

Review

Naomi Appleton, Sarah Shaw and Toshiya Unebe, *Illuminating the Life of the Buddha: An Illustrated Chanting Book from Eighteenth-Century Siam*. Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2013. xviii + 142 pp. £35. ISBN 978-1-85124-283-2 (hardback).

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This book presents an extraordinary object in the collection of the Bodleian Library at Oxford University, a Thai Buddhist *samut khoi* or mulberry-paper folding manuscript produced over two centuries ago. Jacqueline Filliozat described it as ‘the most interesting of all the illustrated Siamese manuscripts in British libraries, by virtue both of its philological importance and of its artistic value’ (p. 5). Henry Ginsburg, the late curator of Thai, Lao and Cambodian manuscripts at the British Library, hailed its discovery as ‘momentous’ (2000: 65). In this volume, Naomi Appleton, Sarah Shaw and Toshiya Unebe draw upon Ginsburg’s pioneering research in Thai manuscripts and synthesize other secondary sources while creating a model for multi-disciplinary, collaborative analysis of various dimensions of a single manuscript. Appleton states in the Preface that the authors intend their book to be read not only by scholars but by a ‘wide audience’ (p. xviii). Thus they provide background on topics such as Thai manuscript making, monastic chanting and the tradition of narrating the Buddha’s past lives, concisely but informatively introducing these areas to non-specialist readers. They have minimized the use of non-English-language terms, and their writing eschews scholarly rhetoric in favour of a style which is amateur-friendly and conveys complexity in a clear and engaging way. The book is also copiously filled with numerous richly-coloured reproductions. This slim volume is a special delight for the eye and the mind.

The *samut khoi*, Bodleian Library item no. MS. Pali a. 27 (R), consists of a long sheet of paper folded concertina-style, inscribed with text and paintings on both sides of the paper. The authors helpfully provide diagrams which show the layout of the text and the pictures across its 77 folios. The text, in Pali language in Khom script, contains extracts from various *suttas* followed by chants which would have been recited by monks on various occasions. On one side of the paper, the pictures depict scenes from stories of the Buddha’s previous existences (*jātakas*). Those on the other side present scenes from the life of the Buddha after his Enlightenment, an unusual subject for Thai manuscript illustrations. As is the case with many Thai paper manuscripts,

the content of the pictures is generally unrelated to the words; the pictures are not technically 'illustrations' of the textual contents as in Western books; instead, on their own, the pictures present another form for expressing Buddhist values and have their own associations. In relation to the form and functions of the manuscript, Shaw well observes that 'this *samut khoi* embodies an interface between oral, written and visual traditions'. Moreover, it 'challenges the boundaries of what we mean by a "book"' (p. 8).

The analysis of the paintings takes up the major part of the authors' study. There are colour reproductions of all of the pictures, accompanied by summaries of the relevant episodes from the *jātakas* and the Buddha Gotama's life story. Similar examples from other manuscripts, mural paintings and textual sources are also presented. Unebe compares the life of the Buddha as depicted in the Bodleian manuscript with a Thai textual account, the *Paṭhamasambodhi*. He wisely does not privilege the textual as the more definitive or orthodox version of the narrative, noting that visual narratives have their own course of development, which interacts with the development of textual narrative while also being affected by sources other than texts.

The book also explores the 'lifestory' of this undated and incompletely provenanced manuscript, casting light on how it may have travelled from the cosmopolitan milieu of the late eighteenth-century Siamese capital of Ayutthaya to the collection of the Bodleian Library in Oxford a century later. An accompanying letter and label suggest intriguing connections to Ceylon and British imperial history.

The manuscript's ritual purpose and usage, its textual and visual narratives, its art historical value, and its role linking the histories of Thailand, Sri Lanka and Britain are deftly explored by Appleton, Shaw and Unebe. Thanks to their beautiful and stimulating book, the Bodleian manuscript, and the Thai *samut khoi* form in general, should receive the wider appreciation they deserve.

REFERENCE

- Ginsburg, Henry. 2000. *Thai Art and Culture: Historic Manuscripts from Western Collections*. Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press.