THE DISEMBODIED HUMAN HEAD IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN ART

The disembodied head has become a standard symbol of Asian art. Modern reproductions, especially heads of the Buddha, are now mass-produced as purely decorative items in the West. The idea of using a head or bust to represent a particular individual as a whole has a long tradition in Western art, dating back at least to Roman times. However, in many parts of Asia, this idea is entirely alien to the local artistic tradition; in particular for religious sculpture, where the completeness and integrity of an image are vital for its use within worship and ritual. This article will attempt to explain why the head without a body has become such an established feature of Asian art in Europe, using examples from Southeast Asia in the Rijksmuseum collection.

Although rare, the idea of showing a human head without a body is not unknown within the Hindu-Buddhist tradition, especially in relief sculpture. One example is the stone face of a man carved in high relief that is believed to have come from Candi Bima on the Dieng plateau in Central Java (fig. 1). Similar faces can still be seen within false arches on the tower or superstructure of the temple. This iconographic feature of a face within an arch is derived from early Indian architecture and appears as a distinct motif in many parts of Southeast Asia, in particular during the 6th to 8th centuries.

Archaeological finds

In general however, the heads that appear in Asian art collections in Europe are only fragments of a larger, once complete statue or relief carving. It is often assumed that these heads must have been deliberately removed from their bodies by thieves or unscrupulous dealers, but this is by no means necessarily the case with older museum collections. In fact, the widespread acceptance of the disembodied head as a standard feature of Asian art is due to the archaeological circumstances in which many sculptures were found. This can be illustrated by two stone heads from Cambodia featured recently in *Aziatische Kunst*. The first (AK-MAK-226) was discovered lying in the ground within the walls of Angkor Thom in 1924 and was already separated from the body; the broken remains of which were only recovered some days later. The second (AK-MAK-227) was excavated from beneath a pile of building debris at the temple of Ta Prohm in 1927, but no trace of a body was ever found.¹

The neck is naturally a weak point in any statue depicting the human body, but this is particularly true in the case of stone. In Indonesia, the neck is often strengthened by the depiction of heavy jewellery and the use of high relief sculpture also provides additional support at the back. Nevertheless, the neck remains vulnerable, as evidenced by a statue of the bodhisattva

Fig. 1
Face of a male figure
from Candi Bima,
andesite, h. 23.9 cm.,
Central Java, 8th-9th
century, Rijksmuseum,
AK-MAK-231.

Fig. 2 (above left)
Statue of the
bodhisattva Manjushri
from Candi Plaosan,
andesite, h. 138 cm.,
Central Java, 9th
century, Rijksmuseum,
AK-MAK-240.

Fig. 3
Head of the Buddha,
andesite, h. 31 cm.,
Central Java, probably
from Borobudur, 9th
century, Rijksmuseum,
AK-MAK-239.

Manjushri in the VVAK collection (AK-MAK-240) which, although complete, is cracked at exactly this point; it was restored to its current appearance in 1931 (fig. 2).

If a statue is allowed to fall forwards, it is very likely to break at the neck. This has sadly been the fate of many Hindu-Buddhist images after the abandonment of the temples in which they were housed and the cessation of cult activity. In some cases however, it is clear that cult images were also deliberately broken and ritually decommissioned in antiquity as a response to changes in religious emphasis. During the years 2000 and 2001, a pit was excavated at the temple of Banteay Kdei at Angkor that contained the remains of 274 stone statues, almost all of which had been deliberately broken at the neck and ritually buried.² In other cases, damaged or otherwise redundant images were intentionally abandoned in streams or canals; the running water serving as a natural means of purification.

On Java, the religious and artistic importance of complete images led to a general disregard for fragmented or broken statuary. This situation is clear from the records of Theo van Erp's first restoration of the Borobudur in 1907-1911. Although 151 complete stone statues of the Buddha could be preserved or restored to their original niches on the sides of the monument, many more existed only as fragments. A further twenty stone heads were recovered during excavation, while three more were found in a chicken coop within a military camp and another on a grave.³ The desire to restore as many statues as possible to their original condition was paramount even to the earliest

investigators, but this is not as easy as it may seem. In a computer research project initiated during the last reconstruction in 1977, an attempt was made to match the known heads from Borobudur kept in European and American collections with the bodies still present on the monument. However, in only two cases could a firm match be established.⁴

This failure was attributed to the rough manner in which the heads had been cut from the body, a practice which has marred countless statues and temple remains throughout the region. In the case of the VVAK example (AK-MAK-239) however, the uneven fragmentation of the neck (fig. 3) looks very much like a natural break and the head was collected at a time when such deliberate vandalism was hardly necessary. The earliest known owner of this head in the Netherlands, the music historian Daniël François Scheurleer (1855-1927), was from a generation of scholars who were readily familiar with the archaeological heritage of Greece and Rome. Rather than destroying an existing aesthetic, or indeed an intact statue, such collectors created a new aesthetic of their own in which archaeological fragments – above all the disembodied head of the Buddha – became central to a new appreciation of ancient Southeast Asian art.

William Southworth is curator of Southeast Asian Art at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

Literature

- Guus van Erp, 'Life and work of Theo van Erp: March 26 1874 Ambon – May 7 1958 Laren (N-H)' in *100 Tahun Pascapemugaran Candi Borobudur: Trilogi I: Menyelamatkan Kembali Candi Borobudur*. Second edition. Balai Konservasi Peninggalan Borobudur, Magelang, 2012, pp. 1-19.
- Jan Fontein, 'Piecing together the fragments of the past: The retrieval and reconstruction of Indonesian sculpture', *Aziatische Kunst* 26/4 (1996), pp. 2-24.
- Yoshiaki Ishizawa & Masako Marui, 'La découverte de 274 sculptures et d'un caitya bouddhique lors des campagnes de fouilles de 2000 et 2001 au temple de Banteay Kdei à Angkor' *Arts Asiatiques* 57 (2002): 206-18.
- William A. Southworth, 'The "Vereniging" at Angkor: Four sandstone sculptures from Cambodia', *Aziatische Kunst* 42/1 (2012), pp. 18-27.

Notes

- 1 Southworth 2012: figs. 3 & 5
- 2 Ishizawa & Marui 2002
- 3 Van Erp 2012: 4-7
- 4 Fontein 1996: 18