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## Title of Object

Walking Buddha

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## Photo of Object (optional)



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## Object Information

**Artist:** Unknown

**Culture:** Thailand (Sukhothai Kingdom)

**Date of Object:** 15<sup>th</sup> century

**Country:** Thailand

**Accession Number:** 31.115

**File Created:** 4/15/2016

**Material/Medium:** Bronze, with traces of pigment, sculpture

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**Department:** Chinese, South and Southeast Asian Art

**Reviewer of File:** Kara ZumBahlen

**Last Updated/Reviewed:** 6/29/2016

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## Tour Topics

Group 3 tour, ancient culture, beauty, fashion/dress, gods/goddesses, ritual/ceremony, spirituality/sacred, symbolism, Buddhism

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

1. Take a moment and walk around this sculpture. Notice the movement depicted by the sculptor. What feelings come to mind?
2. What aspects of this sculpture evoke the supernatural?
3. We discussed the four postures of the meditating Buddha, standing, sitting, reclining and walking. If you were to meditate, which posture would you be most comfortable with? Why?
4. If time permits, try 20-30 seconds of mindful meditation. Mention being aware of sounds, scents, room temperature, being in the moment.

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

The walking Buddha is a sculpture type that flourished in Thailand's Sukhothai kingdom during the 14th and 15th centuries. It was known as *canhama*, "walking back and forth", in reference to the pacing carried out by the Buddha during the third week following the enlightenment. Today, the walking Buddha is known simply as *lilâ*, "graceful". The left hand raised is the gesture of granting protection (fear not, the *mudra* of reassurance) and the figure displays the supernatural anatomy of the Buddha, including projecting heels, long fingers, smooth skin, elongated arms, extended earlobes, *ushnisha* (here erupting into a finial of flame representing the moment of enlightenment).

The creation of a walking Buddha image is a distinctive feature of Thai art in the thirteenth century. Walking images of the Buddha continue to be made in Thailand to this day. Sukhothai walking images are connected with the conception of Thai kings as being closer to the people than their Indian or Khmer counterparts. The Sukhothai style of sculpture is very distinctive, with smooth long limbs, an oval face and smooth modelling of clothing. The influence of Sri Lanka is clear in the flame-like *ushnisha* which is seen on the head of images of the Buddha (see Khan Academy article).

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

Buddhism is a religion to about 488 million people around the world and had its origins about 2500 years ago in northern India when Prince Siddhartha left his palace where he had spent twenty-nine years indulging in pleasures. He was determined to comprehend the nature of human suffering. After a grueling spiritual quest that lasted six years, he at last attained enlightenment meditating under the Bodhi (fig) tree. He became the Buddha, the "awakened one," and devoted the rest of his life to teaching the way to enlightenment that he himself had found, giving birth to one of the world's great religions.

It is widely believed by Thais that Buddhist missionaries were sent to Thailand in the 3rd century B.C. While this is quite possible, there is at present no evidence to support this belief. In the main, however, it came with Indian traders and settlers who for seven hundred years frequented the shores of Burma, Malaya, Indonesia, Thailand and Cambodia. The early settlers brought both Hinduism and Buddhism, as evidenced by numerous images of Vishnu, Shiva and Buddha found in early sites in Thailand. Animism antedated both Hinduism and Buddhism in Thailand and has persisted to the present day, chiefly in the form of spirit shrines in doors, yards and business premises. By the 6th century A.D. Buddhism was well established in south and central areas of what is now Thailand.

Buddha images were not made during the first few centuries after the life of Buddha. They first appeared during the 1st and 2nd century A.D. in India. Almost immediately, a set of rules developed on how the Buddha should be depicted. It is worth remembering that a Buddha image is considered to be endowed with supernatural powers and therefore has to be properly rendered.

Regarding the history of the **Sukhothai Kingdom**: Traditional Thai historians considered the foundation of the Sukhothai kingdom as the beginning of their nation because little was known about the kingdoms prior to Sukhothai. Modern historical studies demonstrate that Thai history began before Sukhothai. Yet the foundation of Sukhothai is still a celebrated event. Sukhothai was the capital of the first Kingdom of Siam in the 13th and 14th centuries. It has a number of fine monuments, illustrating the beginnings of Thai architecture. The great civilization which evolved in the Kingdom of Sukhothai absorbed numerous

influences and ancient local traditions; the rapid assimilation of all these elements forged what is known as the 'Sukhothai style'. (See UNESCO site for pictures of Sukhothai Temples.)

Buddhism is a large part of Thai culture. About 95% of the Thai people are practicing Buddhists. Statues and images of the Buddha are everywhere in Thailand. However, in the summer palace of the King there are no images of Buddha because before becoming the enlightened one, Buddha was a prince and a prince is beneath the king and displaying images of a prince in the King's palace would be offensive. A reminder that though the faith of Buddhism is such a large part of the Thai culture, the man who became the buddha is not a god.

The Buddha is always in one of four postures deemed suitable: Sitting, Standing, Walking or Reclining Postures. The dress of the Buddha is the monastic robe, draped over both shoulders, or with the right shoulder bare.

This walking Buddha is practicing walking meditation. In Thailand, there are two main branches in Buddhist meditation: samatha (calmness, concentration) and vipassana (insight), which stresses mindfulness. The walking meditation is a form of mindfulness meditation. Thich Nhat Hanh, perhaps the greatest Zen Master of our time, refers to Mindfulness poetically as, "keeping one's consciousness alive to the present reality". Simply put, Mindfulness is the mind of "just being". It is said that to "just be" can simultaneously be the most ordinary and the most precious experience in life.

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### **Current Mia Label Information (optional)**

The walking Buddha is a sculpture type that flourished in Thailand's Sukhothai kingdom during the 14th and 15th centuries. The Buddha, born Prince Sidartha, renounced his wealth and spent the rest of his life teaching throughout northern India. The Sukhothai Buddha image portrayed him simply and elegantly, with his heel lifted and eyes lowered, practicing walking meditation. Walking is one of four postures prescribed for meditational exercises in ancient Theravada Buddhist texts.

Sukhothai artists were the first to create walking Buddha sculptures fully in the round. The type, however, has its roots in earlier images illustrating the Buddha descending from Tavatimsa heaven on a special ladder, after spending months there teaching his mother, who had died 7 days after his birth. It might also refer to the Buddha walking up and down a golden bridge in the third week following his Enlightenment.

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

Buddhism: <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-buddhist/>

Sukhothai Kingdom: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sukhothai\\_Kingdom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sukhothai_Kingdom)

Sukhothai is also an UNESCO World Heritage site, so you could show pictures of the temples there: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/574>

An article on another walking Buddha from the Khan Academy:

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-asia/southeast-asia/thailand/a/sukhothai-walking-buddha>

Articles from Google Scholar, Class Notes, Mia Library, and Docent Files