

ASIAN ART

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CHOLA AND VIJAYANAGAR BRONZES RETURN TO INDIA

The Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art announced its plans to return three sculptures to the Government of India, following rigorous provenance research that documented that the sculptures had been removed illegally from temple settings. The Government of India has agreed to place one of the sculptures on long-term loan. This arrangement will allow the museum to publicly share the full story of the object's origins, removal, and return, and to underscore the museum's commitment to provenance research.

The two Chola period (circa 850-1250) sculptures Shiva Nataraja, circa 990, and Somaskanda, 12th century, exemplify the rich artistry of South Indian bronze casting. The sculptures were originally sacred objects traditionally carried in temple processions. The Shiva Nataraja, which is to be placed on long-term loan, will be on view as part of the exhibition *The Art of Knowing in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Himalayas*, which opens later this month in Washington, DC. Chola bronzes were produced in Tamil

Nadu, India, from the 9th to 13th centuries, and represent a pinnacle of Indian metal casting, characterised by elegant, slender, and vibrant depictions of Hindu deities. Crafted mainly for temples using the lost-wax method, the copper alloy sculptures served as portable, sacred icons for religious processions.

The 16th-century work Saint Sundarar with Paravai comes from the Vijayanagar Empire (1336-1646), a dominant South Indian kingdom in Karnataka known for its immense wealth, art and cosmopolitan culture, with its capital at Hampi, and a highly successful trading power.

As part of a systematic review of its South Asian collections, the National Museum of Asian Art undertook a detailed investigation into the provenance of the three sculptures, scrutinising each work's transaction history. In 2023, in collaboration with the Photo Archives of the French Institute of Pondicherry, museum researchers confirmed that the bronzes had been photographed in temples in Tamil Nadu, India, between 1956 and

1959. The Archaeological Survey of India subsequently reviewed these findings and affirmed that the sculptures had been removed in violation of Indian laws. The Shiva Nataraja belonged to the Sri Bhava Aushadesvara Temple in Tirutturaipundi Taluk, Tanjavur District, Tamil Nadu, India, where it was photographed in 1957. In addition to photographic evidence confirming the sculpture's presence in the temple in 1957, a provenance researcher at the museum determined that a New York gallery had provided falsified documentation to facilitate the sale to the museum.

The Somaskanda and Saint Sundarar with Paravai entered the collection of the museum as part of a gift of 1,000 objects from Arthur M Sackler in 1987. Research led by the museum's team at the Photo Archives of the French Institute of Pondicherry confirmed that the Somaskanda was photographed at the Visvanatha Temple in Alattur village, Mannarkudi taluk, Tamil Nadu in 1959, and the Saint Sundarar with Paravai at the Shiva Temple in



Shiva Nataraja, Lord of Dance, India, Tamil Nadu state, Chola dynasty, circa 990, bronze. On loan from the Government of India. Photo: National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution

Veerasolapuram village, Tamil Nadu, in 1956.

Provenance research involves close examination of an object's physical characteristics alongside documentary evidence that together inform an understanding of an object's ownership

and movement over time. Researchers identify and inspect information from sources as varied as export licenses, dealer records, inventories, curatorial files, ship manifests, genealogical records, historical photographs, correspondence and many more to construct as robust an ownership history as possible. This research aims to uncover and tell the complex histories of individual objects and the networks of people who have interacted with them over time.

In December 2025, under the Smithsonian's Shared Stewardship and Ethical Returns Policy, the museum announced its first ethical return of three sculptures to the Kingdom of Cambodia, with one of those cultural treasures to remain on display in the museum on long-term loan. The National Museum of Asian Art has been active in the field of Asian art provenance research since the early 2000s, refining methodologies, advancing scholarship, whilst building global partnerships and making research findings publicly accessible.



Landscape Masters

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NEWS IN BRIEF

ASIA SOCIETY, NEW YORK

In January, the Board of Trustees of Asia Society announced that the Honourable Kevin Rudd, Australia's Ambassador to the US, will return to lead the Asia Society from its global headquarters in New York on 31 March 2026. Dr Rudd will also serve as President of the Asia Society Policy Institute (ASPI) and will assume a leading role with ASPI's Center for China Analysis, which he established in 2022. He succeeds Kyung-wha Kang, who stepped down as Asia Society President and CEO in October to serve as the Republic of Korea's top diplomat in the US. He will also be actively engaged in ASPI's Washington office, particularly through the Center for China Analysis, in his ongoing engagement across the US system on China policy.

Dr Rudd served as Asia Society's President and CEO (2021-23) and the inaugural President of ASPI (2015-23). A distinguished diplomat, China scholar, and leading voice on Indo-Pacific and Asia-Pacific affairs, he led Asia Society and ASPI in aggressively pursuing its mission to navigate common futures on major policy challenges confronting the Asia-Pacific in security, prosperity, sustainability, and the development of common norms and values in the region. During his tenure, Dr Rudd developed the world-class Center for China Analysis within ASPI. From the Institute's beginning, he established ASPI as a leading global think-and-do tank, ranking in the top one percent of think tanks worldwide, with a distinctive voice and position in the global dialogue.

During his Asia Society presidency, he also led the establishment of two new locations, in Paris (Asia Society's first in the European Union) and Seattle (focused on AI and technology). Given the current challenges facing the Asia-Pacific and world, in his upcoming tenure, he will expand the Policy Institute's presence in Washington, DC, and deepen

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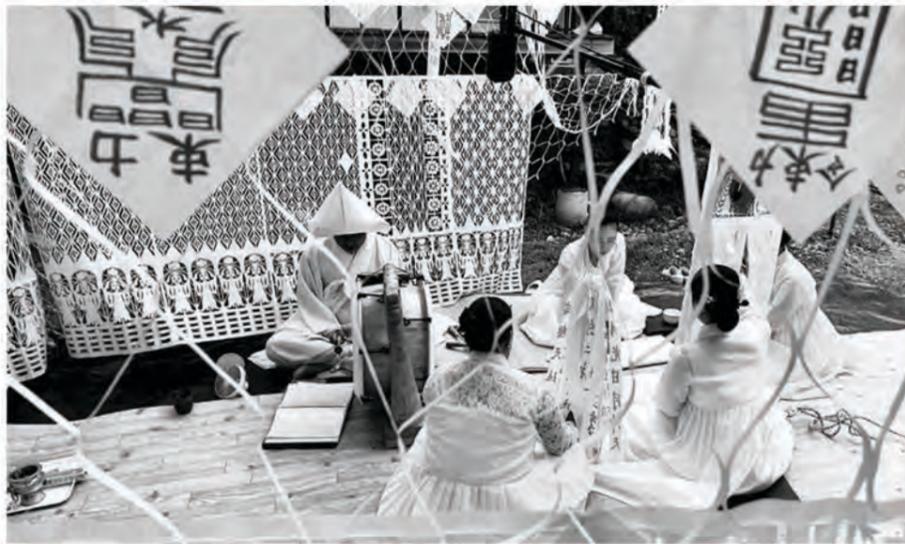
SACRED PAPER Korean Ritual Arts

While Christianity and Buddhism appear to be the dominant religions in Korea, the deeper current shaping everyday Korean life may in fact be shamanism, sustained by the simple yet urgent desire for safety, good fortune, and good health.

Throughout a modern history marked by upheaval, war, loss, and rapid change, the quiet wish for the well-being of one's family has remained constant. Embedded in shamanic ritual, this exhibition presents a view of an enduring pulse beneath Korean daily life, where the spiritual and the practical intersect and intertwine.

Tracing this pulse through two regional traditions of Korean ritual paper art, the exhibition reveals how such fragile materials carry the weight of human hopes and wishes. From Chungcheong Province to the East Sea coast, paper art becomes a vessel for devotion, an architecture of protection, and a record of how communities imagine their place between the visible and invisible worlds.

In Chungcheongnam-do, the Seolwi Seolgeong tradition creates intricate cut-paper structures that define and organise



Above: Korean Shamanic Funerary Ritual from Chungcheongbuk-do, Korea
Below: Seolwi Seolgeong (2025) by Park Jongseung, spirit-invoking ritual paper banner, 64 x 95 cm

ceremonial space. The artist Jongseung Park creates intricately cut paper forms to construct a sacred shrine originating in Chungcheongbuk-do, South Korea, demonstrating how mulberry paper can be transformed into structures that shelter, guard, and channel spiritual presence.

Along the East Sea coast, ritual practice extends this spiritual intent in a different direction – the artist Dr Heera Shin presents

folded paper flowers, lanterns, and ornaments that serve as vivid articulations of blessings offered to the deceased in this area.

● 9 March to 24 May, Charles B Wang Centre, Stony Brook University, New York, stonybrook.edu
● LECTURE
Mon 9 March at 4pm, 'Paper and Things Otherwise Unseen: A Journey Through Korean Shaman Rituals' by Dr Laurel Kendal



KAWAI KANJIRO House to House

This solo exhibition celebrates the remarkable life and career of folk potter, poet, and artist Kawai Kanjiro (1890-1966) for the first time in the US. Kawai is best known for his influential role in the *mingei* (folk art) movement in Japan, which he founded in the mid-1920s with his friends, the philosopher Yanagi Soetsu (1889-1961) and the potter Hamada Shoji (1894-1978). Showcasing representative works from

Kawai's personal collection that are rarely seen outside his former home (now a museum known as the Kawai Kanjiro House), the exhibition traces the evolution from the artist's early functional ceramic ware to his late-career modernist wood sculptures.

After the war, Kawai launched a prolific wood carving practice, creating dynamic sculptures and stylised masks inspired by contemporaneous artistic,



Kawai Kanjiro (1890-1966)

mechanical, and scientific imagery. He continued to produce ceramics, experimenting with sculptural forms, new glazes, and decorative techniques. He also designed household wares, published articles, and brushed calligraphy imbued with his

philosophies. Yet his *mingei* beliefs persisted: in 1956, the Japanese government extended him the official honour of Living National Treasure for his achievements in ceramics, but he refused, preferring to work as an anonymous craftsman.

Kawai passed away in 1966, leaving behind a rich legacy in multiple fields of modern art. His former residence opened as a museum, known as the Kawai Kanjiro House, in 1973.

● 10 March to 10 May, Japan Society Gallery, New York, japansociety.org



WATCH
Mei Lanfang and
Twentieth Century
Peking Opera

Mei Lanfang performing in the opera Farewell My Concubine, performed in the US © Chinese National Academy of Arts jPjifjffj

THE DANCING GODDESS Mei Lanfang

This spring, the China Institute is exploring the life and work of Peking Opera performer Mei Lanfang (1894-1961). His 1930 North American tour, organised by the newly established China Institute of America, launched Peking opera onto the world stage and made a significant impact on modern theatre. With his original fusion of song, dance, and dramatic acting, Mei captivated American audiences and inspired artists from Broadway to Berlin.

This exhibition revisits a milestone of cultural exchange and features a

comprehensive array of Mei's innovative stage costumes from his own collection, which were designed to allow dance movements that revitalised Peking opera, along with rare photographs, performance videos, original production props, and artwork. Most of the objects in the exhibition are on public view in the US for the first time, on loan from the Chinese National Academy of Arts in Beijing, the world's foremost archive of Mei Lanfang memorabilia.

● 12 March to 19 July, China Institute Gallery, New York, chinainstitute.org

BUDDHA AND SHIVA, LOTUS AND DRAGON



Stem cup, North China. Tang dynasty, circa late 7th/early 8th century, silver with embossing, chasing, engraving, and microscopic traces of gilding, 4.8 x 6.4 cm



Storage jar, Korea, Joseon dynasty, circa mid-18th century, porcelain painted with underglaze cobalt blue, 44.5 x 34.9 cm

In celebration of Asia Society's 70th anniversary, Asia Society Museum is showing *Buddha and Shiva, Lotus and Dragon: Celebrating 70 Years of Asia Society and the Rockefeller Legacy*. Buddhist and Hindu sculptures are on display alongside Chinese, Korean, and Japanese ceramics to showcase the diverse range of bronzes, ceramics, and metalwork assembled between the 1950s and the 1970s by John D Rockefeller 3rd (1906-78) and his wife Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller (1909-92). John D Rockefeller 3rd founded Asia Society in 1956 with the mission to promote greater knowledge of Asia in the US. The bequest of the collection to Asia Society in 1979 underscores the Rockefellers'



Tea Leaf Jar, Nonomura Seiemon (Ninsei), circa 1574 to 1660-66, Japan, Kyoto Prefecture Edo period, mid-17th century, Kyoto ware, stoneware painted with overglaze enamels and silver, 30.5 x 24.1 cm



The Buddha Shakyamuni in Abhaya-mudra, India, probably Bihar, Gupta period, 6th century, bronze, 68.6 x 27.3 x 17.8 cm, Asia Society, New York. All images: Mr and Mrs John D Rockefeller 3rd Collection. Photo: Synthescape, digital image © Asia Society

conviction that aesthetic encounters with great works of art promotes deep cross-cultural understanding.

The exhibition comprises 70 objects drawn from Asia Society's permanent collection assembled between the 1950s and 1970s. The first section explores Buddhist sculptures, tracing the transmission of Buddhism across Asia over two millennia. The exhibition continues with Hindu sculptures from South and Southeast Asia – largely from the 10th to 14th centuries – which form another strength of the collection. The last and largest section of the exhibition showcases metalwork and ceramics from China, Korea, and Japan.

● 18 March to 3 January 2027, Asia Society, New York, asiasoc.org