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PENINSULAS AND DRAGON TRAILS: SOUTHEAST ASIAN ART FROM THE CROW COLLECTION NOVEMBER 30, 2012 - FEBRUARY 16, 2014

The Crow Collection of Asian Art is home to a small but engaging group of objects from places that are somewhat obscured by the collective term “Southeast Asia.” The name came into use at the end of World War II to describe a part of the world that had for several generations appeared on Western maps variously as Tonkin, French Indo-China (later North Vietnam and South Vietnam), Dutch East Indies, and various other names and boundaries that have disappeared with the reemergence of independent states, many of which have chosen names to contrast with the colonial period. Burma is officially Myanmar (although Burma is making an internal comeback), Cambodia is Kampuchea, the former Sultanate of Brunei is Brunei Darussalam, Singapore is independent from Malaya, and Malaya is Malaysia. East Timor—which was a Portuguese and Catholic outpost on the island of Timor, claimed by the Dutch after centuries of trade monopoly, invaded by Japan, handed back to Portugal, and then ceded to Muslim Indonesia—is now independent, with claims to large underwater gas reserves in the maritime (always murky) region that separates it from Australia.

Southeast Asia is a part of the world where boundaries continue to change, and the segments of this complex history portrayed in *Peninsulas and Dragon Tails* suggest the potential for enriched understanding of the modern world through greater familiarity with the region’s past and current cultural geography.

Lacquered wood sculptures of young monks from the Mandalay period of Burmese history conjure the missing object of their devotion, the historical Buddha, who taught renunciation as a path to bliss, even while British colonials expelled the last king and queen, cooled themselves on sultry porches, and oversaw immense plantations of rubber trees on land where there had recently been only forest. A textile from 20th-century Bali reflects ancient associations between fortune, misfortune, time, and spirits, mixed with advice on preferred market days for various goods, local cults, and Hinduism as imported with people arriving from Java. The Crow Collection’s 7th-century sandstone sculpture of four-armed Vishnu, a rare example of early Khmer culture in Cambodia, takes its place alongside several later sculptures from the period of the Angkor sanctuaries. As always, the sculpture seems to occupy more space than its actual measurements would suggest. The scope of this exhibition touches on only a few times and places within the rich and complex history of Southeast Asia and its diverse cultures—ethnically varied, speaking localized languages, writing with different scripts, wearing different clothes, practicing different faiths, honoring different social structures. The objects shown are grouped by the modern countries with which

they are particularly identified—Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Indonesia. The exhibition includes maps with boundaries of the shifting cultural spheres that produced the objects on view. The importance of geography to culture in this region emerges: the Himalayan mountains of the Eurasian continent branch to the southeast in fingers of land and terminate in the islands of the “Pacific Ring of Fire,” where the earth’s mantle shakes, and the land, rivers, and seas mete out judgments that are repeatedly honored.

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