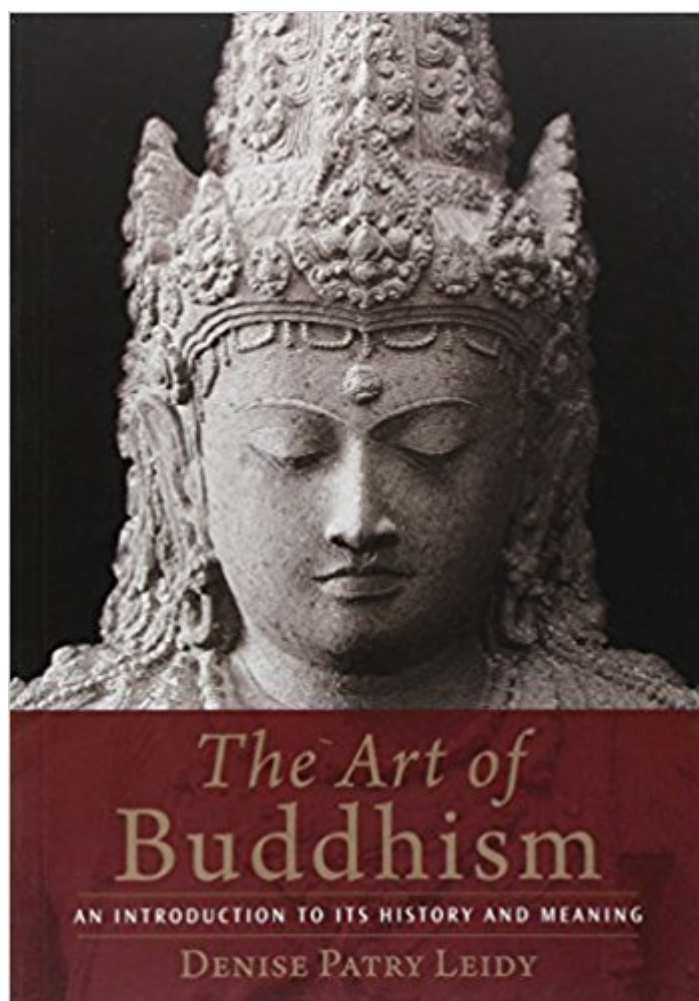


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The Art Of Buddhism: An Introduction To Its History And Meaning



Synopsis

As its teachings spread from the Indian subcontinent in all directions across Asia, Buddhism influenced every culture it touched—from Afghanistan to Korea, from Mongolia to Java. Buddhist art is a radiant reflection of the encounter of the Buddha's teachings with the diverse civilizations that came under their sway. It is also an intriguing visual record of the evolution of Buddhist practice and philosophy over a period of more than two millennia. More than two hundred photographs provide the visual context for this tour of the world of Buddhist art. Included in the rich variety of forms are architecture and monumental art, statuary, paintings, calligraphy, fresco, brushwork, and textile arts. Denise Leidy's guide is the perfect introductory text for all those intrigued by this splendid aesthetic tradition. It also an essential resource for all who seek to understand Buddhist art as teaching.

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Customer Reviews

“Denise Leidy's book offers a lucid pilgrimage through of the art of Buddhist enlightenment, from the vivacious, dawn-fresh sculptural traditions of ancient India up to the threshold of the globalist twentieth century. The language is clear; the information dense and rich; the art beyond compare. Student, scholar, and devotee alike have much to learn from this fine scholar.” —Holland Cotter, Art Critic, New York Times “A sumptuous survey of Buddhist art from all over Asia. Denise Leidy deploys her encyclopedic knowledge to bring the art vividly to life, and her choices of objects are utterly superb. This volume is a must for any lover of

the classical Asian art of enlightenment. — Robert Thurman, Jey Tsong Khapa Professor of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, Columbia University; founder of Tibet House, U.S.; and author of *Infinite Life* — “A work of sustained scholarship from a distinguished art historian whose command of Buddhist art, coupled with her keen eye for its iconographic and aesthetic traditions, has made accessible to readers — for the first time in decades — a body of knowledge that will form the core of any informed understanding of Buddhist culture and traditions from a global perspective. This book is destined to become a classic.” — Mimi Hall Yiengpruksawan, Professor of History of Art, Yale University — “A cogent and focused introduction to the subject. Clear links between [Buddhist] art and practice are consistently and intelligently presented throughout.” — Buddhist Art News

Denise Patry Leidy is curator of the Department of Asian Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. She is the author of numerous articles, and coauthor, with Robert A. F. Thurman, of *Mandala: The Architecture of Enlightenment*.

Great book.

More imagery and less description would better serve students of Buddhism.

This is an excellent & comprehensive overview that is far beyond the usual cut-and-paste assemblage of standard monuments. Very, very good.

This is an excellent survey of the field, packed to the brim (and occasionally over the brim) with scholarly fact and good old fashioned erudition. The pictures are excellently chosen and nicely illuminate the text, and vice versa. I would recommend it to anyone who had a basic knowledge of Buddhism and was looking to orient himself or herself concerning the art. The author doesn't get bogged down in detailed argument (which another reviewer worries about). A good example is the complex argument (dating from the early 1990s) over whether or not the absence of Buddha images early on is deliberate or not, which is barely touched on here. But in terms of what the author sets out to do, the book is excellent -- the coverage of virtually the entire South and South East Asian context is fairly awesome.

[...]Only three volumes exist in print in English which cover Buddhist art as a whole, both historically

and iconographically. I presume that this scarcity is due to the breadth of the subject, to the still shifting opinions on broad trends, and to the inclusion of Buddhist art within wider surveys on Asian art. Until recently, the UK press Thames & Hudson's *Buddhist Art* (by Robert E. Fisher) was the sole volume to which individuals could turn. In 2009, River Books released *Buddhist Art* by Giles Beguin. One year prior to this appeared *The Art of Buddhism: an Introduction to its History and Meaning*, by Denise Patry Leidy, which is specifically for "general readers and undergraduate students" (p. 5). Shambhala is the most prominent American press dedicated to Eastern spirituality. For many readers unfamiliar with Buddhism, it is a primary or initial source of information on Buddhism. While many of its releases are popular in nature, a significant portion of their output comes in the form of translations and scholarly works. The author is a curator in the Department of Asian Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York). Befitting a general introduction to the subject, the author's approach is not to delve too deeply into any particular aspect of Buddhist art, providing instead an overview of its history, from earliest beginnings in India to its dissemination and growth in South, Central, and East Asia through the Nineteenth century. For example, rather than wading into the once-contentious question of the origin of the Buddha image, she describes a general appearance of anthropomorphism across a wide area, and leaves it at that. Two particular themes run throughout the volume: the connection between art and Buddhist practice, and the geographical movement of artistic styles and techniques. Most of the examples of works are related to one or both of these ideas. The author touches on these two themes steadfastly; instances are found on nearly each of the volume's 342 pages. This approach makes for a cogent and focussed (if perhaps misleading) introduction to the subject. After introductory examinations of early forms ("Pillars and Stupas," "The Buddha Image"), chapters are regionally themed; for example, three cover Korea and Japan for three historical periods. Chapters begin with a brief presentation of regional history, and examples of works of art follow, referring to the general historical theme presented and to the overarching consideration for the relationship between art and practice. This simple approach will be appreciated by educators eager for an easy foothold for presenting the history of Buddhist art. Further, those interested in the traditions in Buddhist art in particular regions may easily read through appropriate chapters. An additional chapter on the spread of Buddhist art to the West would have rounded out the volume. The absence of such consideration in the history of Buddhist art is, however, common. The examples presented are largely from history's most well-known, again appropriate to the general approach of the volume. Figures are identified by captions, with location and era, as well as an additional sentence underscoring some key aspect of the work. These sentences -- sometimes facile (on Alchi: "Some of these buildings are filled with magnificent paintings and

sculptures" (p. 155)) -- either highlight some theme from the immediate text, again giving the introductory reader a means to engage the works based upon style or practice. Information on the size and museum holding of the pieces are given in at the end of the book. The author chooses not to explore in any depth pre-Buddhist iconography and styles, e.g., the roots of mandala paintings (India), portraiture and narrative scenes (Persia), etc. Leidy states that the book "focusses on the dialogues between cultures that underlie the dissemination of Buddhism" (p. 5). This focus is steady through the volume, with numerous instances in each chapter of particular styles and trends transmitted from place to place., e.g., "The small flame rising from ushnisha is [...] a regional characteristic" (p. 140). "The painting's dense, scrolling background and the precise depiction of details, such as the jewels decorating the throne and the patterns of the robes, reflect the long-standing importance of Nepalese aesthetics..." (p. 250) "The posture and proportions in a bronze image of Shakymuni from Pagan illustrates [sic] the continuing importance of Indian traditions in neighboring Myanmar" (p. 166). The latter quotation points out a flaw in the text, seemingly due to hasty editing: it is riddled with errors, most of them typographical (misplaced hyphens, likely to the text re-flow during layout). I am unaware of a second edition of this book, however one presumes these will find correction. Despite the emphasis on local and regional styles, there are very few descriptions of influences from outside of Buddhism, either chronologically and geographically. The work contains occasional examples of architecture, but always in support of general artistic points, e.g., to show "the sharing of religious traditions" between China and Tibet and "the diverse Buddhist traditions that coexisted in China during the Qing dynasty" (p. 287). In addition to the role of cultural trade in disseminating Buddhist art, a secondary thesis that the author pursues through the length of the book is the relationship between Buddhist practice and Buddhist art: "... portraits of monks played an important role in Buddhist practice as early as the Tang dynasty." (p. 118) "The acceptance that such terrifying figures embody a great spiritual understanding is part of the shift in perceptions that leads to a deeper awakening." . (p. 176-7) "The ox [...] and herdsman as a metaphor for practice..." (p. 195) While the earliest purposes for Buddhist art are unclear, it is well-established that mandalas, e.g., were designed as visual tools for practitioners. Many scholars also agree that representations of the Buddha and other figures in meditation were designed to help the non-literate. These two instances are given by Leidy with respect to specific works of art, and clear links between art and practice are consistently and intelligently presented throughout. Other, less religiously-oriented motivations for the creation of Buddhist art receive less exploration: donations by the wealthy, materiality, and technical skill as awe-inspiration to the lower classes or as other means of political empowerment, etc. While the

author acknowledges the presence of these in the creation of art, the main line of influence on production and visual styles she cites is: as means to Buddhist practice. While it is true that, from the religious point of view, this is the purpose of Buddhist art, failing to recognize other purposes is overly idealistic. Buddhists of certain schools would of course agree with this description of the making of art. Buddhist art is not an art of worship, but one of practice. Nevertheless, an art history which places religious motives as the main ones in complex technical productions, ones which occur only within an advanced material culture, is something of a simplification. Students of history would benefit from a more thoroughly reasoned (and realistic, in the worldly sense) appraisal of the reasons that a religion directed at self-improvement, doing it oneself, and non-materiality has generated so many ornate and costly artifacts, personal objects of devotion, and monumental sculptures. Again, the author likely wishes to limit the scope of the book, leaving to other materials other critical approaches. As a broad survey, the author does not pursue disputations, instead stating a single opinion on sometimes open questions. While streamlined, this approach also has the effect of appearing categorical to the reader new to the field. Although few of the author's positions are especially controversial, it is also the case that the reason for this non-controversy is at times due to the force of tradition rather than established certainty. Enterprising students might investigate the literature and uncover open questions, but little assistance is given the students by the book's notes and bibliography. Understandably intended for general audiences, perhaps I am willing to give undergraduates more credit for intellectual curiosity, and a desire to see varied scholarly lines of argument, even where they are tangled or frayed, rather than neatly meshed. One map is included, covering the entire Asian region, with a single icon representing sites (e.g., Nalanda and Ajanta) and cities (ancient and modern). Nearly all items listed in the bibliography are post-1980, while most of the (few) quotations from primary sources are from early 20th century translations. The graphic design of Buddhist Art is also non-controversial: clean and efficient. I appreciate the simple use of typography and color. The many images are given good space and a nice attention is paid to page layout. The paper does not allow pencil mark erasures -- erasing on one page leads to rubbing off of an image on the reverse side. This survey fills a noted gap, and as an introductory survey for students (high school or undergraduate) is appreciated. By avoiding what are deemed secondary concerns, the author has produced a stream-lined, readable volume, however at the cost of discarding many avenues of inquiry.- Jonathan Ciliberto / Buddhist Art News, October 2010

I had to buy this for a class in college but I never even had to open it. Yay college!

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