest the lion's mane. The flame-shaped eyes and open mouth are both highlighted by short repetitive linear marks in the stone. The open mouth reveals teeth and a grin-like expression. Topping the mouth is a simple large flat nose.

What do you wonder? STYLE - The lion has a fantasy quality about its design called the Bayon style. The lion is depicted as a fantastic stylized beast, called the Bayon style, which is the mouth wide open and lips drawn back to suggest a grin. The massive chest is covered in a triangular shape by a decorative main. It is believed to have Javanese influence, which references a royal family in the Khmer Empire. Researchers have wondered whether this imaginary depiction could be connected to the fact that lions

were not native to Cambodia, so sculptors of these objects may never have seen a lion. This stone sculpture is carved from sandstone, which is a native stone of the mountains of Cambodia. The process is subtractive sculpture. The detailed design would have been carved with tools designed for that purpose.

Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

What are you thinking? FUNCTION & CONTENT - The title of this sculpture, GUARDIAN LION, guides our thinking to conceive of this object as one created to have protective powers. Its placement at the entrance of a Buddhist temple in Cambodia leads us to appreciate how this particular face was designed to be a protector of Buddhist spiritual teachings. The lion, representing royalty, strength, and courage, was the personal symbol of Khmer kings [who were believed to be gods as well.] The lion as guardian of the sacred precinct suggests the ability to ward off evil through both divine and royal protection.

What do you wonder? ANECDOTAL FACTORS - A quite similar Guardian Lion is part of the Met Museum collection. The “look-alike” sculpture suggests that this may have been a conventional design for guardian lions at the front of Buddhist temples in the Khmer region of Cambodia during the 12th-13th centuries.

From Asia, Met Museum book, section on GUARDIAN LION:

- Guardian Lions are integral to the sculptural scheme of virtually all Khmer temples. They flank the main approaches to the sanctuary, placed along stairways and on terraces. These huge, formidable creatures are often the first sculptures to be seen when approaching a temple. The lion was an important part of traditional Khmer iconography, which revolved around the authority of the king. Lions symbolize royalty, strength, & courage, and as guardians, suggest both divine and royal protection. Consequently, they were believed to ward off evil, and malevolent beings. In this context the lion is the guardian of sacred precincts and the personal symbol of the Khmer god-kings. The same sculptural skills were lavished on these animals as on figural sculpture. Since lions are not native to the Thai-Cambodian area, artists treated them conceptually, often transforming them into iconic, heraldic creatures. This lion is a wonderful great beast, bursting with power. Altogether superbly constructed, it is composed of forceful volumes – full & harmonious. Contrasts between the smooth, bulging body & the decorative patterning of the mane, eyebrows, ears, and so forth, are worked out in a masterful fashion. The carving is crisp & precise without being dry. Alert and attentive, the grimacing beast is a truly regal symbol and a potent guardian of sacred grounds. Stylistically, this sculpture at the Met belongs to the 10th or early 11th c. Guardian lions are sometimes a bit difficult to date w close precision, but this particular example retains all the sculptural vigor & power of those found at the Khmer sites of the Bakheng & Banteay Srei, dating to the 10th c.

The guardian lion concept has continued to be a feature of architecture throughout history around the world, including here at Mia's original entrance on 24th St.

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

One of the most distinct sculptural types developed by the ancient Cambodians is the guardian lion. Considered protectors of the Buddhist teachings, pairs of lion images were often placed flanking temple

doors and monumental stairways. Their sculpted remnants are still evident in several of the temple remains at Angkor as well as ancient Khmer sites in Thailand like Lopburi. Lions were not native to Cambodia and, from the beginning, Khmer artists depicted them as rather fantastic stylized beasts. The lion here is of the Bayon style, with its mouth wide open and lips drawn back like a grin. The massive chest is covered by a decorative mane and the posture is rigid befitting a temple guardian.

Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Mia Accession Records

Marilyn Stokstad, Art History

Class Notes

Object Files

Ancient History Encyclopedia Met Museum – book on Asia, p. 58. Here is a link to a photo within the collections of the Met Museum: <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/38449>)

PROPS – photos on a tablet of 1] Cambodian guardian lion at Met Museum, 2] two guardian lions at an actual Cambodian temple and 3] another type of guardian lion at Mia's original entrance.