

Buddhist Art From India: Where the Natural Meets the Supernatural

The Met has gathered a stunning display of ancient Buddhist art — rare loans including dozens of objects that have never been exhibited outside of India.



By **Holland Cotter**

July 21, 2023

At the press opening for the Metropolitan Museum’s beyond-beautiful “Tree & Serpent: Early Buddhist Art in India, 200 B.C.E.-400 C.E.,” five red-robed monks chanted Pali blessings, the vocalized equivalent of oceanic silence. The ancient sculptures around them projected a different, visual music: Forest birds sang, mythical creatures roared, and semi-divine and human figures clapped their hands and danced as if at some riotous summer party.

There were other contrasts at the opening, too, less evident. Given the monumental glow of the sculptures, each lighted to look deep-carved from darkness, you probably wouldn’t think to guess at the difficult, always tentative process — logistical and diplomatic, extending over a decade — that went into gathering them together, with more than 50 on loan from India for the first time. It says something about those curatorial struggles that we haven’t seen such a display of ancient art from India, on this scale, in an American museum in years, and are unlikely to again soon.

So when the Met’s curator of South and Southeast Asian art, John Guy, stepped up to a microphone to thank a group of visiting Indian museum directors, his words had particular resonance. These were the people who had basically given permission for this show to happen.

Buddhism itself, in its fundamental form, is a permission-giving faith, offering us, as it does, myriad ways to save our souls, including through practices of generosity. At the same time, it’s a faith of ethical absolutes, a major one being: stop killing — your fellow beings, meaning all living things, and the earth, which has a consciousness of its own.

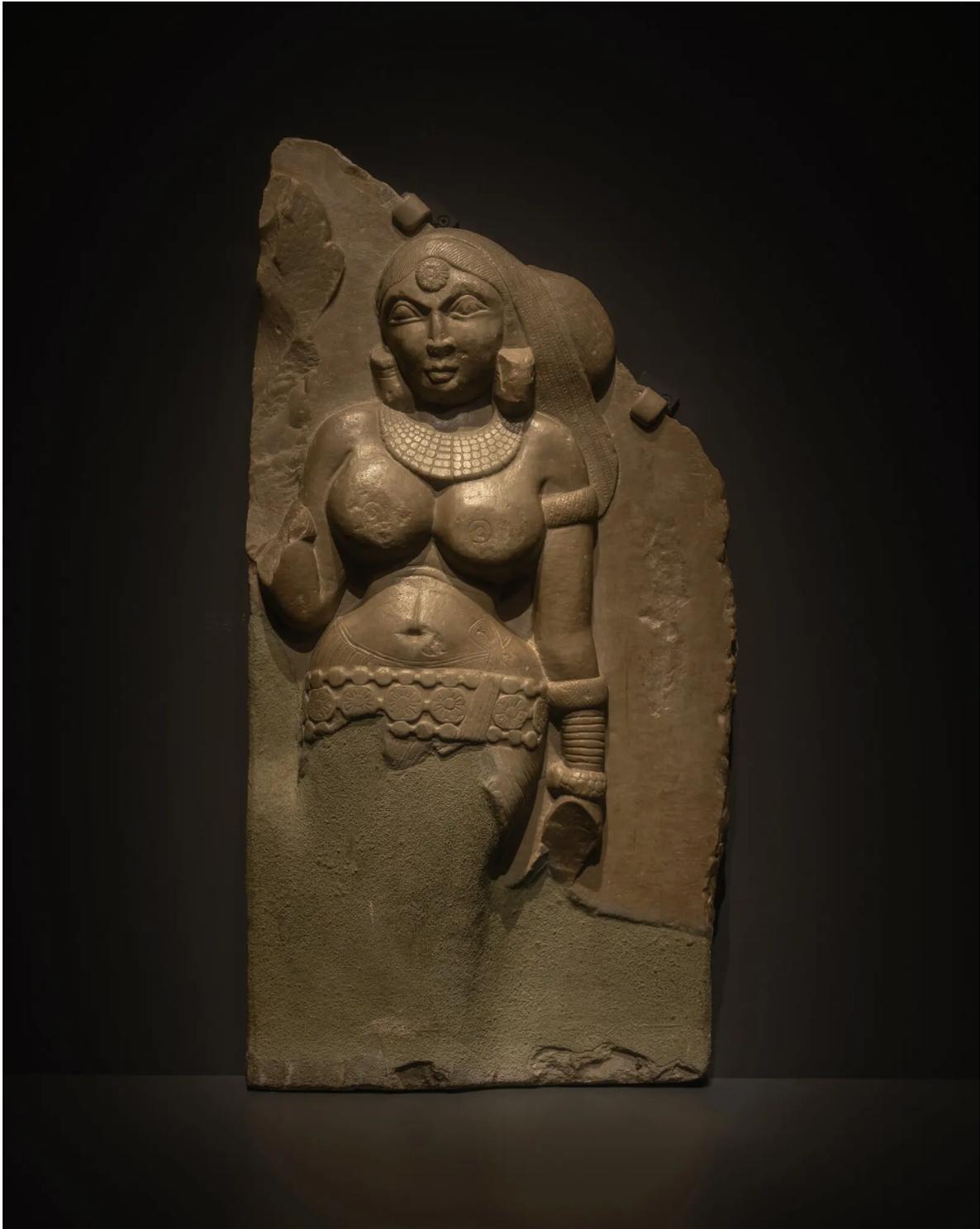


Monks bless the Met exhibition at the opening reception for “Tree & Serpent: Early Buddhist Art in India, 200 B.C.E. - 400 C.E.” They are from a monastery in Queens. Elizabeth Bick for The New York Times

And it is with images of the Earth — of Nature driven by spirits, as it was gradually seen and understood by the man who would become the Buddha — that the exhibition begins.

The man was, in many senses, always a worldly one. He was born a prince, Siddhartha Gautama, in the fifth century B.C.E. in what is now Nepal, near the border with India. As a young person he was a familiar type, a wine-women-and-song sensualist, but one with a depressive streak that led him to grow fixated on the fact of mortality and its woes. In a shock of despondency, he utterly changed his life, took to the road and became a mendicant seeker, one among many, of varying goals and persuasions, who were wandering India at the time.

And once out there, he soon became aware that he was in a spiritually charged terrain, one perceived and revered by grass roots nature cults. Trees, he learned, had souls; birds spoke wisdom; flowers were seasonless, and serpents wielded protective powers. In this world, fantastical creatures — part crocodile, part tiger, part fish — were as common as house pets. And populations of nature spirits, male (called yakshas) and female (called yakshis), grotesque and gorgeous, malign and benign, ruled.



Yakshi, a female nature spirit, from the Amaravati Great Stupa in Andhra Pradesh, southern India, mid-second-century B.C.E. Limestone. Elizabeth Bick for The New York ...

It was in this environment that Prince Siddhartha transitioned to being the Buddha, and found the peace he had sought. He was in his 30s, and already had some followers. By the time he died, at 80, he had many more. By then, Buddhism had become a “thing,” a path, a faith. And significantly for art, it was on its way to becoming a monument-building institution.

Those first monuments were of a particular type. Known as stupas, and based on traditional South Asian funerary markers, they were domes of fired brick and packed earth in which relics of the Buddha — initially cremation ashes — were embedded.

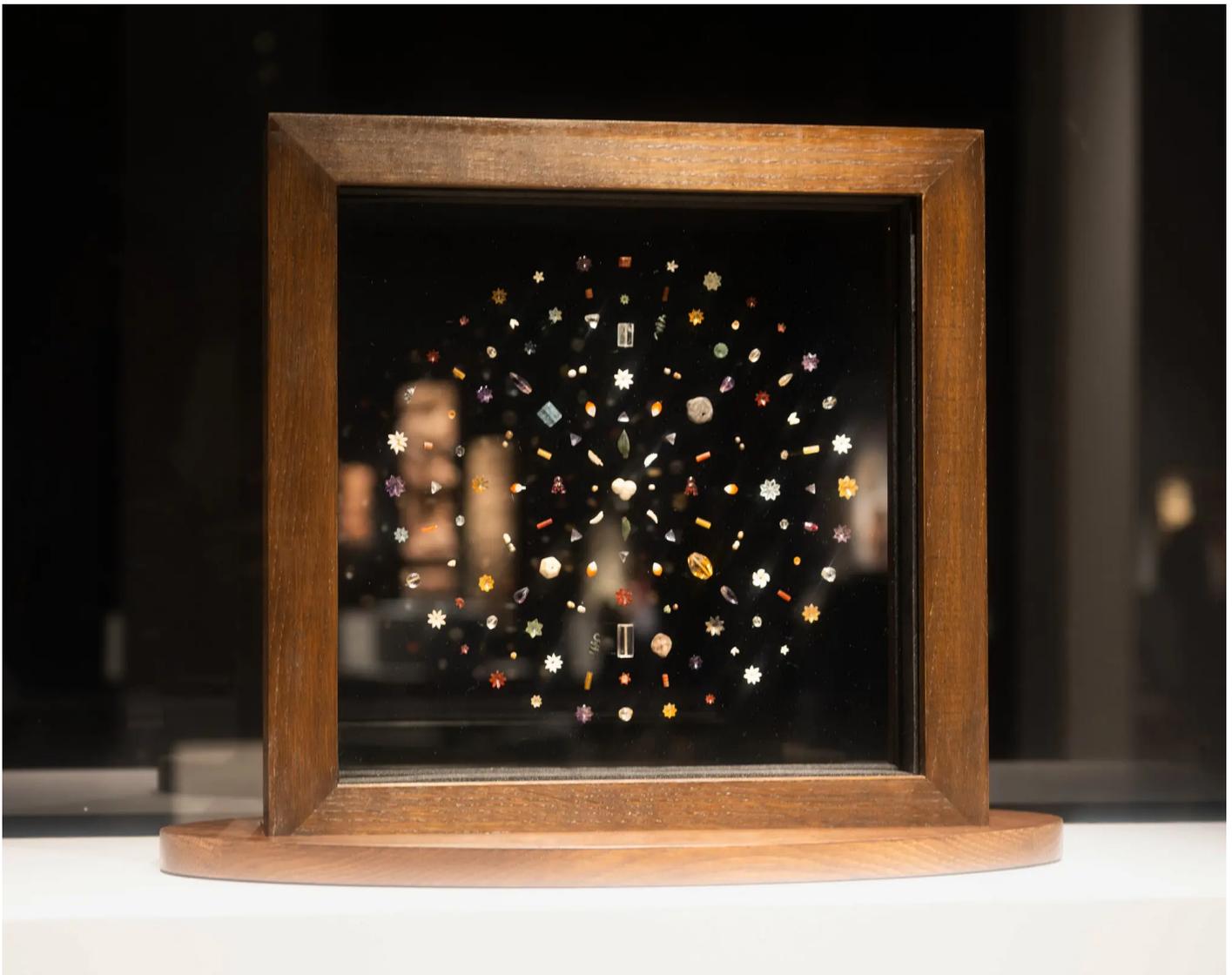
The stupa is a recurrent visual theme in the Met exhibition. A towering abstract walk-in version of one is a pivotal feature of the charismatic exhibition design by Patrick Herron. (Enter this stupa and you find a third century B.C.E. reliquary hoard made up of rock crystal chips, tiny pearls, and sheet-gold florets arranged in a radiant mandala pattern.)



Visitors at the entrance to the exhibition's architectural simulation of a stupa, a monumental Buddhist funerary mound. They are peering at a collection of relics from 240–200 B.C.E. Elizabeth Bick for The New York Times



Relics from the Piprahwa Great Stupa, Siddharthnagar District, Uttar Pradesh, Maurya, ca. 240–200 B.C., include gold. Elizabeth Bick for The New York Times



Relics from the Piprahwa Great Stupa, including semiprecious stones, rock crystal, pearls and shell. Elizabeth Bick for The New York Times

And a sculptural depiction of a stupa, carved in relief on a limestone panel, opens the show. Dating from the first century C.E., it was once attached to the surface of an actual, now long-vanished stupa at Amaravati in southern India (in what is now the state of Andhra Pradesh), an area the Buddha never visited, but one that produced some of the grandest memorials to him, and the origin of most of the works in the Met show.

Cut into the panel's surface are features of the natural-meets-supernatural world that Siddhartha-becoming-Buddha learned to know. A majestically rearing serpent deity guards the stupa's railing gate. A great umbrella-shaped tree shades its dome. And in an extraordinary relief nearby, a grave-faced, plush-bodied nature spirit seems to materialize like mist from the stone.



Center, railing pillar medallion of sandstone with a tree shrine marking Buddha's awakening, Bharhut Great Stupa, Madhya Pradesh, ca. 150-100 B.C.E. Elizabeth Bick for The New York Times

On other reliefs from different locations, in northern and southern animist India, you'll find scenes of communal worship in progress at stupas. With multiple figures kneeling, and waving and praying and flying — no real divide between natural and supernatural here — these get-togethers can look pretty wild, and probably were. Early Buddhist public devotion, like that practiced by animist nature cults, had a jamboree atmosphere. Along with rituals and processions, there were, no doubt, food sellers, and incense

vendors, and corner buskers, as there are in India today. These occasions were about exuberance, abundance, moreness — about heaven, yes, but also very much about earth.

One figure you rarely if ever see participating in these sensuous melees is that of the Buddha himself. For reasons that have been the subject of much historical speculation, early on, and for a long time, he appeared in art only in the form of symbols: an empty throne, a flaming column, a wheel (representing his teachings), a pair of footprints, or the stupa itself. And this was true even when the subject depicted was, as is very often the case, a scene from his own life.



A limestone stupa drum panel with a serpent deity protecting the Buddha; Nagarjunakonda, Andhra Pradesh, late third century, C.E. Elizabeth Bick for The New York Times



Railing pillar medallion: veneration of the Dharma-wheel, Bharhut Great Stupa, Madhya Pradesh, ca. 150–100 B.C.E. Sandstone. Elizabeth Bick for The New York Times

It's as if, after his release from the anxiety of mortality, which he had worked very hard to achieve, to return him to bodily form would be a sacrilege, and a shame. Ineffability was his great reward, a badge of Buddhahood, one he urged us all to try to earn.

Salvation is, of course, like art, a universal concept, different only in detail and dimension from place to place. And while the specific milieu of the Met exhibition is India, its curator, John Guy, who also oversaw the superlative catalog, is careful to avoid the impression that early south Indian Buddhism and culture were landlocked phenomena.

In a gallery titled "Buddhist Art in a Global Setting," he succinctly demonstrates, through the inclusion of two exquisite luxury trade items, the longstanding give-and-take between the subcontinent and the Mediterranean world. One piece is a first century C.E. bronze Roman copy of a Greek figurine of the sea god Poseidon, discovered, in a jumble of other Roman items, in the 1940s in Western India and preserved in a museum there. The other, totally stellar work, also from the first century, is an ivory statuette depicting a fully nude and conspicuously seductive yakshi, or courtesan. It was carved in southern India and found, in 1938, in the ruins at Pompeii.



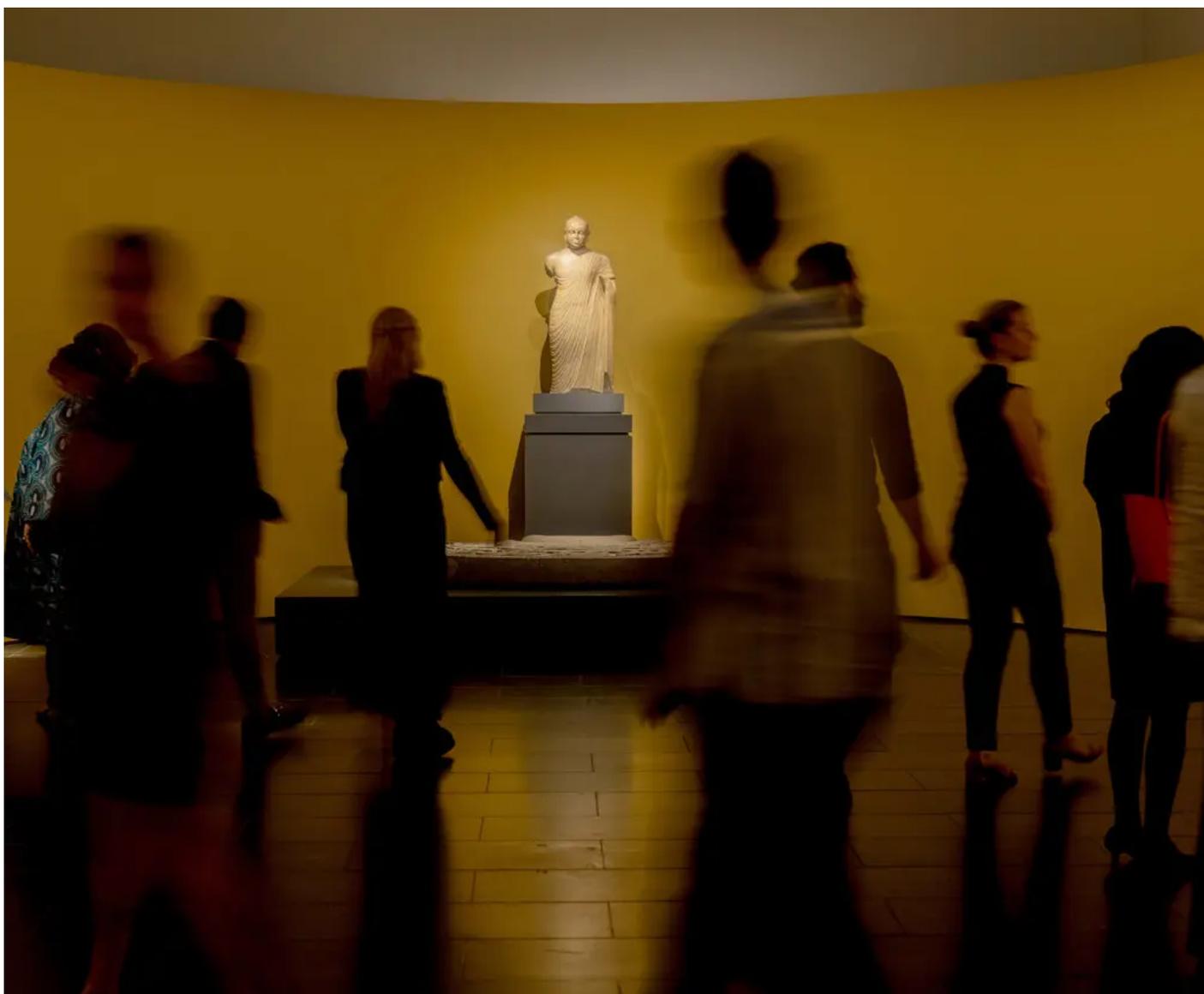
A first century C.E. Roman copy of a Greek figurine of the sea god Poseidon discovered in the 1940s in Western India and preserved in a museum there. Elizabeth Bick for The New York Times



Ivory figurine of a yakshi or courtesan, Western Deccan, Maharashtra, first century C.E., discovered in an excavation of Pompeii. Elizabeth Bick for The New York Times

By the time these pieces had made their journeys away from home, single-figure sculpture, bearing traces of Western models, had already had a long influence, as a prestige style, on Buddhist art in northern India, in political and religious centers like Gandhara. It was only later, in the third and fourth centuries, maybe spurred by an uptick in commercial sea trade between Greater Rome and the subcontinent, that the taste for it moved south.

And when it did, the Buddha himself began to appear there too in bodily form. Carved and cast, free-standing and in-the-round, often wearing robes that had a toga-ish cut and drape, this image became the primary focus of worship at shrines, now centered at monasteries. It replaced the serpent-deities and tree-spirits strategically adopted from the old nature cults, and it incorporated some of the incorporeal symbols — the Dharma wheel — that had once stood in for the Buddha.



The Buddha in bodily form, sculpted in limestone, wearing robes with a toga-ish cut and drape. Telangana, third century C.E. Elizabeth Bick for The New York Times

Several free-standing Indian figures turn the show's final gallery, teasingly titled "The Buddha Revealed," into a kind of chapel. And it is visually clear that a page has turned, both in the exhibition's narrative, and in the history of Buddhism itself.

By the time the latest of these single-figure icons was made in the late fifth to sixth century C.E., the map of Buddhism was changing. By then the religion was widespread in Southeast Asia and China. In the sixth or seventh century, it would arrive in Japan. And its heyday in India was gradually quieting. New evangelical forms of Hinduism were overtaking it in popularity; later, Islam would enter the scene and put Buddhism under siege. By the 12th century, it was reduced to a remnant in India. Then it was all but gone.

If you didn't know of this fate it would be hard to guess it from the glowingly vital, all but palpitating early Indian Buddhist art in the Met show. And from the perspective of the time that art was made, it would have been difficult to predict the terrestrial disaster of our day, engineered by what has turned out to be the planet's most dangerous invasive

species, humans. The stand-alone Buddhas in the show's last gallery are self-contained and expressively commanding, and modern-looking. But coming to them after passing through rooms filled with images of humans and divinities jostling, body to body, like New Yorkers on a subway — with those bodies inextricably woven into landscapes of trees and flowers and birds — “self-contained” and “commanding” and “modern” feel like liabilities, not virtues.

Tree & Serpent: Early Buddhist Art in India, 200 B.C.E. — 400 C.E.

Through Nov. 13, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Ave., (212) 535-7710; metmuseum.org.

Holland Cotter is the co-chief art critic of The Times. He writes on a wide range of art, old and new, and he has made extended trips to Africa and China. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for criticism in 2009. More about Holland Cotter