Arts of Southeast Asia

183 illustrations, 102 in color
Chapter 1  Origins

The earliest human inhabitants of Southeast Asia lived largely by foraging. Some exploited the coastal resources along the shores of the region while others lived in caves close to the streams and forests of the interior. These people developed a close relationship with the natural world on which they relied for their existence. Their earliest manipulation of materials was confined to fashioning tools such as axes and arrowheads, traps and nets. These early cultures depended for the most part on stone tools, which archaeologists have labelled Hoabinhian after a type site at Hoa Binh in Vietnam. Many of these tools demonstrate considerable skill in their manufacture but there is little evidence of an artistic sensibility at work until the last two millennia BC.

The period of Neolithic technology, which developed between 4000 and 1000 BC in coastal and lowland parts of mainland Southeast Asia, left evidence of growing expertise in a variety of media. Polished stone adzes [21] display a real command of the technology and while their forms would have been determined largely by function, the elegant flow of the shapes suggests an appreciation on the part of the makers of the quality of the surface texture. Stone bracelets from this period may have been intended as merely symbolic, perhaps of protection or status, but their forms imply the beginnings of a concern with adornment that is clearly aesthetic. Most of the evidence we have comes from excavations in Thailand. At Ban Kao, a site that dates from the middle of the second millennium BC, the distinctive T-section of the bracelets is not determined by function, and the range of materials used to produce such bracelets, in slate, marble and shell, shows considerable skill in colour, texture and form.

Shell was used during the Neolithic period to make other decorative artefacts such as ear ornaments [23] and beads. At Khok Phanom Di, in Thailand, the remains were found of one woman who had been buried with more than 100,000 shell beads,
probably attached to clothing, which would have shimmered in the sun. The love of reflected light is a continuing theme in Southeast Asian art, and is also evident in some of the pottery [22] found at the same site, which had been burnished by rubbing the surface with a smooth tool such as a pebble before firing. The result is a surface sheen that can have had no practical function; it is clearly an aesthetic elaboration.

The great range of pottery found at sites all over the mainland, but especially in Thailand, presents the most interesting evidence of artistic endeavour from the Neolithic period is, As Khok Phannon Di, occupied from around 2000 BC to 1600 BC, pots were shaped by beating the clay with a paddle, a technique still widely used in the region today. Decorative effects were produced in a variety of ways: some surfaces were impressed with the texture of cord, probably wrapped around the paddle, some were incised and some burnished. The shapes into which the clay was formed were partly dictated by the use for which the pots were intended, but the elegance of line and curve and the great variety suggest that aesthetic considerations also came into play. The complexity of the decorative designs is also remarkable, and there is some consistency of style within particular sites which suggests that preferential choices were made and that these were generally agreed. That the skill of the potter was highly valued is suggested by the wealth of pottery buried as grave goods. Furthermore, some graves of individuals of high status — judging by the care with which they were buried and the quantity of goods buried with them — included their tools of trade; many of these individuals seem to have been potters.

Some sites had particular styles of their own. At Ban Kao a number of distinctive pots with high pedestals and tripod supports were found, in particular a carinated cooking pot supported on cord-marked tripod legs. At Ban Tha Kae the motifs incised on the surface of the pots were accentuated by cord marking [24], either within the motifs or in the areas surrounding them. In general, the background and foreground balance one another in both area and shape, another characteristic of Southeast Asian art that is still evident today. Other sites yielded different techniques: at Nok Nok Tha some of the graves contained painted pottery, while at Non Mak La a striking pot shaped into the form of a cow was found [25].

Figurines in the shape of animals and humans have been found in a number of sites on the mainland, and these probably reflect the importance of the animals so depicted. They include pigs, deer and elephants, but most prevalent are buffalo and other bovine forms.

In maritime Southeast Asia the earliest evidence of art is found in Neolithic remains associated with cultural expansion from Southern China through Taiwan and into the archipelago some four thousand years ago. The early Yanshan culture of eastern Taiwan left a range of decorated pottery vessels, some slipped in red or brown, others decorated with incised patterns or dentate motifs impressed with stamps. At Peinan, thousands of objects were found in graves made from stone slabs. Finds included plain orange pottery, pig and dog figurines as well as items made from a local material called Taiwan jade (greenstone nephrite). From this material there were necklaces made of tubular pieces, earrings [26].
hair ornaments and bracelets. Some of these ornaments were formed into the shapes of animals, while others were geometric. Perhaps the most significant were the split earrings of a type known as ling-ling-o [27]. These nephrite ornaments have four outward projections from the circumference. Earrings of this type have been found also in the Guangdong region of southern China, the Philippines, Sarawak, southern Thailand and southern Vietnam. This distribution coincides with the direction of migration of Austronesian-speakers, some of whom are believed to have sailed from Taiwan to the Philippines and beyond. Aspects of their culture spread west to Borneo and later to Java, Sumatra and to the coast of the Malay Peninsula, and southwards and to the east into Sulawesi and the eastern islands of Indonesia.

Farther south than Luzon, however, the pottery was plain or red-slipped until about 1500 bc, when new styles appeared in the eastern islands of Southeast Asia. Curved and geometrical incisions arranged in discrete zones and stamped designs appeared alongside and partly replaced the existing forms. Some of these developments were probably related to links between Timor, Sulawesi, Sarawak and the Philippines and cultures in the Pacific region; similar styles are also found in the Lapita material of Melanesia and Polynesia, the Lapita peoples probably having colonized those islands from the west.

26 Carved jade earring from a Neolithic grave in Peitou, Taiwan, in the form of two standing human figures flanked by the figure of an animal.
27 Ling-ling-o earrings from the Sa Huynh culture, central Vietnam.

28 Some Bronze Age materials echoed the shapes and decorative elements of earlier times. This container with a trumpet-shaped mouth is covered with a red slip. Ban Lau Khao, Thailand.

The most significant technological development in the Prehistoric period was the introduction of methods of bronze production, which in Thailand seems to have begun soon after 1500 bc. Socketed bronze axes have been found dating from this period, probably used for clearing the forest and for cutting and shaping timber for house-building. There were also spearheads and arrowheads, used either as weapons against human enemies or for hunting game. These tools and weapons were mainly cast using bivalve moulds made of sandstone or clay; their form determined primarily by function. Aesthetic considerations may have been more relevant in the design of bronze ornaments such as the bracelets that form the bulk of early finds. Many of these were cast using the lost wax method, and it is clear that early bronze workers quickly became proficient in a range of techniques. Bracelets and anklets were probably symbolic of status or rank, as were ornaments made from iron, which came into use in the mainland in the late Bronze Age, from around 500 bc onwards. Iron objects were usually made by smiths who heated the ore and beat it into shape.

At Ban Na Di, also in Thailand, remains have been found of bronze-working equipment, including a furnace and ceramic
crucibles, dated to at least 1000 years BC. However, bronze artefacts were not necessarily the most significant or valuable to these cultures. The burial of a child under a crocodile skin and a bone pendant made from a crocodile skull suggests that animals played an important part in symbolic expression, perhaps in totemic terms. Cattle also seem to have had great significance, their bones, probably from sacrifice, buried in many graves. Of the local and exotic ceramics found at this site, most striking were the numerous clay figurines [29] found in the graves, many of cattle, but also of pigs, dogs, elephants and human beings. These figures are modelled with great skill and delicacy, their forms depicted with a sensitivity to the shapes of the living creatures. This importance was sustained over subsequent millennia, with the water buffalo becoming a symbol of status especially in areas of wet rice cultivation, and the central element in status feasts. Strikingly similar figurines dating from the nineteenth century have been found in the Naga hills on the borders of Burma and India.

At Ban Na Di there is also evidence that silk was available. Silk fabric was later to become a medium of artistic expression in Thailand, though whether it was being manufactured locally is uncertain. The ores used for bronze were certainly obtained from elsewhere. There is further evidence of trade or exchange in the range of exotic materials from which ornaments were fashioned during the Bronze Age. Bracelets [30] were made during this period from carnelian, tusk, serpentine and jade, all from far afield but in very similar designs, which suggests that at least some were made locally. The value placed on the material from which items were made, especially when they were brought in from sources of power in distant lands, continued to be an integral part of the complex matrix in which artefacts were framed and understood in Southeast Asia in the ensuing centuries [38].

The most well known and visually striking artefacts from the late Bronze Age in Thailand are the painted pottery vessels from Ban Chiang [3, 11]. Earlier potters at this settlement had produced
In Thailand the production of bronze artefacts continued after the introduction of iron in the middle to late part of the first millennium BC, and indeed the most sophisticated and elaborate bronze items date from this period. Excavations at Ban Doo Ta Phet revealed richly decorated bowls in bronze [33], the latter showing for the first time representations of human life in two-dimensional form. There were also fine examples of jewelry at this site, close to the sea route to India. Evidence of contact with India is furnished by a fine carnelian statuette of a lion, possibly a reference to the Buddha, who at that time was rarely represented in human form. The presence of a double-headed animal pendant made of jade [32] also links this site with cultures overseas. Similar items have been found in contemporary sites in the Philippines and in Sa Huynh sites along the southern Vietnamese coast.

By this time techniques of production had diversified and many artisans had clearly achieved a high level of craftsmanship. The bronze bowls seem to have been cast by means of the lost wax method and then turned on a lathe, reducing the thickness of their bodies to a fine skin. Intricate designs were then worked on the outer surfaces, showing scenes with human figures and animals, flowers and possibly houses. Very similar bowls have been found in India, so it seems that some were made for export.

Another technique to appear first during this period is etching. Among the thousands of beads found at this site, many were made of jade, patterned using caustic soda. The technique may have been introduced from India, where it was used with some skill at this time, around the fourth century BC.

Another iron Age community, at Ao Ban U-Loke, buried its dead with large numbers of bronze ornaments including finger rings, toe rings, belts, bangles and a wonderful spiral head.

31 Jade double-headed animal ornament from the iron Age site at Ban Doo Ta Phet discovered in 1975. Almost identical items are found in iron Age sites in the Philippines and on the Vietnamese coast.

32 Incised frieze on the outside of a bronze bowl from Ban Doo Ta Phet. Face is 27 mm wide.

30 Each of the spectacular painted pots found at Ban Chang represents an aesthetic response to form on the part of the painter.
ornament, demonstrating the high degree of skill of the artist. One man was buried with seventy-five bronze bangles on each arm, three bronze belts and silver earrods covered in gold foil. Gold was by this time an important material; one burial contained a large number of gold beads [36], each skillfully fashioned with eight facets. It was in what is now Vietnam, however, that Bronze Age artists produced their most spectacular work. The village of Dong Son in the Red River delta was first excavated in the 1920s. Since then, archaeologists have applied its name to sites exhibiting the same cultural characteristics, though the village of Dong Son itself was probably not central in political terms. Bronze working had probably been practised in Vietnam since the fourteenth century BC, but during the early part of the period this was limited to tools and ornaments for local use. By the middle of the first millennium BC, iron objects were also being manufactured, and bronze working was reaching a high level of sophistication. Many of the articles produced were highly ornamented ritual objects such as drums, gongs, vessels and weapons. Some of the gongs, usually referred to as drums, are linked stylistically to drums made in Yunnan in southwest China. However, there is a distinct type whose major centre of manufacture was in north Vietnam but which has been found throughout Southeast Asia, with the exception only of Borneo, the Philippines and northeastern Indonesia. The bronze drums of Southeast Asia were studied by Franz Heger, an Austrian scholar whose name has been given to the typology by which they are classified into periods. The oldest type, Heger I drums, have been found across a wide area of Southeast Asia stretching along the Sunda chain of islands from Sumatra to New Guinea. These early examples were cast in one piece, a considerable technological achievement, with a flat tympanum and sides that narrow at the 'waist' [37]. The largest can weigh as much as 100 kilograms and reach to a metre in height.

The original function of the drums is likely to have been connected with both ritual and rank, with many found buried in the graves of high status individuals. The materials with which they were made and the skills needed to manufacture them were such that only the wealthy would have been able to own them. The decoration shows considerable variety. The tympana [38] are generally embellished with regular formal patterns such as meanders and spirals in circular bands. Between these there are always bands with flying birds, which may be either herons or phoenicopterus. The geometric and repeated figures appear in low relief [39], having been impressed into the wax using moulds before the bronze was cast. On the sides of the drums, scenes
depicting ships or houses peopled with feathered men were incised in the wax by hand. These figurative scenes contain rich detail, though the feathered men who can be identified quite clearly as warriors, dancers or musicians in some examples are so sketchy and indistinct in others that they can no longer be read as human forms.

Dong Son was not the only site of bronze working in this period, nor were drums its only product. Other bronze articles recovered from Dong Son sites include tools and arrowheads, bracelets, bowls and daggers with hilts in the shape of standing human figures. There is also a considerable amount of material associated with this period and culture found in other parts of the region, including a number of sites in the islands. In Island Southeast Asia, the Bronze Age had started much later than on the mainland, probably between 500 and 200 AC. Iron and copper technology arrived at about the same time as the introduction of bronze, possibly as a result of contact with northern Vietnam. By the first part of the first millennium AC, bronze was being produced in some quantity in Java and Bali, and perhaps elsewhere. The products of these industries were remarkable in the quality of their design and the skill of their manufacture. The extraordinary ceremonial bronze axes found in Roti in 1875 may well have been made locally as their style and shape differ considerably from those made in Java [38]. There may be an echo of the Dong Son feathered warriors in the figure represented in low relief on the side of one blade, with a huge ceremonial headdress. A fine axe from Toban in Java is decorated with a bird of prey carrying a similar axe in its talons, although in shape and design the axe itself is quite different from those from Roti. A further design is shown in a great ornamented socketed axe from Macassar. Another group of objects that date from the Bronze–Iron Age is that of the large bronze flash-shaped vessels found in the islands in Madura, Lampung and Kerinci in Central Sumatra. A similar vessel was found in Kandil, in Cambodja, and it has been suggested that the style may have been inspired by Dong Son bronzes. The flasks, decorated with large bold spiral shapes and triangles, are similar in decorative design to a group of clapperless bells [39], one found in Battambang in Cambodja and four in parts of peninsular Malaysia. It seems likely that these items all originated from the same bronze-casting centre, arriving at their destinations through trade or tribute. By the time of their manufacture, however, bronze production centres had developed in several parts of the region and it is by no means certain that northern Vietnam was their place of origin.

Evidence of local bronze drum manufacture was discovered in Bali, where indented moulds were found, which would produce designs in relief, standing out on the surface; one of these
corresponds to the heart-shaped human face that appears on the side of a drum found in Pejeng in Bali. The Bali drums differ technically from the Hager I drums, being cast in two pieces by the lost wax method. Their shape also differs, in that they are taller and more slender, with large handles on the sides, between which the faces on the Pejeng drum appear in pairs.

Some of the most visually striking Prehistoric art in Southeast Asia cannot yet be precisely dated, though it appears to come from the early centuries of this era. It includes a large number of paintings on the walls of caves and tombs, at both mainland and island sites. In Thailand, most figures are painted in red ochre. The scenes include humans and animals, often in what appears to be a representation of a hunt, some with dogs and bows and arrows. Deer, elephants and cattle are among the animals shown in the paintings at Pha Thaen in the northeast of the country (26), which may depict rice cultivation. Dolphins and fish also appear in some of the paintings. Most figures are drawn as silhouettes, with the shapes filled in with flat colour, though there are depictions in X-ray style of a man with a bull at Khao Phra in Thai Thani province.

At Tham Pha Daeng, the human figures seem to be wearing skirts, cloths, a feather-waist ornament and feathery headdress that recall the figures on the sides of the Dong Son drums. At Tham Ta Duang, a group in procession is carrying what appears to be a large circular drum. Some of these paintings seem to contain a narrative element, though what relationship, if any, there is between these early rock paintings and the murals that appear in temples several centuries later is unclear. They do suggest, however, that the art of wall painting, if introduced to the region from outside, was not an entirely new phenomenon.

In maritime Southeast Asia, cave paintings have been found at a number of sites. Some of the most famous are those at the MacCluer gulf on the west coast of New Guinea, while others have been found in Sulawesi, Ceram, the Kei Islands and in Borneo. In Sarawak, the paintings on the wall of one of the Niah caves, first excavated during the period 1954–62, appear to have been associated with death rituals. In front of the red ochre paintings, which depict dancing figures alongside boats, were several coffins in the shape of boats, in which were human remains.
Spectacular paintings in a style unique to Southeast Asia occur in some of the slab-lined burial chambers found in the Pagaralam area of the Pasemah highlands of South Sumatra [40]. The lining of graves with stone slabs does occur elsewhere: such constructions have been found in eastern Taiwan, where they appear to date from 1500 to 800 BC or even earlier. Slab graves also occur in parts of Java and in southern Bali, in both cases associated with bronze items and with objects traded from India such as carnelian beads. The tombs in Pasemah contained items suggesting that they date from the period between the middle of the first century BC and the middle of the first century AD. The chief interest of the Sumatran examples, however, is the multicoloured paintings of human and animal figures, which could possibly have been added at a later date, though this is unlikely. They are made up of zoned areas coloured with red and yellow clay, charcoal and haematite. Two represent a man and buffalo, one appears to show a man with an elephant and another depicts a large bird, possibly an owl. They differ remarkably in style from other paintings found in the region in the complete elision of the distinction between foreground and background, the shapes of the design elements being formed of tessellating pieces like parts of a huge mosaic. The preference for silhouette and profile found elsewhere is also absent: the image of the bird turns face-on to the viewer with the eyes, beak and ear tufts dominating, while below the wings great claws curve up toward the centre of the image. The whole painting is startlingly impressionistic, depicting for the first time in Southeast Asian art what the eye might catch from a glimpse of the subject in reality rather than the artist's understanding of its make-up. The bird's legs are so unimportant as to be barely indicated at all, while the
talons, completely displaced from them, appear as if at the end of arms, grasping toward their prey. The whole expresses the violence of the creature rather than the elements of its actual form.

The subject matter of the Pasemah paintings seems to relate directly to the stone sculptures also found on the plateau [41, 42]. There are a large number of these, representing human and animal figures in vigorous interaction. Some show men struggling with a snake or an elephant, some show people riding on elephants or buffalo, one is of tigers copulating. There are groups of humans, some including children, as well as single individuals. In one sculpture, depicting two riders on an elephant, there are what appear to be two bronze drums of the Heger I type; the weapons depicted in the sculptures also resemble those excavated in northern Vietnam, thus linking them with the Dong Son era.

These sculptures do not seem to be a transformation of wooden sculptures into stone form; many follow closely the shape of the original boulder from which they were cut, with details in relief but sculpted on all sides of the surface. Their dynamism contrasts starkly with the static style of the ancestor figures that were still being carved from wood by some peoples of island Southeast Asia in the twentieth century, and which will be considered in the next chapter. The vigour and energy with which the statues are imbued and the bold, strong modelling of the features and limbs, their twisting and thrusting movements captured in stone, give an effect of power that testifies to the skill of the artists. Perhaps they represent local legendary giants, demons and heroes such as Lidah Pahit (Bitter Tongue) and Mata Empat (Four Eyes) whose rivalry ended when they were turned to stone, or perhaps it was the sculptures that gave rise to the stories. What is certain is that these works contain no hint of Hindu or Chinese influence. While some have suggested that the elephant riders must reflect the effects of Indian culture on the Sumatran population, the style of the sculptures indicates no such influence.

Stone sculptures that may also date from this early period occur in other parts of island Southeast Asia. The most notable are probably the stone figures from the Bada valley in South Sulawesi [43], which seem to be associated with stone burial jars. As is the case with some of the Pasemah statues, the features have been carved in low relief, but in the Bada valley examples these are very rudimentary. The faces are indicated by stylized eyes and nose, often with no mouth, and single lines suggesting the curve of the arm towards the genitalia, which are exaggerated in comparison. In Kalimantan and in Nias there are roughly similar images carved in wood, and it may be that in this case there was a transference of the form from wood to stone.

Whatever the dates of these bronze items, wall paintings and stone sculptures, it is clear that by the early centuries of the first millennium AD, artists and craftsmen working in local styles were already proficient in a range of media and were able to express ideas in a range of forms. The arrival of world religions from overseas in the centuries that followed would affect subjects, styles and iconography, but this would take place within an already flourishing and vibrant artistic world.