Devotional image

Place of origin: Burma (probably, made)
India (possibly made in north-east India, made)

Date: ca. 12th century-13th century (made)

Artist/Maker: Unknown

Materials and Techniques: Plain red-stained pyrophilite called 'andagu' in Burma, carved in high relief. Also known as 'dolomite' or 'steatite'. Pyrophilite is a type of metamorphic rock, similar to schist or slate, which has a very fine texture that allows precise and detailed carving.

Museum number: IM.378-1914

Gallery location: South-East Asia, Room 47a, case 15

Public access description

This image represents eight scenes from the life of the Buddha clockwise around a central figure of the Buddha in the lotus position and in the earth-touching or earth-witnessing attitude. He is seated on a waisted lotus throne beneath the Bodhi tree, under which he achieved enlightenment. He is depicted in monastic robes which leave his right shoulder bare, his curly hair rises to an usnisha surmounted by a lotus bud.

The surrounding subjects illustrate eight main scenes of the Buddha's life. Starting at the bottom left corner they are: the Nativity in which Maya-devi (the Buddha's mother) gives birth to the Buddha from her right-side in the Lumbini grove, attended by her sister Prajapati; the Buddha's first sermon in the Deer Park at Benares; the subjugation of Nalagiri, the elephant, which the Buddha prevented from destroying him by overcoming it with love; on the highway of Rajagrih; the Buddha's death (or Parinirvana or Mahaparinibbana); the descent from the Tavatimsa heaven; the twin miracles, in which flames arise from the Buddha's shoulders and water pours from his feet while at the same time a vast number of images of him appear all over the sky; and at the bottom right, the Parileyyaka episode, in which the monkey offers the Buddha a gift of honeycomb.

Descriptive line

Burmese devotional image, carved in high relief, depicting the Buddha achieving enlightenment under the Bodhi tree and seven further scenes from his life. Red-stained pyrophilite. c. 11th-12th century.

Physical description

The arched stele has a figure in the centre, representing the Buddha's enlightenment. He is seated in the padmasana position with his left hand in his lap (apparently cupping a small object in his open palm) and the right one in bhumisparsa-mudra (earth touching or witness attitude in the lotus position) on a lotus throne within a niche beneath the Bodhi tree. He is shown wearing monastic robes which leave his right shoulder bare. The hem of his robes above his feet is decorated with a zig-zag design between two bands. He has a heart-shaped face with a broad nose and downward-cast eyes. The lips are full, but not of the curvaceous type associated with so many Pagan-style images. He has a broad forehead with his hair is in tight rounded curls rising to an usnisha tipped with a flame. He lacks an urna on his forehead, but he has the distinctive rings round his neck and long ears, which are framed behind with loops of more tight curls Behind his head there is a horse shoe-shaped aureole which is decorated with petal-like flame motifs with scrolling foliage and a cone-shaped berried fruit above a hamsa (goose) on either side. Under the spreading branches of the Bodhi tree on each side there are tumbling figures from Mara's demon army, above two flanking etiolated figures which probably represent Bodhisattvas in abhaya-mudra in a gentle tribanga potion: possibly Maitreya with plaited locks in a top-knot on the left and Padmapani on the right.

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The Nativity in which Maya-devi (the Buddha's mother) gives birth to the Buddha from her right-side in the Lumbini grove, attended by her sister Prajapati on the right.
The subjugation of Nalagiri, the elephant, with the Buddha walking, facing to the right
At the apex there is the scene of the Buddha's death or Parinirvana, showing him surrounded by his disciples under a small stupa or chaitya. On the right hand side are the following three scenes:
The descent from Tavatimsa Heaven with The Buddha walking to the left while looking over his shoulder to his right. Brahma on left holds a chauri whisk, but Indra on his other side is now largely missing. Below Brahma there is the kneeling figure of Sariputta, while a dancing celestial figure is carved above him. Next is the scene of the twin miracles, with the seated Buddha in dhammachakra mudra between two smaller Buddhas with celestial beings above. Below is the Parileyyaka episode, in which a monkey offers the Buddha the gift of a honeycomb.
The lotus throne is held up by two Naga kings seated within scrolls of lotus buds on a damaged base with an elephant's head in the centre, and a lion (now headless) on the right. The rest of the base is either badly damaged or missing.

Dimensions

Height: 12.7 cm, Width: 7.6 cm

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Object history note
This sculpture has no known provenance, but it is extremely close in style and arrangement to one in the Pagan Museum of the same size and material, which is in a less damaged state. This latter piece was excavated in 1955 just north-east of Pagan and is described and illustrated by Gordon Luce (1970, vol. 2, p.174 and vol. 3, Pl. 404).

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O74718/devotional-image-unknown/