JUNE -JULY 2024 AT THAMMASAT LIBRARY WITH THE BRITISH LIBRARY

NARRATING REBIRTH

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With The British Library

Selected reproductions of the Library's collection

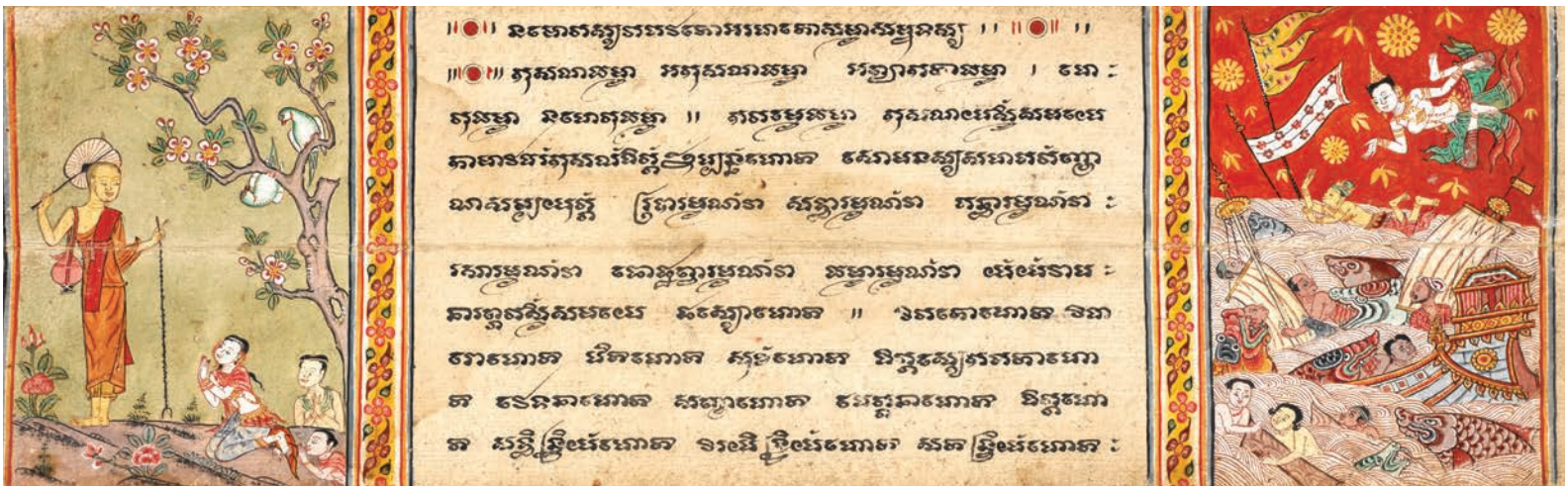
THE JATAKAS

Narrating Rebirth through illustration

Cover image: Illustration from the Narada Jataka BL 14255 f.8. Above: Temiya BL 14255 f.1. Opposite: Candakumara BL Or. 14068 f.4.

THE EXHIBITION

REPRODUCTIONS OF A SELECTION OF THE BRITISH LIBRARY'S JATAKA MANUSCRIPTS



Few people in the modern world are now unfamiliar with the story of Siddhartha Gautama. Yet his tale of a solitary journey into the forest to learn the truths of existence was in Buddhist countries for most of their history more of a peripheral story, if it was known at all. What most certainly were known and loved were the more sensational just-so-like stories of the Buddha's past lives, or jātaka tales. Commonly set in a familiar universe of just kings, evil brahmin advisors, nāga serpents and Indic gods like Indra, such stories would often illustrate the multi-life moral progress of the bodhisattva. The Buddha-to-be would perform feats demonstrating his extreme talents, such as being so perseverant as to swim across the ocean for seven nights or be so blessed with determination that he would refuse the riches of heaven. Such excellences, the idea goes, would eventually accumulate so that the bodhisattva could finally be reborn as someone so gifted and upstanding that they could accomplish the loftiest feat of them all: Enlightenment. Some of the jataka manuscripts which pile up in monastery libraries across Buddhist Southeast Asia follow old Sinhalese Pāli

texts, while others are more like sprawling romantic adventures. For centuries, this narrative form was the most ubiquitous style of literature available in the region, a shared imaginative world for entertainment, religious instruction and creative expression.

The reproductions presented in this exhibition are from the British Library's collection of over 300 paper-folding and palm leaf manuscripts. They were primarily collected by Dr Henry Ginsburg (1940-2007), the Library's first curator of Thai, Lao and Cambodian collections. Produced between the 18th and 19th centuries, the manuscripts were commissioned by wealthy patrons for merit. For this reason, the texts often do not match the jataka stories depicted but more frequently contain extracts in Pāli language from the seven books of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka. These pictures then were not like storybook illustrations but expensive embellishments to go alongside the goodly work of transmitting dharma. As with mural paintings in this period, stories were depicted with their most recognizable scenes such as the bodhisattva as a snake coiled around an ant hill for the Bhūridatta Jataka or being tied to a flying horse for the Vidhura Jataka. The images presented in this exhibition were chosen to show examples of all ten of the Mahānipāta Jataka or Ten Great Birth Stories. They show a range of different artistic styles from different periods, demonstrating both the breadth of the Library's collection as well as the depth of creativity applied, as with other religious narratives, over and over again to the same captivating stories.

Opposite: A manuscript with illustrations from the Mahajanaka Jataka BL Or. 14068 f.3 Below left side: BL Or.16100 f.4. Right side: Bhuridatta Jataka BL Or. 14068 f.4.

Narrating the bodhissatva's path

THE STORIES

The previous lives of Gotama Buddha - the historical Buddha - are the subject of a collection of Birth Tales, in Pāli jataka. They show how he gradually acquired greater virtues and moral stature from one incarnation to the other. These stories, well-known in all Theravāda Buddhist cultures, are attributed to Gotama Buddha himself and are included in the Pāli Buddhist canon, the Tipitaka. He is thought to have narrated them during his ministry to his followers, using each jataka to teach certain morals and values. There are 547 such stories, but more were created in the region of Northern Thailand and Laos at a later time and are known as Paññāsa Jataka. Some of the stories are quite brief while others are of considerable length. The ten major stories are Temiya, Mahajanaka, Suvanna Sama, Nemi, Mahosadha, Bhuridatta, Canda Kumara, Narada, Vidhura, and Vessantara. Named for their principal characters, they describe the perfection of ten important virtues: Temiya, renunciation; Mahajanaka, courage; Suvanna Sama, devotion; Nimi, resolution; Mahosadha, wisdom; Bhuridatta, perseverance; Canda Kumāra, forbearance; Narada, equanimity; Vidhura, truthfulness; and Vessantara, charity.

The Buddha's Birth Tales are a major subject of Thai manuscript illustration, with the oldest extant manuscripts dating back to the early 18th century. Depicted are usually significant events in the previous lives of Gotama Buddha, that are easily recognisable. The bodhisattva is often at the centre of the illustrations, and he can be seen in incarnations in form of human beings (359 tales), deities and benevolent spirits (71 tales), or various animals (117 tales). Although the bodhisattva is not portrayed as female in any of the 547 jataka, female figures appear frequently as supporters of the bodhisattva. Without them, the bodhisattva's moral growth may not have happened. Examples are Vessantara's wife Maddi, the king's daughter Ruja in the Narada Jātaka, the goddess Manimekhala in the Mahājanaka Jataka, or female nāgas in the Bhuridatta Jataka.

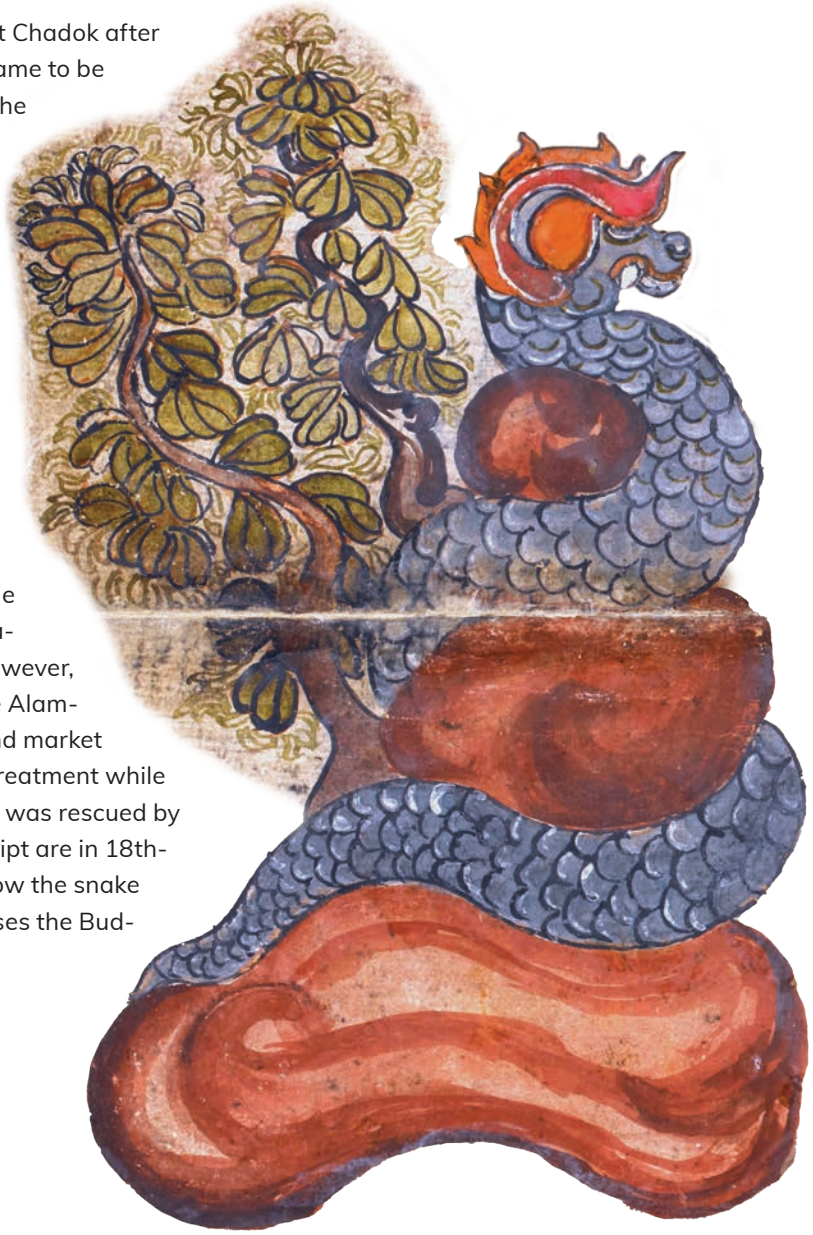
Opposite: An illustration of the Mahosadha Jataka. BL Or.14255 f.5.

While many stories are labelled Jatakas as they are said to be tales of the Buddha's past lives, ten tales are the most prominent.

SELECTED JATAKA

In Thailand, these ten tales are known as the Thosachat Chadok after Dasajāti Jataka. At a certain point in time, these tales came to be considered as the ten last lives of the Buddha, in which he perfects the most important of his excellences. In the Temiya jataka, he pretends to be mute so as to avoid becoming the king, thus demonstrating his excellence of reunciation. In the Mahosadha Jataka, the bodhissatva is an advisor to the king who manages through cunning to avert a disaster, thus demonstating the excellence of wisdom.

Two of the less well-known jataka tales are the Bhuridatta Jataka and the Vidhura Jataka. The Bhūridatta Jātaka reveals the story of the Buddha's former life as a nāga (serpent) prince. His human mother was given as a bride to his nāga father to resolve a feud between his father and a human king. Bhūridatta vowed to follow the holy precepts while coiled around an ant hill near the Yamuna River, as shown on the illustration to the right. However, he was captured by a greedy snake charmer with name Alambayana who forced Bhūridatta to perform in villages and market places for money. Bhūridatta endured this humiliating treatment while upholding the highest standards of morality, and finally was rescued by his brother Sudassana. The illustrations in this manuscript are in 18th-century painting style with Mon influences and show how the snake charmer captured the bodhisattva. This jataka symbolises the Buddha's virtue of morality.



BHURIDATTA AND SAMA JATAKA

The bodhisattva develops truthfulness and loving-kindness.

This painting on the right illustrates a scene from the Vidhura Jataka about a wise sage with the name Vidhura Pandita, who was a minister of King Dhanañjaya. Vimalā, queen of the nāga king Varuna, desired to meet Vidhura and requested his “heart” be brought to her. Punnaka, a yakkha, won power over Vidhura in a game of dice with King Dhanañjaya. He tied the minister to the tail of his horse, dragged him across mountains (as shown on the right side) and hurled him on a rock to obtain his heart. When Vidhura learned that the yakkha was acting on behalf of the nāga queen, he offered to see her voluntarily and to enlighten Vimalā and her king Varuna with his wisdom. The nāga couple were delighted and Varuna rewarded him with a magnificent jewel before escorting him back home safely. This jataka symbolises the Buddha’s virtue of truthfulness.

The Sāma Jataka tells the story of Sāma, also known as Suvannasāma due to his golden skin, who cared for his parents after a poisonous snake caused them to lose their eyesight. While fetching water at a source shared by deer, the king of Benares with name Piliyakkha was hunting deer nearby and shot Sāma with a poisoned arrow, as shown in the illustration to the bottom right. The dying Sāma told the king that his blind parents would not survive without him. King Piliyakkha admitted that he shot Sāma as a result of greed and promised to care for his parents. When the parents learned of their son’s death, they made a solemn declaration that if Sāma led a virtuous life in the past, then the poison should leave his body and he should live again. The goddess who had been Sāma's mother in a previous life also made the same resolution, and Sāma indeed revived while his parents also regained their eyesight. The Sāma Jataka symbolises the Buddha’s virtue of loving-kindness or benevolence.

Left side: Bhuridatta BL Or 14526 f. 5. Right side top: Vidhura Or 14068 f. 5. Below: Suvannasama BL Or. 14068 f.5.

SAMA JATAKA

In which the bodhissatva helps his blind parents, demonstrating his benevolence, and is shot with an arrow by the king.

Previous page left: BL Or. 14559 f.6.

TEMIYA JATAKA

In which the bodhissatva pretends to be mute so as to avoid becoming king, demonstrating sacrifice.

Previous page centre: top: BL Or. 16101 f.3.

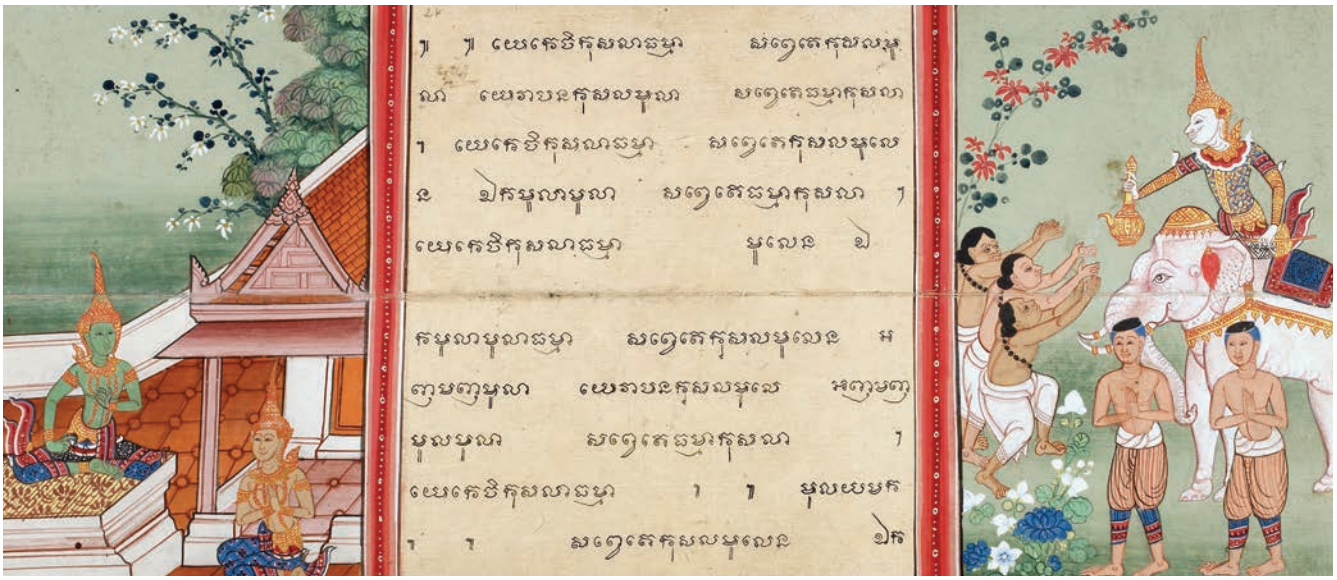
Below: BL Or. 16100 f.3.

MAHAJANAKA JATAKA

In which the bodhissatva swims for seven days and is finally rescued by a goddess, demonstrating perseverance.

Previous page right top: BL Or. 16101 f.3.

Below: BL 16552 f.8.



The most significant and well-known jataka tale

THE VESSANTARA JATAKA

Prince Vessantara was the Buddha's last incarnation before he was reborn as Prince Siddhattha and eventually attained enlightenment. This last Birth Tale, also called the Great Jataka, is the most popular across Southeast Asia, symbolising the virtues of charity and generosity. Prince Vessantara gave away his white elephant, bringer of rain, to Brahmins of a drought-stricken land as an act of compassion (top right). He was then exiled from his kingdom because people feared that his generosity may bring poverty to the land. His wife and children followed him and they set up a forest hermitage. A Brahmin, Jujaka, found Prince Vessantara and asked for his children to become servants to the Brahmin's wife to stop other villagers mocking her. Out of compassion for Jujaka's wife Prince Vessantara agreed to give away his children while his wife was collecting fruit in the forest. The greedy Brahmin later sold the siblings – unwittingly - to Prince Vessantara's parents (bottom right). Prince Vessantara and his wife were finally welcomed back to the kingdom and reunited with their beloved children.

The story was the most well-known story in Buddhist Southeast Asia for many centuries. It instantiates the virtue of generosity, for Vessantara is obsessed with giving everything away. Throughout the region, kings were keen to present themselves as examples of just this barami or kingly excellence. Vessantara's act of giving away his children to the greedy Brahmin Jujaka was one of the most performed and drawn narrative scenes as well as Vessantara's wife Maddi's distraught search for them after they had disappeared.

Opposite page are scenes from a MS depicting scenes from the Vessantara Jataka such as the bodhissatva giving away a rain-making elephant and the brahmin Jujaka with Vessantara's children. Top: BL Or. 16552 f.24. Bottom left: BL Or. 16552 f.32. Bottom right: BL Or. 16552 f.56.

Producing mulberry paper

The production of mulberry paper is known across East and South-east Asia and can be traced back to at least the tenth century CE. The bark of the Paper Mulberry tree (Broussonetia papyrifera) is harvested by hand, stripped off the branches, sorted according to size and quality, soaked in water and boiled to soften it. Then it is washed, cleaned, and beaten into a pulp, which is diluted in a vat with water. The pulp can be bleached or blackened to produce white or black paper, both of which were very popular in Thailand to create manuscripts. A special screen is submerged into the vat repeatedly to carefully build up layer upon layer of the fibrous residue. Finally, the screen is allowed to air-dry in the sun until the paper can be removed carefully. If the paper is too rough for writing or painting on it, it can be smoothened by placing it on a hard surface and carefully rubbing a tiger cowrie shell (Cypraea tigris) over it.

Above: A craftsman is smoothening handmade paper with a cowrie shell. Credit: Aphilak Kasem-pholkoon

Applying gold and lacquer to the finished manuscript

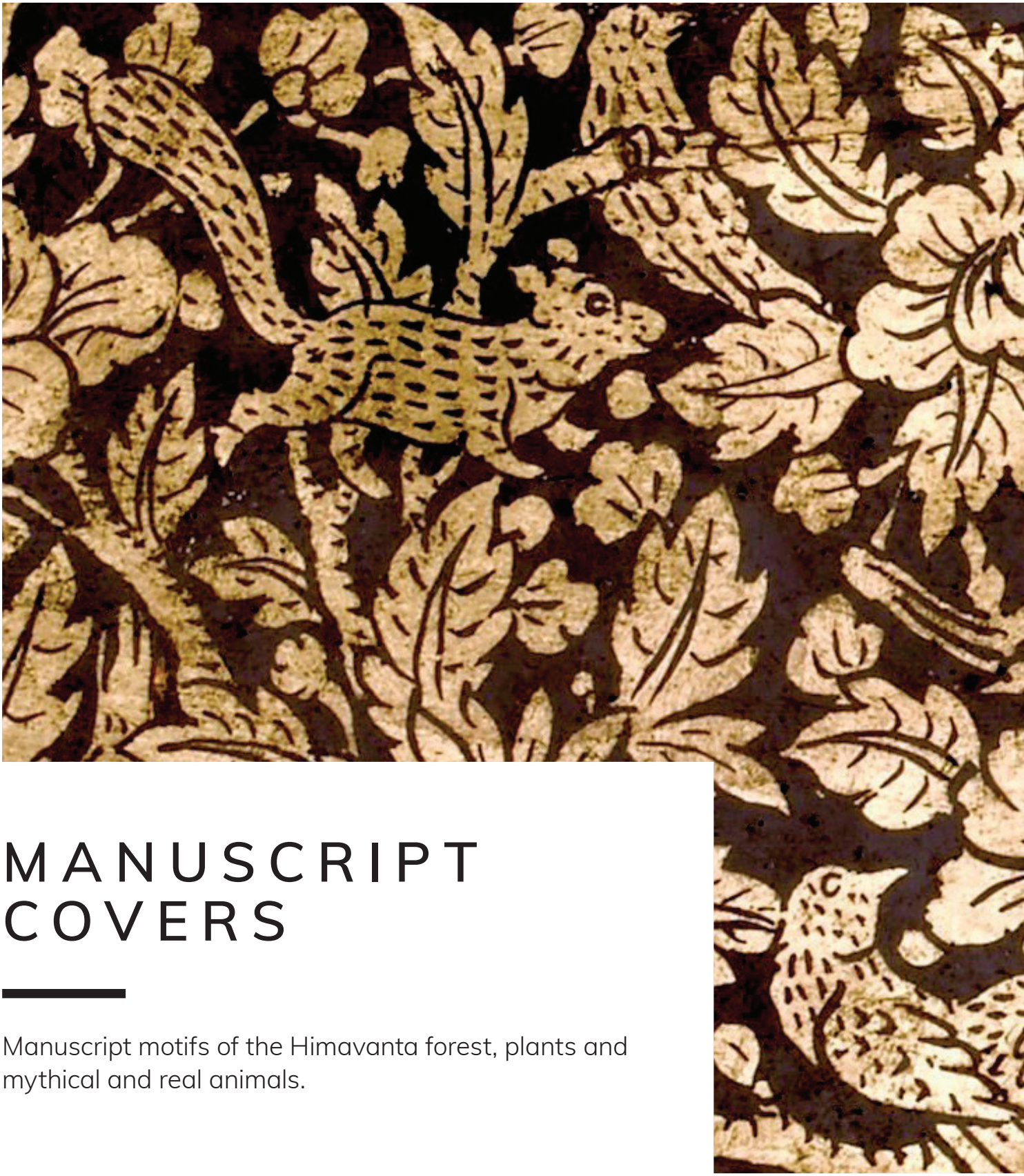
MANUSCRIPT COVERS

The beauty of illustrated Buddhist manuscripts from Thailand is often further enhanced by lavish gold embellishments on their covers. These were applied to increase the meritorious value of a manuscript, but also to reflect on the social status of the person who commissioned a manuscript or whom such a work was dedicated to.

A popular method to apply gold leaf on the covers of Thai paper folding books, palm leaf manuscripts, furniture and musical instruments is called lai rot nam. This technique goes back at least to the late Ayutthaya period (17th-18th century CE).

The first step consists of applying on the chosen surface several coats of black lacquer, a resin from a tree in the sumac family. The design is traced on parchment paper, and small holes are punched along the lines with a needle. The artist then places the perforated paper on the dried lacquer and wipes it with white clay to copy the design on to the lacquered surface. With a yellow gummy paint made from gamboge and river tamarind rubber the parts which remain black are covered in all their smallest details.

The next step in this process is to add a thin coat of lacquer glue over the surface, and when it is semi-dry, gold leaf is applied. After about twelve to twenty hours the work is “washed with water”: using a wet cotton ball or sponge the artist gently detaches the gummy paint to expose the lacquer while the remaining gold design, glued to the lacquered surface, appears. Hence this art is called lai rot nam, which is the Thai expression for ‘designs washed with water’. The beauty of the finished work depends first upon an exquisite design and afterwards a perfect execution which require artistic talent as well as excellent technological knowledge and skills.



MANUSCRIPT COVERS

Manuscript motifs of the Himavanta forest, plants and mythical and real animals.

The finest examples of Thai folding books have black lacquer covers with lavish gold decorations made in the lai rot nam technique. Often these were funeral or commemoration books commissioned by royals or wealthy members of the society and offered to the Buddhist order of monastics, Sangha. Made from several layers of sturdy mulberry paper, their covers provide more space to apply decorative designs in gold than the much narrower palm leaf manuscripts. Motifs of these decorations include scenes from the heavenly Himavanta forest, plants, mythical and real animals, deities and floral patterns.

HISTORY OF THE THAI MANUSCRIPTS COLLECTION AT THE BRITISH LIBRARY

A small collection of about one hundred manuscripts from Thailand was transferred from the British Museum and the India Office Library when the British Library was founded in 1973. These were mostly palm leaf manuscripts and black folding books with texts in Thai or Pali, the latter written in Khom script. Only a handful of these had illustrations or decorative elements. This part of the collection consisted mainly of bequests or purchases from missionaries, Pali scholars, explorers, colonial officers, diplomats, or professionals working for the Siamese government. Among them were Henri Mouhot, merchant Thomas McGill (manuscript from Singapore), John Bowring (commissioned manuscripts), surveyor John Richards (maps), James Hayes of the British Factory in Siam, politician and diplomat Robert Curzon, scholars R.C. Childers and Hugh Nevill (Thai manuscripts from Sri Lanka), diplomat E.H. French (commissioned manuscript), diplomat Ernest M. Satow, US foreign service employee Carl Ostertag.

From 1973 onwards, Henry Ginsburg, worked for over thirty years as the library's Curator of Thai, Lao and Cambodian Collections. Born in 1940 in New York, he studied French and Russian at Columbia College in New York, obtaining a BA in French literature in 1962. In 1964–65 he volunteered with the American Peace Corps in Chachoengsao, Thailand, where he fell in love with the country, its culture, and its people. It was during this time that he decided to study for a MA degree at the University of Hawaii– Manoa. His thesis, "Thai Literary Tales Derived from the Sanskrit Tantropakhyana with Special Reference to the Pisacapakaranam" was accepted in 1967. He then moved to London to continue his studies under Stuart Simmonds at the School of Oriental and Asian Studies (SOAS). In his Ph.D. thesis, he researched "The Sudhana Manoharā Tale in Thai: A Comparative Study Based on Two Texts from the National Library, Bangkok, and Wat Machimāwāt, Songkhla," and it was accepted in 1971.

During his time at the British Library Henry Ginsburg acquired nearly two thirds of the existing Thai manuscripts collection, including many illustrated items, by way of purchase or donation. His close contacts with Thai royalty, scholars, collectors, antiquarians and art dealers led to numerous opportunities to buy rare materials. Significant donations were received from MR Narisa Chakrabongse (Chakrabongse Archive of Royal Letters) and from Doris Duke's Southeast Asian Art Collection (manuscript furniture and artworks) between 2002

and 2004. A linguistically important collection was purchased from the estate of Sinologist Søren Egerod in 1995.

During the three decades he worked at the British Library, Henry Ginsburg contributed to the study and research of Thai manuscripts and art with numerous scholarly articles and book chapters. His two books, Thai Manuscript Painting (1989) and Thai Art and Culture: Historic Manuscripts from Western Collections (2000), were groundbreaking publications on the subject of Thai manuscripts and manuscript art. The latter was the result of an exhibition of Thai manuscripts from the British Library's collection in Bangkok to mark the Golden Jubilee of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej and the state visit to Thailand of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. The Office of the National Culture Commission of Thailand invited the British Library to produce such an exhibition, which was held in 1996 at the Changing Exhibition Hall of the Thailand Cultural Centre, Bangkok, and was officially opened by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, together with Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. The success of this project owed much to the long-term friendship between Henry Ginsburg and Princess Sirindhorn, who visited the British Library on several occasions to view Thai manuscripts. His book became a lasting memento of this exhibition. Henry Ginsburg retired in 2002, but continued to volunteer at the Library to train and support his successor, Jana Igunma.

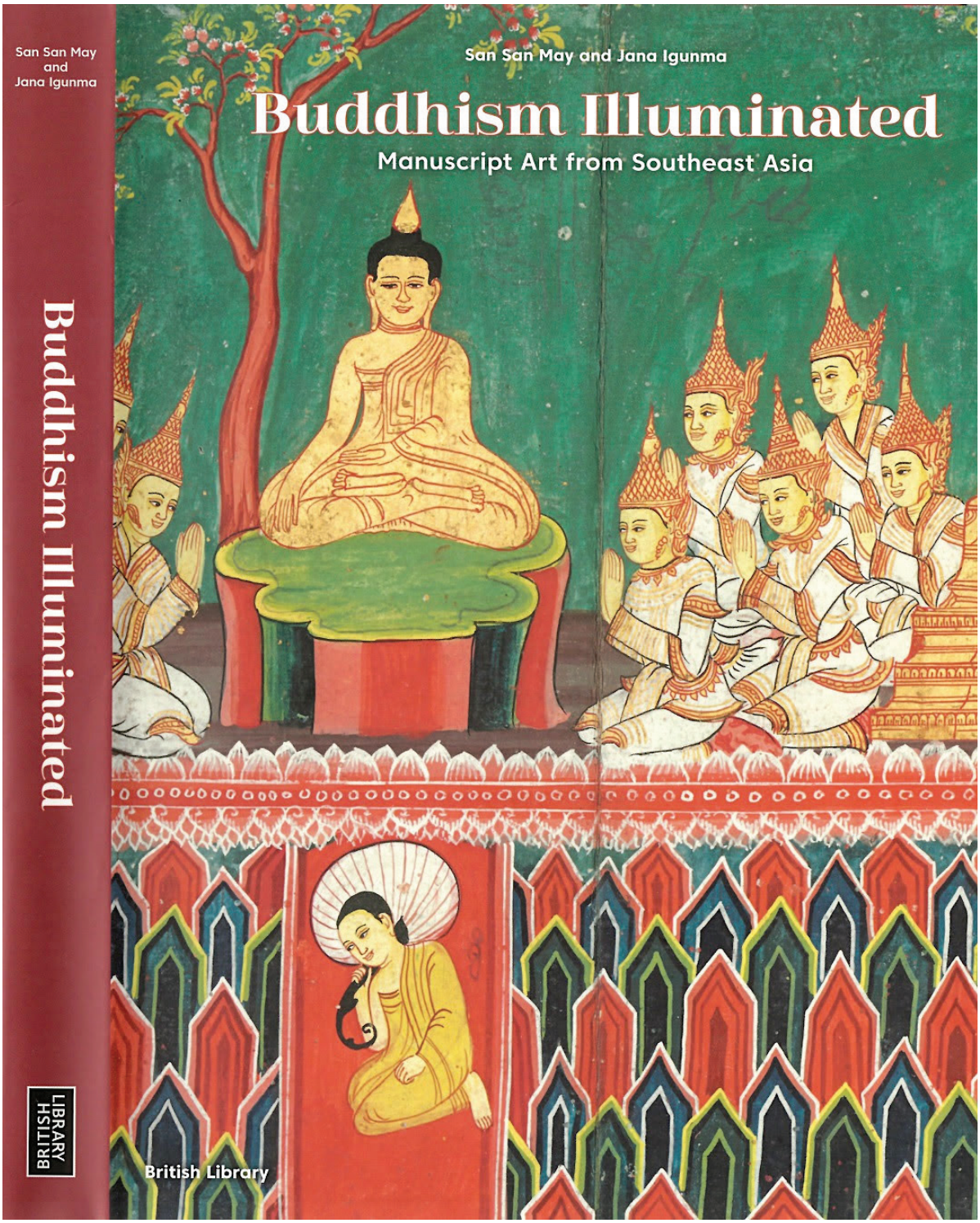
Above: Henry Ginsburg showing Thai manuscripts to Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn during a visit to the British Library on 16 January 1991.

A brief history of the Thai manuscript collection at the British Library

After his sudden death in 2007 during a trip to New York, Henry Ginsburg's own small collection of Thai and Cambodian manuscripts was donated to the British Library, alongside his collection of Thai books which was purchased. An endowment from the estate of Henry Ginsburg enabled the creation of a full-time curatorial post in his memory, the Henry Ginsburg Curator for Thai, Lao and Cambodian Collections, as well as the digitisation of over one hundred manuscripts from Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Burma and Vietnam. The endowment also supported the publication of two more books on Southeast Asian manuscripts, including Buddhism Illuminated: Manuscript Art from Southeast Asia (2018).

A recent donation of several hundred artworks, early photographs, manuscripts, antiquarian books, letters and notebooks from Thailand complements the existing collection. It was received from descendants of Frederick S. Harrop (1887-1969), who was hired as art teacher by the Siamese government in 1913 and worked as Headmaster at Poh Chang School of Arts and Crafts in Bangkok until 1930.

Left side: Narada Jataka BL Or. 14068 f.5. Right side: One of the Library's publications showcasing its collection of manuscripts from Southeast Aisa.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