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Treasures of Southeast Asian Art

Remarkable Thai and Burmese items acquired by three national museums

Highlights from Doris Duke's collection of Thai and Burmese art, one of the world's finest collections, have been acquired by three of the UK's national museums. Items from the collection – a spectacular array of exotic and decorative artefacts assembled by the American heiress during the course of her lifetime – have been donated to the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum and the British Library. Selected items will go on display at each institution during May and June.

Notable among these acquisitions are ceramics, including a 16th-century glazed ridge tile sculpture in the form of a dragon at the British Museum, a gilt metal shrine with enthroned Buddha donated to the V&A and a text for the ordination of a Buddhist monk written on ivory pages received by the British Library.

Doris Duke was the sole heir to her father's fortune, which was based on tobacco and hydropower. From the period of her round-the-world honeymoon in 1935 she enjoyed a life-long love affair with the Orient. With the help of agents she began to buy extensively, particularly paintings and decorative arts dating from the 19th century, and by the 1970s she had formed a large and important collection of Thai and Burmese art and decorative objects.

After her death in 1993 she left the major portion of her estate to the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, which distributed much of the Asian art to museums in the United States. The Foundation also distributed items to the three British museums according to the speciality of each institution: the British Museum received paintings, ceramics and sculpture, the V&A received sculpture, paintings and decorative arts objects and the British Library received the manuscripts and manuscript-related items.

Henry Ginsburg, former curator of Thai collections at the British Library, helped to negotiate the distribution: “Along with a number of Thai and Burmese manuscripts, the Library’s acquisitions include a group of elaborately decorated manuscript cabinets dating from the 18th and 19th century. Such cabinets were not previously represented in any British collections; the generosity of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation now means the British Library has the finest examples in the country.”

John Guy, Senior Curator of Asia at the V&A said: "This generous gift enhances and extends the V&A’s Southeast Asian collection, making it one of the most comprehensive collections in Europe. We are now able to display the artistic achievements of Thai culture in ways that truly reflect its rich achievements in the Ayutthaya and Bangkok periods. Notable additions to the collection include a superb series of painted wood panels from the early 19th century, and some fine Thai and Sino-Thai ceramics.”

Richard Blurton, Assistant Keeper in the Department of Asia at the British Museum commented: “This splendid gift of 45 items has greatly enriched the British Museum’s holdings of Thai and Burmese art, thus enabling it to better represent the culture of these areas to its international audience. Ceramics, lacquerwork, sculpture in wood and in bronze, as well as decorative items are included in the gift. However, perhaps the most important group of objects are the paintings, both on wood and on cloth which illustrate scenes from Buddhist moral narratives; there are six in total and one of them, a banner painting, is close on 4m in length. These paintings complement the existing group in the Museum, and together now form one of the most important collections of Thai painting in Europe”.

For more information and images, contact Ben Sanderson at the British Library Press Office: 01937 546126 or ben.sanderson@bl.uk; Helen Beeckmans at the Victoria and Albert Museum Press Office: 020 7942 2503 or h.beeckmans@vam.ac.uk; Hannah Boulton at the British Museum Press Office on 020 7323 8522 or hboulton@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk

NOTES FOR EDITORS

Doris Duke Charitable Foundation – The mission of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation is to improve the quality of people's lives through grants supporting the performing arts, wildlife conservation, medical research and the prevention of child maltreatment, and through preservation of the cultural and environmental legacy of Doris Duke's properties.

Established in 1996 and headquartered in New York, the foundation supports four national grantmaking programs. It also oversees three properties that were owned by Doris Duke in Hillsborough, New Jersey; Honolulu, Hawaii; and Newport, Rhode Island.

Before donating Doris Duke's Southeast Asian art collection to various museums, the foundation commissioned a book by Dr. Nancy Tingley in 2003 to document the history and significance of the collection. The book, entitled "**Doris Duke: The Southeast Asian Art Collection,**" is available on the foundation's Web site at www.ddcf.org.

The British Museum was founded by an Act of Parliament in 1753. Today it retains many of its founding values; it is a living museum of mankind for mankind, actively acquiring, displaying and interpreting material culture from the earliest known human artefacts to the work of contemporary societies. Through its 90 visitor galleries and its extensive education programme it presents the world under one roof. For more information visit www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk

The **V&A** is the world's greatest museum of art and design with unrivalled collections of fine and decorative art ranging from the treasures of the past to the best of contemporary design. The Museum houses important collections from around the world representing Britain, Europe and the great cultures of Japan, China, India and Islam. Its collections have grown over 150 years to become a vast encyclopaedic resource reflecting centuries of achievement in costume, jewellery, textiles, metalwork, glass, furniture, photographs, prints, drawings, paintings, watercolours and sculpture. The inspiration for museums of art and design the world over, it has an international reputation as a centre for excellence and is Britain's national museum for the study of design and the arts.

The British Library is the national library of the United Kingdom. It provides world class information services to the academic, business, research and scientific communities and offers unparalleled access to the world's largest and most comprehensive research collection. The British Library's collections offer an unequalled treasure trove for the creative researcher: they include 150 million items from every era of written human history beginning with Chinese oracle bones dating from 300 BC, right up to today's newspapers. Further information is available on the Library's website at www.bl.uk

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