

Spotlight

The Kingdom of the Dawn of Happiness

By RedZuan Rahmat

The Kingdom of Sukothai was founded in the year 1238 and is recognised as the first Thai kingdom. Sukothai, which means ‘Dawn of Happiness’, reached its zenith during the rule of its greatest ruler King Ramkhamhaeng (1279 to 1300). King Ramkhamhaeng is credited with the creation of the Thai alphabet and the introduction of Theravada Buddhism to Thailand. During this time, the capital Sukothai, became the site of many magnificent Buddhist temples and royal palaces. These temples and palaces were decorated with stuccos and figures, many of which can still be seen today in the ruins in Sukothai Historical Park. Together with its principalities - the ruins in the twin city of Si Satchanalai and the town of Kamphaeng Phet which marks the border of the Sukothai kingdom - they make up the UNESCO listed “Historic Town of Sukothai and Associated Historic Towns”.

I had the opportunity to visit each of the three Historical Parks of Sukothai, Si Satchanalai and Kamphaeng Phet, and was struck by how grand those temples were. Though there were the giant stupas and the elaborate architecture, what captured my attention the most were the statues and stuccos of the Buddha, each of them in various positions, distinctly Sukothai in appearance.

“The Buddhist art of Sukothai represented the apex of Thai classical heritage, flaunting elegant beauty born of indigenous craftsmanship by seeking to fuse the Mahapurilaksana (features of a Great man) with an idealized philosophy of Buddhist iconography. As a collection of historical significance, this art style represented a notable artistic expression belonging to a distinctive art period: the Sukothai style.” – Text panel in Kamphaeng Phet National Museum.

Of course, there are several pieces from the Sukothai period on display in our very own Asian Civilisations Museum. The rest of this article spotlights these artefacts and compares them with the statues in Sukothai.



Figure 1 Sukothai Walking Buddha, ACM

The Sukothai Walking Buddha

My favourite, and a favourite of many ACM docents, is the 15th century bronze figure of Walking Buddha. This image of the Buddha in a walking posture first appeared during the Sukothai period. His slender, lithe appearance conveys a fluid sense of motion, as he puts forward his right foot. His hand gesture, or *mudra*, is in the *abhaya* posture, indicating the dispelling of fear.

Characteristic of the Sukothai art style, the Walking Buddha has round and knobby hair curls, an *ushnisha* which rises up as a flame-like top-knot, an oval face, arching eyebrows, an aquiline nose, faintly smiling lips, broad shoulders, a slender waist, and hands whose 4 fingers are of unequal length.

Similar to the Walking Buddha is this figure on pedestal in front of Wat Sa Si, within the Sukothai Historical Park. The same fluid sense of motion of the Buddha in mid-stride is even more pronounced here, with the bent in the knee and body leaning slightly backwards.



Figure 2 A Walking Buddha in motion in Wat Sa Si, Sukothai



A further example of a Walking Buddha is carved into the alcove of one of the subsidiary stupas in Wat Mahathat. This one seemingly has the Buddha walking off to the side, instead of forward. Perhaps he is depicted in this way when the figure is a stucco or carved in relief into the stone.

Figure 3 A walking Buddha in an alcove in Wat Mahathat, Sukothai

Seated Buddha in Subduing Mara Pose

The seated Buddha figure (15th or 16th century, Sukothai) in the ACM collection has the Buddha in lotus position. His hand with fingers of unequal length, a characteristic of Sukothai art, touches the ground. This hand gesture, the *bhumiparsha mudra*, tells of the Buddha's victory in calling the earth as his witness and defeating the demon Mara who had sought to frighten him with armies of demons.

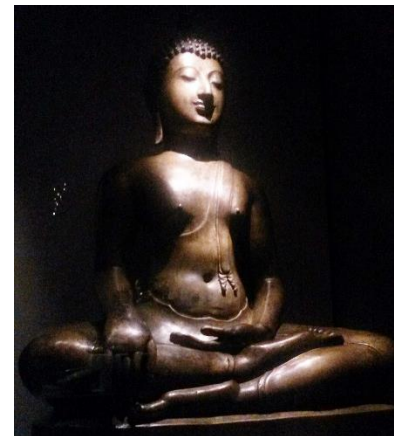


Figure 4 Sukothai seated Buddha, ACM

Similar figures can be seen throughout the ruins of Sukothai. This



Figure 5 Seated Buddha in Wat Phra Si Ratanamahathat, Si Satchanalai

temple in the ruins of Si Satchanalai, Wat Phra Si Ratanamahathat Rat Chaworrawiharn has a seated Buddha in *bhumiparsha mudra* in front of a Prang-style main stupa.

The temple complex was built in the 16th century, during the Ayutthaya period, the kingdom that directly followed the Sukothai period.

Standing Buddha and Reclining Buddha



Figure 7. Reclining Buddha at Wat Phra Kaew in Kamphaeng Phet



Figure 6 A standing Buddha in Wat Mahathat in Sukothai

Besides the walking Buddha and seated Buddha figures, the Sukothai art style also commonly portrays the standing Buddha and the reclining Buddha.

The Makara

The Sukothai section in our museum also has a display of the mythical sea-creature known as a *Makara*. This beast with the head in the form of an animal such as a crocodile, elephant or lion with the lower body of a fish, is from Hindu influence and its iconography is often seen in Southeast Asia.

Wat Si Sawai, which has three Prang stupas decorated with elaborated *Makara* stucco figures, was originally a Hindu sanctuary that was expanded and converted to a Sukothai Buddhist temple.



Figure 9 Makara from Sukothai, ACM



Figure 8 Multi-headed serpents and Makaras in Wat Si Sawai, Sukothai

Sangkhalok Ware

The Sukothai region was also famous for its ceramics. Celadon from Sukothai were known as Sangkhalok ware and fired in the Sangkhalok kilns near Si Satchanalai. These ceramics were popular in the 15th and 16th centuries and exported to Indonesia, the Philippines and elsewhere in South-east Asia.

They became popular when imperial bans on ceramic production at Chinese kilns resulted in a shortage of export wares, a market which



Figure 10 A Sangkhalok kiln, recreated at the Ramkhamhaeng Museum in Sukothai Historical Park

Thai potters from Sukothai were happy to supply. The upcoming “China Mania: The Global Passion for Porcelain, 800-1900” special exhibition will showcase a fine example of Sangkhalok ware, a glazed celadon dish from the mid-15th century.



Figure 11 Sangkhalok glazed celadon, mid 15th century, ACM