A Pre-Angkorian Bronze Bodhisattva at the Art Institute of Chicago

Nicolas Revire[1]

Abstract—This article examines a small pre-Angkorian bodhisattva in bronze (7th–8th century) at the Art Institute of Chicago, traditionally identified as Maitreya but never studied in depth. Its iconography, style, and casting technique are considered within the Mon–Khmer corpus of early mainland Southeast Asian Buddhist imagery. The study reassesses the absence of archeological context and the unsubstantiated attribution to the so-called Prakhon Chai or Plai Bat Hill hoard in northeast Thailand, discovered in the 1960s. Attention is given to its acquisition through a New York–based dealer, likely connected to Bangkok networks, revealing the complex modern circulation of Southeast Asian antiquities.

Keywords: Art Institute of Chicago; Bodhisattva Images; Prakhon Chai Hoard; Pre-Angkorian Bronzes; Provenance Research

Introduction

In 1966, the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC) received a small Southeast Asian bronze sculpture of a bodhisattva—identified in museum records and later publications as Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future—at a time when such works were extremely rare in the United States. From an early stage, it was associated with the so-called Prakhon Chai hoard reportedly discovered in northeast Thailand in the mid-1960s, an attribution often repeated without firm evidence (see *infra*). Although publicly exhibited and published for decades, the bronze has never been the subject of sustained scholarly analysis. Its small scale, modest quality of workmanship, state of preservation, and limited provenance information have kept it at the margins of scholarship, even as it remains of historical interest.

This article addresses this gap by reassessing the AIC bodhisattva in three interconnected ways. First, it examines the sculpture's stylistic, technical, and iconographic features, with particular attention to the longstanding but untested identification of the figure as Maitreya. Second, it situates the bronze within the broader historical and cultural context of Buddhist imagery in mainland Southeast Asia during the pre-Angkorian period, clarifying how this work relates to regional artistic developments beyond any particular site. Third, it revisits the vexed issues of provenience and provenance. This includes both the contested narratives surrounding the discovery of the Prakhon Chai bronzes and the wider, often problematic, history of collecting

[1] The Art Institute of Chicago (Research Fellow). Email: nrevire@artic.edu.

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Southeast Asian antiquities from the 1960s onward. In doing so, it underscores the ethical and methodological stakes of interpreting early Buddhist art in the absence of secure archeological context.

From a methodological standpoint, it is important to distinguish from the outset between traditional art-historical analysis, which can operate on a preponderance of stylistic evidence, and provenance research, which demands verifiable documentation, particularly when ethical or legal concerns such as repatriation arise. The AIC bodhisattva sits at the intersection of these approaches: its stylistic and iconographic features allow art-historical study, while its collecting history must be evaluated against strict evidentiary standards. The absence of archeological context further complicates attribution and limits what conclusions can be drawn about its original site, function, or cultural associations.

The discussion proceeds as follows. I begin with a close description of the AIC bronze and its stylistic and iconographic types, offering comparisons with related works, before turning to the question of technical features. I then situate the object within the scholarly discourse on the Prakhon Chai bronzes, a group later entangled in controversies surrounding particular collectors, dealers, and practices, in order to highlight both the appeal and methodological limitations of this category. Finally, I reconsider the sculpture's provenance and collecting history, showing how dealer networks and mid-20th-century market practices shaped the movement of Southeast Asian antiquities into U.S. collections.

Stylistic, Iconographic, and Technical Features

Measuring just over 30 cm in height, the AIC bodhisattva is stylistically attributed to the pre-Angkorian period (7th–8th century) and to the wider Mon–Khmer artistic sphere encompassing much of present-day Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and southern Vietnam. Similar images have been discovered in northeast Thailand at Mueang Fai and Ban Tanot and northwest Cambodia at Prasat Ak Yum (e.g., Boisselier 1967: 284ff; FAD 1973; Baptiste et al. 2025: cat. 18–19). The two-armed standing bodhisattva wears a short *sampot*, or male wrap garment, falling to mid-thigh and gathered at the waist with a cord-like sash tied in a conventional front knot. The edge of the garment is neatly folded, overlapping slightly at the center front to form a narrow, angled hem that echoes the triangular taper of the knot. Front pleats converge toward the cord, emphasizing the figure's upright, axial posture. The upper body is bare and entirely unadorned, emphasizing the figure's ascetic character and suggesting a devotional ideal centered on renunciation rather than courtly splendor. The figure likely held attributes that are now lost—possibly a water jar in the left proper hand and a lotus bud in the right—objects that may originally have been cast separately and affixed afterward **[Figures 1a–c]**.

The facial features include joined, prominent eyebrows and a broad nose, characteristics associated with the Mon–Khmer sculptural tradition, and a subtly modeled mustache rendered in relief along the upper lip. The matted

Figures 1a–c: Standing bodhisattva, right profile (a), front view (b), left profile (c); pre-Angkor period, 7th–8th century; probably Thailand, possibly from Plai Bat Hill, Buriram province; probably solid-cast bronze; H. 31.1 cm (without tang); Art Institute of Chicago, gift of Mr and Mrs William H. Wolff, 1966.328 © AIC

hair is arranged in the small, looped locks characteristic of ascetic figures of the first millennium. What appears to be a small stupa or *caitya* in the chignon, traditionally considered an identifying attribute of the Bodhisattva Maitreya, is faintly discernible **[Figure 1d]**.[2] Without this element, the figure could easily be identified as Avalokiteśvara, who is likewise often depicted with the ascetic hairstyle in this early period.

It should be emphasized, however, that such symbols and attributes were not necessarily standardized in the Buddhist art of this era, and no surviving iconographic treatises or inscriptions from the first millennium provide definitive guidance for identification in Southeast Asia.[3] Equally problematic is the broader question of whether Maitreya was a significant focus of cult in pre-Angkorian (or Angkorian) Southeast Asia. Textual evidence from the region is scant, and no inscription securely attests to the independent worship of Maitreya in the first millennium.[4] The tendency to label ambiguous

[2] Might this attribute, alternatively, be interpreted as a water vessel—an object traditionally associated with the Bodhisattva Mahāsthāmaprāpta?

[3] The same holds true for early Buddhist art of South Asia, where in the formative stages of iconographic development various bodhisattvas could also bear the emblematic *caitya* in their hair. For a recent reconsideration of these bodhisattva identifications, see Revire et al. 2021.

[4] A pre-Angkorian door-jamb inscription in Old Khmer (K. 163) from Prasat Ampil Rolum in Cambodia

Figure 1d: Head detail of the bodhisattva shown in Figs 1a–c © AIC

bodhisattva images as Maitreya may therefore reflect more the assumptions of modern scholarship (e.g., Leidy 1994) than the realities of early Southeast Asian devotion. Given these uncertainties and in the absence of secure iconographic markers, inscriptions, or textual confirmation, the safest conclusion is that the AIC bronze and other similar images represents a generic bodhisattva rather than a specific figure of Maitreya.

The AIC bronze retains a single tapered tang projecting from a wax bridge between the feet, now largely broken, indicating the remains of a casting runner. This single tang aligns it with other small figures likely intended for individual devotional use rather than architectural attachment.[5] It would also have served to secure the figure to its original stone, wood, or metal base, now lost. Such a method—probably involving upside-down casting of the figure separately from its base—was common in mainland Southeast Asia until the 10th century, after which bronzes were more frequently cast integrally with their plinths. Despite the absence of radiography to confirm this, the AIC statue is likely solid-cast, given its substantial weight (5 lb/2.27 kg), another typical feature of small-scale bronzes from this period. Larger figures were generally hollow-cast using the lost-wax technique to reduce weight, conserve material, and facilitate handling.

Conservation documentation of the AIC bodhisattva is relatively limited but nonetheless significant. The dealer's original invoice (see below **Fig. 5**), when the object was first offered to AIC, records that the figure had been "broken in two at the waist and was skillfully repaired by Mr. Joseph Ternbach [1897–1982]", a freelance sculpture conservator and restorer who gained recognition in New York City for developing mechanical cleaning methods for ancient bronzes (Ternbach 1972). Subsequent technical examinations have further informed the AIC sculpture's history. In 1997, visiting professor Chandra Reedy prepared a short internal report concluding that the sculpture was most likely authentic, noting extensive areas of genuine corrosion, perhaps the result of long-term burial, as well as a possible pigmented wax surface, especially on the back, suggesting an earlier conservation intervention. A later internal condition report, dated 2008, described "many stress cracks", particularly near the feet, attributed again to corrosion. Furthermore, traces of the original silver-toned patina remain visible on the central areas and other parts of the body, standing in contrast to the vibrant green and red encrustations of copper corrosion. This contrast suggests that the surface was at some point partially cleaned. Analysis by X-Ray fluorescence spectroscopy revealed a composition of copper and tin, indicative of bronze, with smaller amounts of lead, iron, and other elements. However, because of the non-invasive nature of the analysis and the surface

records gifts offered to a Buddhist triad—Buddha, Maitreya, and Avalokiteśvara. Although undated, the associated towers may date to the late 7th century (Woodward 2003: 60).

[5] Within Bunker's (2002) typology, single tapered tangs are characteristic of small pre-Angkorian bronzes, in contrast to the double tangs observed on larger examples from the Prakhon Chai or Plai Bat Hill corpus.

condition of the sculpture, it was not possible to obtain a quantitative determination of the alloy composition using this technique.[6] Taken together, these records seem to indicate a genuinely premodern object with a complex history of corrosion, surface treatment, and modern repair.

Useful comparisons can be drawn between the AIC bodhisattva and related small-scale bronze representations of two-armed bodhisattvas—variously identified as either Maitreya or Avalokiteśvara—in other U.S. collections. All of these works entered their respective institutions after 1966 and have often been associated with the Prakhon Chai hoard (see *infra*). They include examples from the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco or AAMSF (B68S9),[7] the Norton Simon Museum (M.1974.01.2.S; F.1975.17.30.S), the Cleveland Museum of Art (1977.178; 2011.152), the Denver Art Museum or DAM (1983.14), the Brooklyn Museum (B86.259.2), the Metropolitan Museum of Art or Met (1987.258.3; 1989.237.2; 1994.51; 1995.570.8), the Walters Art Museum (54.2688),[8] and the Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art (S2015.24).

All of these figures share with the AIC bronze a broadly comparable conception of the bodhisattva: a youthful standing figure, slender in build, with an unadorned torso, narrow waist, and a short wrap garment secured at the hips. The drapery typically falls in straight, shallow folds, emphasizing the verticality of the body; the hair is arranged in tight locks or bangs, gathered into a topknot, evoking ascetic practice rather than princely adornment. Across the group, jewelry is absent, underscoring a devotional mode distinct from the more ornate bodhisattvas of later Angkorian production. These works also share a calm, frontal presence and a restrained modeling of musculature, contributing to an impression of contemplative stillness.

We can assume that these objects were most likely intended for personal devotion and may have originally formed part of triads in small domestic shrines, though this remains difficult to confirm. Robert Brown (2022), building on Gregory Schopen's theory of a personal "cult of the book" in the early development of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India from the 6th century onward, proposed that the production of small-scale bronze Buddhist images in early South and Southeast Asia reflects a parallel phenomenon: a private, non-institutional or non-monastic Buddhism centered on a lay "cult of icons".

Within this shared visual language, however, meaningful differences emerge in the details. The AIC figure stands with an unusually straight, axial posture, whereas several comparable examples display a gentle contrapposto or lateral sway, which softens the silhouette and introduces a subtle sense of movement. Facial treatment also varies: in the AIC bronze the Mon–Khmer ethnic features are more sharply defined, with a

[6] I wish to thank my AIC colleagues Ken Sutherland and Clara Granzotto in Conservation and Science for their assistance with the bronze.

[7] This piece is pending repatriation to Thailand, see Reichle, this volume.

[8] Bequeathed by A.B. Griswold in 1992; reportedly held in a private collection from Nakhon Pathom in 1948. Although it may originate from northeast Thailand, it cannot have derived from the Prakhon Chai hoard discovered in 1964 (Woodward 1997: cat. 12).

Figure 2: Standing bodhisattva; pre-Angkor period, 7th–8th century; probably Thailand, possibly from Plai Bat Hill, Buriram province; probably solid-cast bronze; H. 29.5 cm (without tang); private collection, intended for bequest to the Dallas Museum of Art, PG.2007.53 © DMA

pronounced mustache and joined eyebrows that create a distinctive expression, while other examples show smoother planes, separate brows, or a clean-shaven face. Hair treatment ranges from tight, evenly spaced curls to looser, more schematic locks and the handling of the garment hem and sash often differs in depth, articulation, and position. Proportions likewise fluctuate —some figures exhibit slightly elongated torsos or more robust thighs—suggesting workshop individuality rather than a single canonical model.

The closest parallel to the AIC bronze in scale, proportions, iconography (also lacking hand attributes), and style is a figure intended for bequest to the Dallas Museum of Art or DMA **[Figure 2]**.[9] While the two bronzes are not identical —most notably in the absence of a mustache on the Dallas example—the similarities are strong enough to suggest production in the same workshop, around the same period, and possibly by the same artisans. Both figures share a compact, upright posture and modeling of facial features, hair arranged in bangs, and short drapery tied at the waist with a cord. The DMA figure was originally cast with a conjoined tapered tang, a technical feature also present, as we have seen, on the AIC object, likely reflecting the similar casting practices of the same atelier.[10]

Another instructive comparison can be made with a related bronze head at the Victoria & Albert Museum or V&A (IS.23-1988), London, which evidently belonged to a larger figure cast using the lost-wax technique. Despite differences in scale and casting method—one presumably solid-cast, the other hollow—the V&A head also shares key features with the AIC bodhisattva, including almond-shaped eyes, eyebrows, and a faint mustache shown in low relief; an ascetic hairstyle of fine, looped coils; and a small *caitya* in the chignon **[Figure 3]**. At the same time, small differences in proportion, facial expression, and hair modeling suggest local or regional variations within the broader Mon–Khmer artistic milieu. It is impossible to determine which piece is older; rather than necessarily reflecting a temporal gap or localized stylistic development at a specific given site, these differences may represent the work of different sculptors within the same broader, contemporary workshop tradition.

The above examples from the DMA and the V&A also exhibit a similar surface appearance, with characteristic green and red incrustations from long-term corrosion, suggesting similar past environmental conditions. While the V&A example is somewhat less robustly modeled, with a slightly more delicate treatment of the facial features and

[9] See Bromberg 2013: cat. 116 (erroneously identified as "Buddha, possibly Maitreya"). From the collection of the late David Owsley, purchased at auction, *Indian, Himalayan, and South-East Asian Art*, Sotheby's London, 24 November 1986, lot 125, with provenance listed as Elsworth & Goldie, New York, 1965. I thank Angela Chiu for sharing a scan of this catalog. The statue was formerly in the Samuel Eilenberg Collection when Emma Bunker published her 1972 article (p. 73, fig. 11); by 2002 (Appendix A, p. 123), she recorded its whereabouts as unknown. Bunker tentatively attributed it to the Prakhon Chai hoard.

[10] The figure is also likely solid-cast, judging from its weight (5.28 lb/2.40 kg). I thank Jacqueline Chao, Curator of Asian Art at the DMA, for her assistance with this bronze.

Figure 3: Bodhisattva head; ca. 8th century; probably from the Khorat Plateau, northeast Thailand; lost-wax cast bronze; H. 13 cm; Victoria & Albert Museum, London, purchased from Alex Biancardi (Walmore Collection), IS.24-1988 © V&A

hair than the AIC figure, its overall iconographic vocabulary remains consistent, emphasizing asceticism. A technical study comparing their alloy compositions—including copper, tin, and possible other constitutive elements such as lead or zinc—would be especially valuable in assessing and confirming whether these works indeed share a common metallurgical tradition. Such analysis could also shed light on the production practices of pre-Angkorian bronzes across the Mon–Khmer cultural sphere.

This group of bronze images is generally described in the literature as cast in a high-tin alloy (with the tin component often exceeding 15%) or even a silver-rich alloy, a composition that enhances both hardness and durability while imparting a lustrous, silvery sheen. Over time, however, prolonged corrosion can transform the surface into darker green or greyish hues. To date, only limited metallurgical analyses have been undertaken in U.S. museum collections —for example, on selected works in the Met, though these concern larger figures produced by the lost-wax process (Becker et al. 2014: 269)—and no comprehensive database of alloy compositions appear to exist for the corpus as a whole.[11] A more directly relevant comparison with the AIC bronze is the small standing bodhisattva at the Walters Art Museum (Woodward 1997: cat. 12), which unfortunately lacks secure information on its origins and whose alloy composition has been recorded as approximately copper 76%, tin 18.7%, lead 3.26%, and zinc 0.11%. While such data points offer valuable insight into material choices, they remain too few to establish broad patterns or to reveal precisely their cultures of origin. It therefore remains again impossible to determine whether these bronzes—despite their broad stylistic and iconographic affinities—were produced within a single workshop tradition or, more plausibly, across multiple centers operating contemporaneously, perhaps involving itinerant workshops or mobile craftsmen. Minor regional or chronological variations in alloy recipes would naturally be expected, assuming all the studied pieces are authentic. Comparison is further complicated by their uneven states of preservation: some examples clearly reflect long-term oxidation, while others bear signs of more recent and sometimes aggressive cleaning, likely carried out before or shortly after their accession into museum collections.

Taken together, the similarities and divergences among these bronzes point to a shared regional idiom rather than a single prototype or production center. The AIC bronze aligns closely with the early Southeast Asian corpus in overall conception and devotional character, while its specific sculptural choices—particularly the rigid axial stance, distinctive and crude facial modeling,

[11] For comparison, see Anna Bennett's scientific examination (1999) of a similar large work in a private collection, as well as the technical and chemical analyses of the pre-Angkorian group of Buddhist bronzes from a cache discovered in Kampong Cham province, southern Cambodia, now in the National Museum of Cambodia (Jett 2010). See also Baptiste et al. (2025) for further recent analyses of early examples from Prasat Ak Yum, Angkor (cat. 18–19) and of two images in the Guimet Museum, Paris, reportedly from Prakhon Chai or Prasat Plai Bat Hill 2 (PPBH2) in Buriram province (cat. 20–21), on which see more below.

and technical features—indicate the work of a particular atelier operating within, but with its own refinements distinct from, the broader Mon–Khmer stylistic milieu. The sculpture exemplifies both the shared iconographic vocabulary of pre-Angkorian bodhisattva imagery across the region and the challenges of attribution and dating in the absence of documented archeological context.

The Prakhon Chai Puzzle

As we have seen, the AIC sculpture was very early on linked to the so-called Prakhon Chai hoard (Bunker 1972: 73, fig. 13),[12] as were other bronzes of similar type and appearance, highlighting a need to critically examine the evidence behind these attributions.

In 1965, news circulated of a "startling discovery made on the borders of Cambodia and Thailand". The report described "Cambodian villagers" involved in the unearthing of "Khmer statues" made of bronze and noted their "high silver content which gives them an attractive dark surface" (*Illustrated London News*, 28 August 1965: 37). Early scholarly accounts further identified these bronzes as "Pre-Khmer" images in the so-called "Prei Khmeng" or "Kampong Preah style"—terms used by art historians to designate the early phase of Khmer art and architecture, generally dated from the mid-7th to 8th centuries within the pre-Angkorian period (Boisselier 1967). The designation derives from the sites of Prasat Prei Khmeng, near the ancient city of Hariharālayā (modern Roluos) in Siem Reap province, and Prasat Kampong Preah, on the edge of the Tonle Sap Lake in Kampong Chhnang province, both in Cambodia. In other words, these terms refer to a chronological phase in early "Khmer art" rather than a specific geographic provenance. The development and dissemination of these artistic and architectural styles, as well as questions of their ethnic attribution—whether Mon or Khmer—naturally extend beyond any single site and transcend modern national borders.

Soon afterward, however, other accounts began to shift the story of this discovery northward. What had been first reported as a Cambodian find was gradually associated instead with northeast Thailand. This spectacular hoard of bronze Buddhist images—reportedly comprising dozens or even hundreds of sculptures clandestinely unearthed over the years by local villagers, and treasure hunters, many of which quickly entered the international art market—was eventually revealed to have been discovered in Prakhon Chai, a district name, not a single place, in Buriram province (Boisselier 1967: 305–310).[13]

[12] Other published references that uncritically repeat Bunker's attribution include FAD 1973: Appendix, fig. 16; and Tanongsak et al. 2024: 179, Table 1, no. 1 (without illustration).

[13] Bunker mistook Prakhon Chai for a place name, which she refers to as the "Pra Kon Chai Temple" (1972: figs 1–3). In *Program Bulletin* no. 40, Special Issue (August 1966), dedicated to the Avery Brundage Collection, it is stated that "two four-armed Lokesvara of bronze in the Prei-Khmeng (Plate IV) and Kompong Prah styles are part of a set of seven pre-Khmer statues excavated only last year from a subterranean chamber *in the region of Prakornchai* (Thailand)" (p. 10; my emphasis). This evidently refers to B65B57 (Plate IV, p. 5) and B66B14 (no image) at the AAMSF and appears to be the earliest published

The bronzes were soon celebrated for their stylistic qualities and for what they seemed to reveal about the richness of Buddhist practice in northeast Thailand during the pre-Angkorian period. Major museums in Europe and the United States quickly acquired examples and "Prakhon Chai" became a convenient shorthand for a distinctive style of early Southeast Asian Buddhist bronze. Yet the very notion of a "Prakhon Chai style" was fraught with problems. The original find was never properly excavated or documented and the various accounts of its discovery are contradictory, as summarized recently by Tanongsak et al. (2024). As noted above, in fact there is considerable disparity among the bronzes in terms of stylistic details, iconography, scale, and production techniques—and possibly alloy compositions—, making it difficult to speak of a single, homogeneous style (Bunker 2002: 115ff). Such diversity is, of course, typical of hoards, where objects of different origins and even different periods may have become mingled.[14]

It was eventually recognized that the bronze hoard may have originated from Prasat Plai Bat Hill 2 (ปราสาทเขาปลายบัด ๒; hereafter PPBH2), a previously unrecorded 10th-century Khmer temple, initially identified as lying within Lahan Sai district (อ. ละหานทราย), Buriram province.[15] In her 2002 article, Emma Bunker confidently stated that "Prakhon Chai has no bearing on the discovery site at all" and concluded that "the precise location of the famous 1964 discovery has been identified, but it is not in Prakhon Chai, a designation that is no longer relevant", further noting that she had acquired this information "on a trip through Northeast Thailand in May 2001" (p. 108, n. 9).

Bunker's assertion, however, clearly overstates the certainty of her knowledge or that of her informants. Following administrative restructuring in northeast Thailand, the site actually falls within Chaloem Phra Kiat district (อ. เฉลิมพระเกียรติ),[16] established in Buriram province on 5 December 1996 to mark the 50th anniversary of King Bhumibol Adulyadej's accession to the throne. This administrative change, unnoted in Bunker and prior scholarship, may have contributed to the ongoing confusion.[17] More precisely, PPBH2

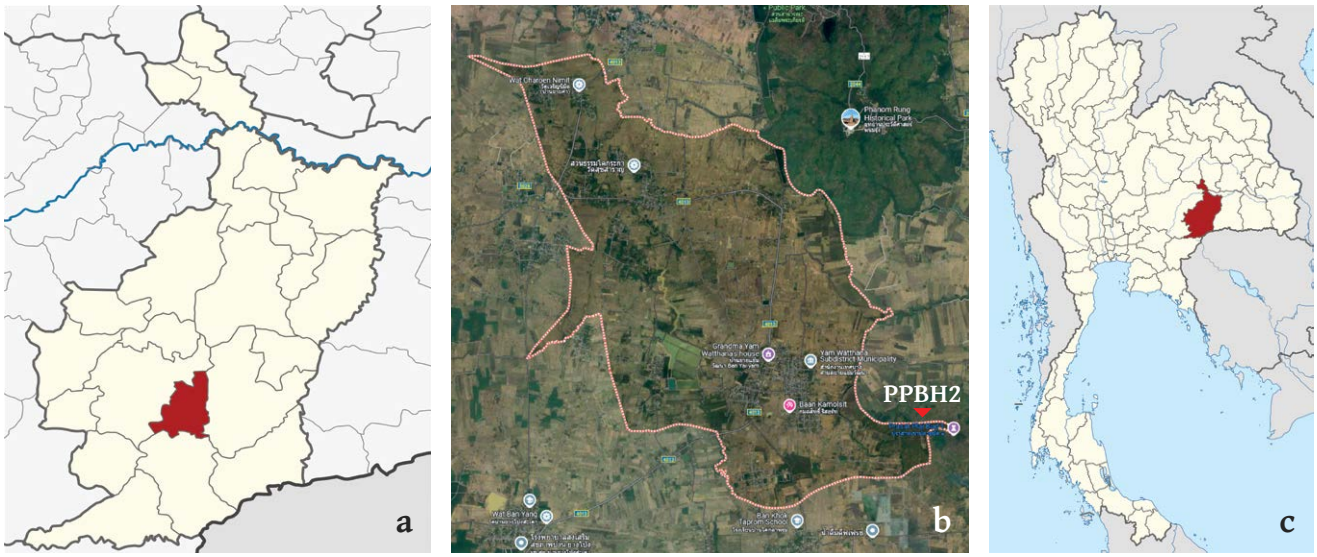
association between this hoard and Prakhon Chai district in Buriram province, preceding Boisselier 1967.

[14] A clear example of this stylistic diversity is a small standing four-armed bodhisattva, formerly in the Brundage Collection (now AAMSF, B65B58), which Bunker & Latchford (2011: 82, fig. 4.31, n. 146) attributed to the original so-called Prakhon Chai hoard from Buriram province. The figure, however, exhibits a distinctly peninsular or maritime style, with a long sash and other features typically associated with "Śrīvijayan art" from the Thai–Malay Peninsula or Sumatra. Boisselier (1967: 306) also noted stylistic parallels between certain images in this Prakhon Chai corpus and "Śrīvijayan art".

[15] See Pisit & Subhadradis 1976: 239, figs 101, 103 (cited in Woodward 2003: 105–108); also FAD 2536: 33–35. Lahan Sai was officially established as a full district on 16 July 1963. See *Royal Gazette* 80 (72 ก): 362 (in Thai). The name used by local villagers for the temple in the 1960s is unknown.

[16] Chaloem Phra Kiat was formed by separating the sub-districts of Charoen Suk (ต. เจริญสุข), Ta Pek (ต. ตาเป็ก), and Isan Khet (ต. อีสานเขต) from Nang Rong district (อ. นางรอง), and the sub-districts of Thawon (ต. ถาวร) and Yai Yaem Watthana from Lahan Sai district. See *Royal Gazette* 113 (62 ก): 1–4 (in Thai).

[17] Recent studies (e.g., Tanongsak et al. 2024; Baptiste et al. 2025) continue to repeat the Lahan Sai attribution.

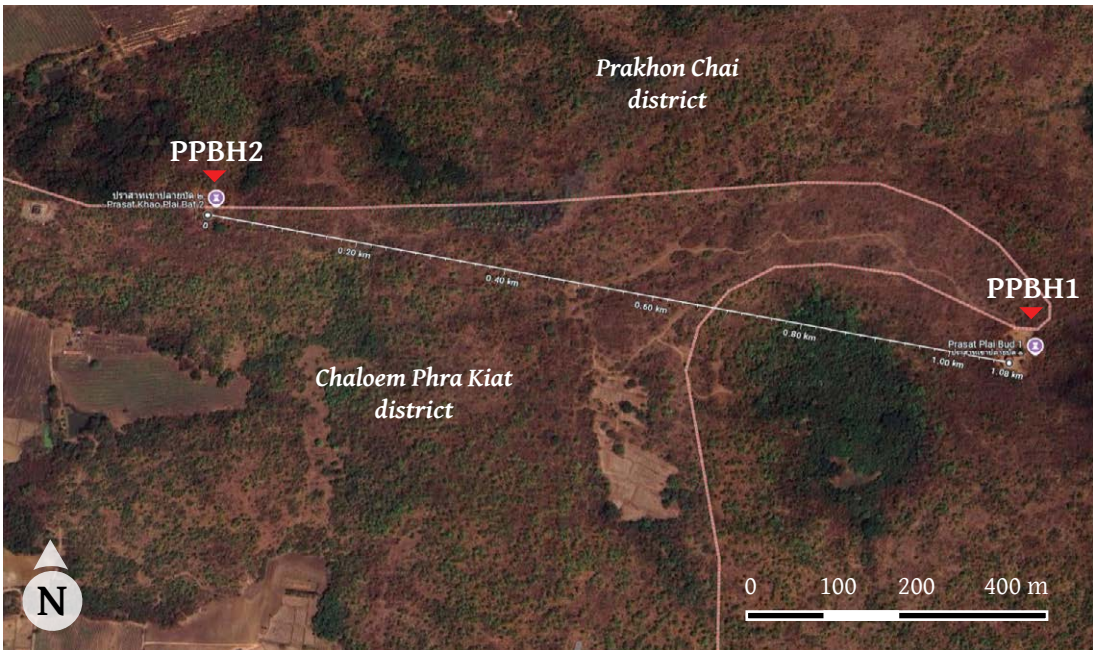


Maps 1a–c, left to right: Chaloem Phra Kiat district (a), Yai Yaem Watthana sub-district (b), in Buriram province (c), Thailand © Google Maps

lies on the southeastern border of Yai Yaem Watthana sub-district (ต. ยายแย้มวัฒนา) **[Maps 1a–c]**, about 1 km west of Prasat Plai Bat Hill 1 (ปราสาทเขาปลายบัด ๑; hereafter PPBH1), another 10th–11th-century Khmer temple, located in Chorakhe Mak sub-district (ต. จรเข้มาก), within Prakhon Chai district (อ. ประโคนชัย) **[Map 2]**.

Much ink has been spilled in recent years regarding certain individuals such as Douglas Latchford (see *infra*) believed to have played a central role in the looting, illicit export, and sale of many of these artifacts, allegedly masking the site's real name and true location in order to evade Thai authorities and mislead scholars. This issue has been examined in detail in Tanongsak et al. (2024), highlighting both the intensive treasure-hunting operation at PPBH2 in the mid-1960s and the rapid, international dispersal of objects supposedly found at the site over a relatively short period. This may well be true; however, the modern administrative boundary shown on **Map 3** clearly indicates that PPBH2 lies precisely on the dividing line between Prakhon Chai district to the north and Chaloem Phra Kiat district to the south. The site is literally bisected on the map, confirming that it was never formally recorded or inventoried as a historical monument when these administrative boundaries were first established. In other words, although PPBH2 has had no administrative connection with Lahan Sai district since 1996, its association with Prakhon Chai district does not appear to be completely incorrect, as asserted by Bunker (2002) and, most recently, in Tanongsak et al (2024). Rather, it remains the most natural and geographically coherent attribution for much of the Plai Bat Hill area.

Beyond the brief—and admittedly ambiguous—initial notice in the *Illustrated London News*, the literature offers no verified evidence that the site's precise

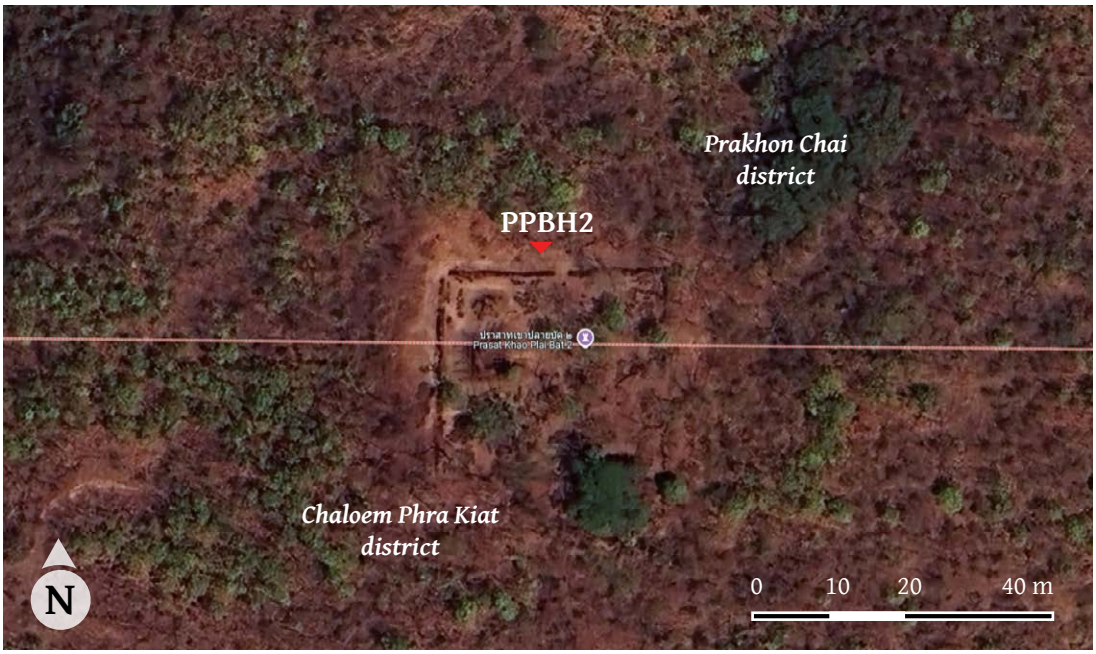


Map 2: Location of PPBH2 (west) and PPBH1(east) on Plai Bat Hill, with administrative boundaries straddling Chaloem Phra Kiat district to the south and Prakhon Chai district to the north, Buriram province © Google Maps

location was deliberately distorted or obscured.[18] In summary, the complexities surrounding PPBH2's position seem to result mainly from limited on-the-ground verification and incomplete consultation of local administrative records and official maps in Buriram province. In contrast, the label "Prakhon Chai" may initially have been adopted simply to suggest a plausible regional origin and was later perpetuated by collectors and dealers to enhance the market appeal of disparate objects—some almost certainly modern forgeries—purportedly originating from north-east Thailand (Phillis Lau-Casson 2025).

While I do contest the attribution of a discrete "Prakhon Chai style" to sculptures said to have been found at PPBH2, I do not dispute that a group of genuine Buddhist bronzes was discovered in the mid-1960s around Plai Bat Hill—an area historically located, as noted above, largely within Prakhon Chai district. However, the reportedly high number of objects raises doubts as to whether all bronzes originated from a single hoard or even a single site. As Bunker herself observed, "several months after the initial [1964] discovery, [illegal] excavations inside Prasat Hin Khao Plai Bat II, to the depth of some 2 metres, revealed a large cache of small bronzes, 5 to 50 centimetres

[18] Tanongsak et al. (2024) use the terms "misrepresentation" and "misdirection" to describe the initial reporting and dissemination of alleged incorrect information about the Prakhon Chai hoard. Whether these reflect deliberate obfuscation or the consequences of limited knowledge of administrative and field documentation remains an open question. Some individuals may have taken advantage of such ambiguities in official records, while others probably encountered these confusions without any strategic intent.



Map 3: Location of PPBH2 straddling Chaloem Phra Kiat and Prakhon Chai districts, Buriram province © Google Maps

in height, of lesser quality than the earlier [and larger] examples", before acknowledging that "there is no record of where they are today" (2002: 110). In other words, any attempt to reconstruct a reliable and comprehensive corpus of Buddhist bronzes from this cache at PPBH2 is futile.[19]

That said, it remains entirely possible that bronzes of comparable type were unearthed in multiple hoards across the wider Plai Bat Hill area or even originated from sites further afield. Asger Mollerup (2018: 82–86) documented numerous looted mounds across this landscape, extending from PPBH1 **[Figure 4]** to a newly recognized structure east of PPBH2, which he designates Prasat Plai Bat Hill 3 (PPBH3). Moreover, similar bronzes were discovered and published in the early 1960s–70s at other sites in the region—including Ban Mueang Fai, Thai Samakkhi sub-district, Nong Hong district (บ้านเมืองฝ้าย, ต. ไทยสามัคคี, อ. หนองหงส์),[20] in Buriram province, and Ban Tanot, Tanot sub-district, Non Sung district (บ้านโตนด, ต. โตนด, อ. โนนสูง), in Nakhon

[19] Bunker, in her 2002 article, proposes a reconstructed list of 36 bronzes that she links to PPBH2 cache (Appendix A), while also listing an additional 17 images that are loosely related or "similar" (Appendix B). In their most recent reassessment of this material, Tanongsak et al. (2024: Table 1) identify 45 bronzes attributed to, or associated with, Prakhon Chai or PPBH2 across museum websites and academic literature, with the caveat that: "This list does not claim to be exhaustive nor, let us reiterate, does it claim that all of these objects are genuine or definitely from Plai Bat II" (p. 178).

[20] The site originally lay within Lam Plai Mat district (อ. ลำปลายมาศ). On 31 March 1981, Thai Samakkhi sub-district, along with Sa Kaeo (สระแก้ว) and Huai Hin (ห้วยหิน), was separated to establish the new minor district (*king amphoe*; กิ่งอำเภอ) of Nong Hong. See *Royal Gazette* 98 (47 ง): 1091 (in Thai).

Figure 4: Looting hole near PPBH1 on Plai Bat Hill, Prakhon Chai district, Buriram province, 2009 © Asger Mollerup

Ratchasima province (Boisselier 1967: 284ff; FAD 1973)—and may well have been produced in related ateliers.

Importantly, these bronzes were never site-specific: they likely circulated widely and changed hands numerous times over many centuries. In the absence of reliable excavation records, photographs, or credible testimonies, no secure link can thus be established between the AIC bodhisattva—or any comparable bronze—and a precise findspot, whether PPBH2 or elsewhere.[21]

As demonstrated above, attributing objects to the so-called Prakhon Chai hoard on stylistic grounds alone is methodologically unsound. A con-

[21] The only photographic information we have for this hoard concerns the three large images featured in the *Illustrated London News* article "Unique Early Cambodian Sculptures Discovered" (28 August 1965: 37). These correspond, respectively, to two bronze bodhisattvas from the former Brundage Collection (AAMSF: B65B57 and B66B14; pending repatriation) and a fine standing buddha from the Rockefeller Family Collection in New York (Johnson & Proser 2006: 177). This does not exactly confirm their original source but only indicates that they were initially associated with this spectacular find, later attributed to Prakhon Chai or PPBH2.

nection with PPBH2 remains possible, but it cannot be demonstrated on art-historical evidence. Finally, and importantly, the available archeological data likewise does not support firm conclusions.

For this reason, the label "Prakhon Chai" should preferably be avoided in such object descriptions. The category never cohered into a meaningful stylistic group, given the diversity of forms among images loosely associated with Prakhon Chai, and, as we have seen, it heavily relies on assumptions about provenience (findspot) that cannot really be substantiated. The AIC bodhisattva may have come from the Plai Bat Hill area, but it could just as plausibly have originated elsewhere in the region—or even perhaps across the border in Cambodia. More broadly, this case illustrates how geographic and stylistic designations have often served market and museum narratives more than scholarship, perpetuating myths of provenience and obscuring the limits of what can truly be known.

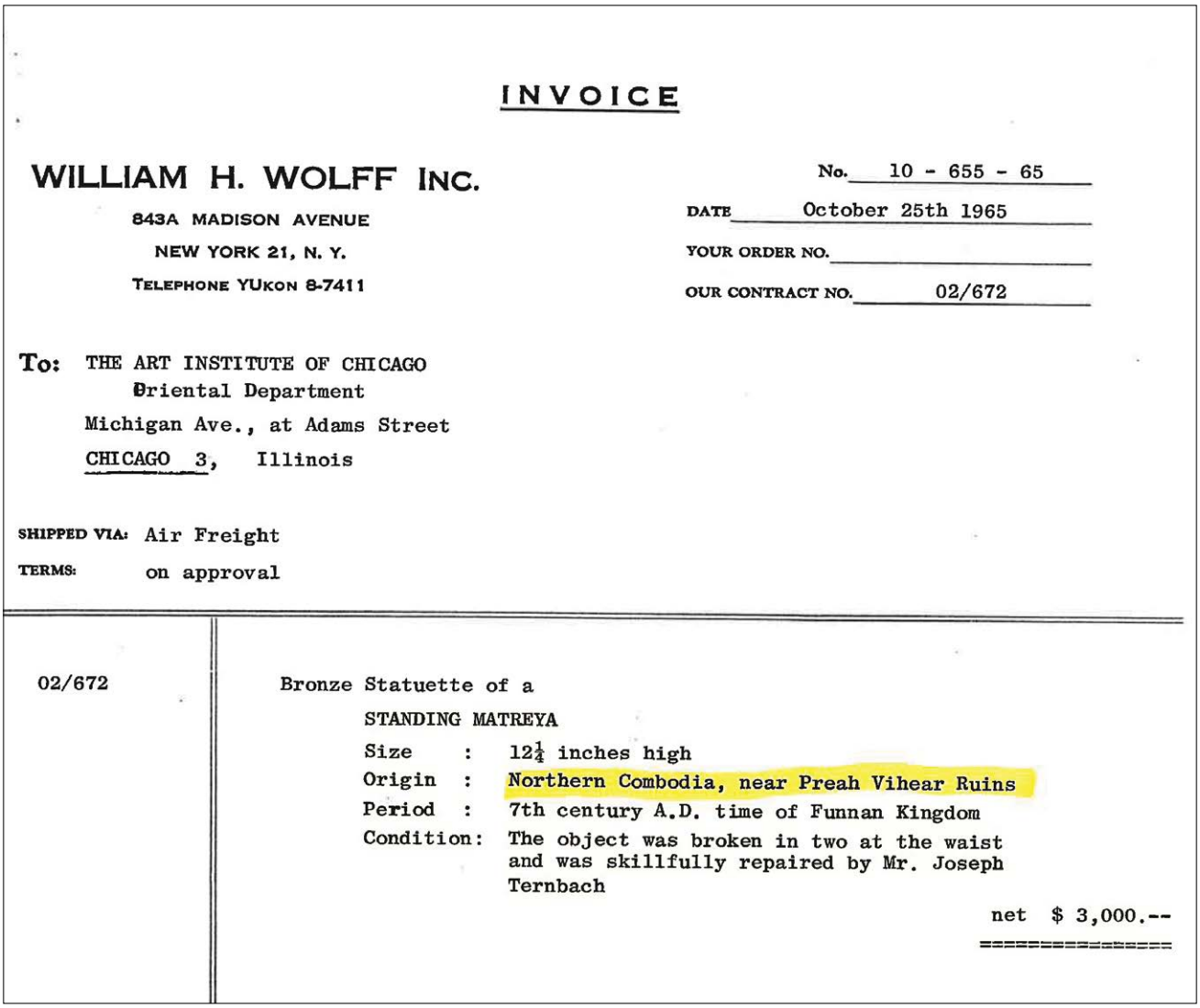
With these considerations in mind, I finally turn to the museum record and the AIC bronze's acquisition history to assess what, if any, firmer conclusions may be drawn about its journey into the collection.

A Bangkok–New York Connection?

The case of the AIC bodhisattva must finally be situated within the broader circulation of Southeast Asian antiquities during the 1960s, a period when U.S. museums increasingly acquired such works through rapidly expanding international art markets. Evidence from this era suggests that many artworks passed through Bangkok—then emerging as a key regional hub—before reaching dealers in Europe or New York. Although documentation for the AIC sculpture is limited, its recorded purchase from a New York dealer aligns with these broader patterns. Examining this acquisition history thus not only clarifies the likely route by which the bronze entered the AIC collection, but also illuminates the transnational networks, possible intermediaries, and market conditions that shaped the movement of such archeological objects during this formative period.

The AIC bronze was acquired from William H. Wolff (1906–1991), a Belgian-born dealer who emigrated from Nazi Germany to New York in 1936, later relocating to Chicago and, after World War II, returning to New York to establish his antiquities business. From the 1960s to 1990, Wolff operated *Far Eastern Antiquities* in Manhattan, supplying major U.S. museums with Asian art. His activities in Southeast Asia, however, are only sparsely documented and no evidence clarifies how or where he obtained this bronze. In a June 1965 letter to the AIC curator, Wolff mentioned a brief trip to Bangkok en route to India as part of his annual summer buying trips to Asia.[22] It is likely that he acquired the bodhisattva during this short visit in early July 1965, although from whom and under what circumstances remains unknown.

[22] Letter from William H. Wolff, *Far Eastern Antiquities*, to Jack V. Sewell, Art Institute of Chicago, 21 June 1965: "Until July 5th/6th you can cable me to Bangkok, [...] I will leave Bangkok on the 8th of July".



INVOICE

WILLIAM H. WOLFF INC.
843A MADISON AVENUE
NEW YORK 21, N. Y.
TELEPHONE YUKON 8-7411

No. 10 - 655 - 65
DATE October 25th 1965
YOUR ORDER NO.
OUR CONTRACT NO. 02/672

To: THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO
Oriental Department
Michigan Ave., at Adams Street
CHICAGO 3, Illinois

SHIPPED VIA: Air Freight
TERMS: on approval

02/672	Bronze Statuette of a STANDING MATREYA Size : 12¼ inches high Origin : Northern Combodia, near Preah Vihear Ruins Period : 7th century A.D. time of Funnan Kingdom Condition: The object was broken in two at the waist and was skillfully repaired by Mr. Joseph Ternbach net $ 3,000.--

Figure 5: Dealer's invoice, highlighting presumed origins for the AIC bodhisattva © AIC Archives

In October 1965, Wolff sent an invoice to the Art Institute for purchase consideration which described a small bronze statuette of a standing "Matreya" (*sic*), measuring 12¼ inches (approximately 31 cm), assigned to the "Funnan (*sic*) Kingdom" of the 7th century and attributed to "northern Combodia (*sic*), Preah Vihear Ruins" as its origin **[Figure 5]**.[23] By March 1966, however, the reported findspot had shifted: Wolff now claimed the piece derived from "recent excavations in Thailand" and, although he did not identify specific sites or objects, he associated it with other bronzes in prominent collections, including the Philadelphia Museum and the Brundage Collection (now at the AAMSF). This

[23] See also "Art of Asia Recently Acquired by American Museums, 1966", *Archives of Asian Art* 21 (1967–68): 76, 95, fig. 7, where the same origin is indicated.

change likely reflects evolving hearsay or informal conversations between the New York dealer and his contacts, possibly in Bangkok, none of which were, unfortunately, documented.[24]

These "recent excavations" could refer to any number of digs undertaken in Thailand during this period, though it is tempting to read them as an allusion to the widely publicized finds later known as the "Prakhon Chai bronzes", unearthed in Buriram province in 1964–65. The dealer offered no explanation for his sudden association of the statuette with these discoveries. Nevertheless, the AIC bronze has since been loosely linked to this group[25]—perhaps due to perceived stylistic affinities, though these remain inconclusive as we have seen, or more likely because it surfaced at the same moment that other bronzes purportedly from the same hoard were entering the international market. At best, this association reflects a broader trend rather than serving as evidence: as noted above, no firm documentation ties this piece—or most others—to the original find.

The shift from "northern Cambodia, Preah Vihear Ruins" to "recent excavations in Thailand" underscores the fluidity with which origins could be proposed in the mid-1960s, at a time when few regional specialists were available in the United States and museum staff often relied on dealers for information. How Wolff came to first cite Preah Vihear as a findspot remains unclear; it is unlikely he visited the site or possessed first-hand knowledge. More plausibly, such claims reflected local hearsay or information passed along through informal networks—material difficult, if not impossible, to verify today. Nonetheless, statements of this kind were frequently incorporated into museum files[26] and, in some cases, into catalogs and exhibitions, where they could subtly shape emerging narratives of early Southeast Asian art. The AIC bodhisattva illustrates how market actors, operating within limited knowledge environments, occasionally advanced hypotheses or associations that later gained undue authority. While such assertions may have seemed persuasive at the time, without corroboration they cannot be treated as evidence today. Equally, it is possible that dealers sometimes knew more than they disclosed, whether to protect sources or for other reasons. In the present, the burden falls on curators and scholars to reassess this inherited information critically and to build provenance and provenience histories on firmer documentary and contextual grounds.

Major figures in the Bangkok art world of the period also warrant brief

[24] Letter from William H. Wolff, *Far Eastern Antiquities*, to Jack V. Sewell, Art Institute of Chicago, 16 March 1966: "I had the opportunity to discuss the recent excavations in Thailand, from where also above object derives".

[25] The AIC sculpture is listed in two publications by Bunker (1972: 70, 73, fig. 13; 2002: 123, Appendix A, no image), where she attributed it to the Prakhon Chai bronzes—later associated with PPBH2—without providing detailed analysis or supporting evidence for this attribution.

[26] In another comparable case, I refer to a letter from William H. Wolff, *Far Eastern Antiquities*, to Emma C. Bunker, Denver Art Museum, 24 February 1966: "It really is a wonderful object. I was assured at the time of my purchase that it came from Angkor Thom and I invoiced it accordingly". The Khmer object in question was not identified in the DAM collection and its present whereabouts remain unknown.

consideration, particularly given the early claim that the AIC bodhisattva derived from the Prakhon Chai hoard. Among them was Douglas A.J. Latchford (aka Pakpong Kriangsak, ภัคพงษ์ เกรียงศักดิ์; 1931–2020), a British-born businessman who settled in Thailand in 1955, became a Thai citizen in 1968, and amassed one of the most prominent private collections of Khmer art. Though not a dealer in the formal sense, he operated at the center of Bangkok's antiquities market for decades and maintained close relationships with collectors, curators, and scholars.[27] His direct involvement in the looting and dispersal of the Prakhon Chai bronzes—later discussed alongside Emma Bunker—has been widely reported through journalistic investigations, legal filings, and oral accounts since 2012, with some observers characterizing this episode as "Latchford's first big heist" (Tanongsak et al. 2024).

Latchford's case is instructive not because he can be linked directly to the AIC bodhisattva—no such evidence exists—but because it illustrates the type of market ecosystem in which the sculpture surfaced. Bangkok in the 1960s and 1970s was a dynamic yet weakly regulated hub for Southeast Asian antiquities. Awareness of legal restrictions varied and local and international enforcement was uneven. A *New York Times* report of 30 March 1976, for instance, noted that bronzes associated with the Buriram/Prakhon Chai discoveries continued to circulate domestically and abroad, even as the Thai government prepared to request the return of a prominent bodhisattva from the Met (67.234). The article referred to allegations of collusion among Thai customs officials, military and police officers, and local dealers supplying Western institutions, while also recording cautious responses from U.S. museum directors—including the Art Institute's E. Laurence Chalmers—who acknowledged the gravity of the situation but expressed concern that such repatriation claims could heavily reshape American museum collections.[28]

There is no suggestion obviously that all collectors or Western museums knowingly acquired looted material during this period. However, the permissive environment in Thailand prior to the 1970 UNESCO Convention helps explain how objects attributed to Prakhon Chai moved rapidly into international markets and why assertions of origin—such as those made early for the AIC bodhisattva—took hold despite limited documentation. This context underscores the need for renewed scrutiny of provenance claims from this era, not to retroactively assign culpability, but to more accurately reconstruct the pathways by which such works entered museum collections.

Latchford undoubtedly handled several Buddhist bronzes later associated with the Prakhon Chai or PPBH2 hoard, many of which eventually entered major U.S. collections—AIC excepted—either through his personal gifts or via intermediary dealers such as Adrian Maynard of Spink & Son in London. In

[27] See *Bangkok Post* 12 September 2010: http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/investigation/195844/a-rare-find; also *New York Times*, 27 August 2020: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/27/arts/douglas-aj-latchford-khmer-antiquities-expert-dies-at-88.html.

[28] See: https://www.nytimes.com/1976/03/30/archives/bangkok-will-ask-met-to-return-idol.html.

a conversation on 13 November 1985 with Robert D. Mowry, then Curator of the John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection at the Asia Society in New York, Latchford reportedly stated:

> In total, I handled seven of the bronzes from Prakhon Chai: the two in the Rockefeller Collection (Maitreya Bodhisattva [now Asia Society, 1979.63] and the Dvaravati-style Standing Buddha [Rockefeller Family Collection]), the two in the Brundage Collection in the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco [presumably B65B57 and/or B66B14 and/or B68S9], the huge standing Bodhisattva in the Metropolitan Museum [presumably 67.234], the piece in the Norton Simon Museum [possibly M.1974.01.2.S, F.1975.17.30.S or M.1980.14.S], and the one in the Guimet [presumably MA3321].

The impressive list likely represents only those major pieces he was prepared to acknowledge at the time. It thus leaves open questions regarding the participation of other intermediaries in the circulation of further works attributed to Prakhon Chai. Additional objects later linked to Latchford, though of far lesser prominence, entered the Met (1987.142.315; 1989.237.2; 1994.51). At the AAMSF, three of the four Buddhist bronzes currently being repatriated to Thailand (B65B57, B66B14, B68S9) are documented as passing through Spink & Son, London, and by extension are presumed to relate to material primarily handled by Latchford, while the fourth (B65B70) remains less clearly documented.[29]

Such cases raise broader methodological questions about the criteria guiding contemporary repatriation decisions. In practice, restitution often relies on a combination of stylistic attribution to known looted sites, associations with problematic actors, and newly surfaced archival or oral evidence indicating illicit acquisition—yet inconsistencies persist. For example, one bodhisattva at the AAMSF (B65B58), though stylistically distinct (see *supra*, note 14) but with a comparable provenance profile,[30] was excluded from recent negotiations. In contrast, another bronze closely resembling the Prakhon Chai group and directly linked to Latchford was restituted to Cambodia in 2023 and recently displayed in the Guimet Museum's *Angkor Royal Bronzes* exhibition, even as its caption acknowledged uncertain origins ("Cambodia, or a neighboring country"; Baptiste et al. 2025: cat. 90). These cases illustrate that restitution decisions remain highly contingent and case-specific, reflecting evolving ethical standards, legal frameworks, and diplomatic considerations.[31]

[29] I am grateful to Natasha Reichle, Associate Curator of Southeast Asian Art at the AAMSF, for sharing information on provenance pertaining to this group of images. See also Reichle, this issue.

[30] As Bunker & Latchford noted: "according to people who were intimately involved with the original find, it was found with the Khao Plai Bat II images and acquired by Spink's with the Khao Plai Bat II bronzes they purchased" (2011: 124, n. 146).

[31] See, e.g., the 2023 repatriation of three 9th–11th-century Campā Buddhist bodhisattvas from the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) to Cambodia. Purchased in 2011 via Douglas Latchford, their return highlights the complexities of Southeast Asian cultural heritage: the Cham creators remain marginalized in Cambodia and Vietnam, looting often

In this context, the AIC bodhisattva calls for a cautious, evidence-driven approach, given that its early market history remains characterized more by speculation than by secure documentation.

By way of illustrating the extensive circulation networks of the period, several other U.S. and international collectors and dealers acquired bronzes later linked to the so-called Prakhon Chai hoard in the late 1960s, many of which ultimately entered American museum collections. New York–based dealer Robert H. Ellsworth (1929–2014) sold several related pieces to the Kimbell Art Museum (AP 1965.01), Denver Art Museum (1966.43 and 1983.14), and the Met (1982.220.5). Peter Marks (1935–2010), another New York-born dealer, sold a large bronze to Ben Heller (1925–2019),[32] also in New York, that eventually entered the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena (M.1980.14.S), with the AIC having first refusal.[33] Emma C. Bunker (1930–2021), then Research Associate Curator at the Denver Art Museum, published a bronze from her own collection in 1972 (p. 73, fig. 9), which later changed hands through multiple auctions and is now in the Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art (formerly, the Freer & Arthur M. Sackler Gallery; S2015.24). Similarly, the collector and curator David T. Owsley (1929–2025), born in Dallas, acquired a piece at auction that originated in the former collection of Samuel Eilenberg (1913–1998), who may in turn have obtained it from Ellsworth in New York (see *supra*, note 9). Outside the U.S., Alex Biancardi, based in Paris, handled loosely related material, some of which reached the V&A (IS.23-1988; IS.24-1988) and the Met (1987.145). Archival sources indicate Biancardi had contact with Latchford,[34] though there is no evidence he knowingly acquired looted material or that these works were definitely part of the Prakhon Chai group.

What emerges from these cases is not an isolated series of sales but a dense, fluid network of acquaintances, intermediaries, and transactions spanning decades and continents, even if the key transfers occurred within a relatively narrow window of time. The precise relationships among the main actors —whether acquisitions were made directly in Thailand, the United Kingdom, or the United States—remain elusive. Many of these bronzes almost certainly passed through Bangkok, if not directly via Latchford, where local dealers and middlemen maintained close ties with Western expatriates, collectors, and visiting curators or scholars. Shops such as *Monogram Antiques*, run by Connie Mangskau (1907–1990), of half-British, half-Thai descent, played a key role in this circulation.[35] Mangskau, a close

involved military and former Khmer Rouge networks, and shifting borders complicate notions of "country of origin", with repatriation frequently advancing nationalist narratives and sometimes serving to obscure, rather than remedy, historical injustice: https://theconversation.com/repatriation-or-political-theatre-how-the-return-of-stolen-artefacts-can-distort-history-265290.

[32] Heller is also connected to another large bronze (AK-RAK-2000-15), now in the collection of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

[33] AIC Archives, Arts of Asia Department, Dealers Files, Peter Marks.

[34] See *ABC News*, 9 June 2022: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-06-10/how-south-east-asian-art-in-australia-via-suspected-smuggler/101118586.

[35] The Cleveland Museum of Art (1977.178) and

friend of Jim Thompson (1906–1967?), the "King of Silk", introduced Latchford to Thompson and to Southeast Asian art in the mid-1950s (*Bangkok Post*, 12 Sept. 2010). Bangkok thus functioned as a pivotal hub in the transnational trade of Southeast Asian antiquities—a nexus where objects frequently changed hands, blurring both provenance and provenience. Even small case studies, such as the AIC bodhisattva, provide instructive insights into how these networks operated and how objects circulated through them.

As said, it is very likely that William Wolff acquired the bronze in Bangkok during his brief visit in July 1965. As far as can be determined, however, the piece appears unconnected to Latchford. Such a link cannot be entirely ruled out, yet it remains unproven and, indeed, improbable. Wolff and Latchford may have known one another—Wolff being the senior—and may even have met in Bangkok on occasion.[36] Nevertheless, they are not known to have conducted business together and seem to have operated within largely separate, localized networks serving distinct Western clienteles. There is likewise no evidence that Wolff personally knew Bunker, one of Latchford's close associates.[37] One of Wolff's business acquaintances, however, was the freelance sculpture conservator Joseph Ternbach—who repaired the bronze bodhisattva prior to its offer to the AIC (see *supra*)—and who later co-authored an article with Bunker on lost-wax casting in ancient Chinese bronze sculpture (1970). While this connection proves nothing in itself, it highlights the small and enduring constellation of informal professional relationships that characterized the U.S. Asian art world of the period.

William Wolff maintained extensive correspondence and business ties with Jack V. Sewell, Curator of Oriental (Asian) Art at the Art Institute from 1951 to 1988. Their exchanges, including courtesy visits in both New York and Chicago, reveal a close and mutually beneficial working relationship that extended beyond occasional transactions. By 1966, the AIC had already made several notable purchases from Wolff, demonstrating sustained engagement between the dealer, the curator, and the institution. The circumstances surrounding the acquisition of the small bronze bodhisattva (1966.328) highlight this dynamic. First offered for purchase consideration to the museum in October 1965 along with a notable Chola bronze from southern India (1966.334), the piece was ultimately recorded as a gift in March 1966—precisely when reports

the Met (1982.468) each hold bronze bodhisattvas, possibly from northeast Thailand, that are reported to have passed through *Monogram Antiques*.

[36] See interview with Douglas Latchford, where he recalls that "Willie Wolff" (along with Spink) used to visit several times a year—to Bangkok, including Nakhon Kasem, the city's notorious thieves' market, as well as to Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Hong Kong, and Singapore—shopping for Thai and Khmer antiquities during the 1950s and 1960s. *Bangkok Post*, 14 October 2012: https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/special-reports/316913/after-the-horrors-cambodia-looks-to-reclaim-its-heritage.

[37] Correspondence preserved at the DAM shows Wolff writing to Bunker in the late 1960s and early 1970s to offer or discuss objects for acquisition, though there is no indication that they ever met in person or maintained a close working relationship. I wish to thank Renee Albiston, Associate Provenance Researcher at the DAM, for granting me access to the museum's dealers' files.

Figure 6: Standing bodhisattva; pre-Angkor period, 7th–8th century; probably Thailand, possibly from Plai Bat Hill, Buriram province; bronze; formerly in the possession of William H. Wolff by 1974, current whereabouts unknown © DAM

of the Prakhon Chai discoveries were spreading and the regional antiquities trade was expanding. While the timing may be coincidental, correspondence indicates that the "gift" designation did not originate with Wolff.[38] Instead, it appears to have been proposed by the AIC's Board of Trustees, likely as a gesture of goodwill—or perhaps a form of compensation—for the museum's substantial purchases from Wolff between 1962 and 1966.[39] As noted above, the two AIC bronzes (1966.328 and 1966.334) were part of a single transaction.

Intriguingly, during archival research in the dealer files of the DAM's collection, I came across a photograph of another bronze bodhisattva **[Figure 6]**, very worn, distantly similar to the AIC piece but closer in appearance to one of the AAMSF bronzes under repatriation (B68S9). This object had also been offered by Wolff in 1974 to the DAM, through Bunker,[40] but was eventually politely declined by Ronald Otsuka, the curator in charge at the time. Its present whereabouts are unknown. It is notable that yet another of Wolff's so-called Prakhon Chai pieces appeared on the U.S. art market in the mid-1970s. In an earlier letter, Wolff mentioned that many of the "Oriental objects" at the DAM—the famous Pan-Asian Collection, on loan at the time—were his "children", having arrived in Denver via Christian Humann.[41] This is significant, as Humann is generally understood to have sourced most of his collection from Ellsworth & Goldie in New York. This suggests that Wolff's network functioned in parallel to, and at times in competition with, Ellsworth & Goldie's operations in New York.

Research on William Wolff—necessarily limited by scarce records—and his role in sourcing South and Southeast Asian antiquities remains both essential and challenging for Western museums.[42] While no definitive evidence links the AIC bronze bodhisattva to Bangkok, to Latchford, or to any specific archeological site, its arrival in Chicago through New York-based dealer Wolff nonetheless reflects broader market dynamics: strong institutional demand, a ready and often opaque supply, profit-driven circulation, and limited regard for archeological context. New York functioned as a central hub and

[38] Letter from William H. Wolff, *Far Eastern Antiquities*, to Jack V. Sewell, Art Institute of Chicago, 22 December 1965: "I would have much more preferred that you had suggested that I make a present of the PRE KHMER BRONZE to the museum instead of the Board".

[39] These include, *inter alia*, 1962.639, 1963.642, 1964.556, 1965.366, 1965.452, 1965.453, and 1965.1130. Further provenance research on this group, largely from southern India, remains an important desideratum.

[40] Letter from William H. Wolff, *Far Eastern Antiquities*, to Emma C. Bunker, Denver Art Museum, 19 March 1974: "By accident, I browsed through my archives of Asian Art XXV and saw again your article on pre-Angkor Bronzes from Pra Kon Chai. I have in my collection a double of Figure 14 [AAMSF, B68S9]".

[41] Letter from William H. Wolff, *Far Eastern Antiquities*, to Robert Moes, Denver Art Museum, 19 February 1971.

[42] Wolff was implicated in at least two cases involving stolen or illegally exported antiquities: a Bhima from Prasat Chen, Koh Ker, in Cambodia sold to Norton Simon in 1976 and returned to Cambodia in 2014; and a Chola bronze of Sambandar sold to the NGA, Australia, in 1989 and repatriated to India in 2021. See: https://chasingaphrodite.com/2012/04/10/a-blast-from-the-past-norton-simon-bought-smuggled-idol/, and https://swarajyamag.com/news-brief/australia-set-to-return-14-works-of-art-including-chola-era-sambandar-murthis-to-india.

entry point for these objects into the U.S. market, shaping how bronzes like the AIC bodhisattva reached museums nationwide. With most dealers from this period now deceased and documentation fragmentary or inaccessible, determining precisely when, where, how, and through whom such objects left their countries of origin remains exceptionally difficult.[43] These circumstances underscore the persistent challenges U.S. museums face in reconstructing provenance for their Southeast Asian collections and the likelihood that, in the absence of further dealer records, many such questions will remain unresolved.[44]

Conclusion (or Not)?

The bronze bodhisattva at the Art Institute of Chicago, though modestly crafted, holds significant historical and scholarly value. Stylistically, it belongs to the pre-Angkorian milieu of the 7th–8th centuries, with features broadly consistent with contemporaneous bronzes from northeast Thailand and northwest Cambodia. Its repeated identification as Maitreya remains unproven, lacking definitive iconographic attributes or textual support; more cautiously, it should be regarded as a generic bodhisattva, reflecting the vibrant yet only partially understood Buddhist traditions of early mainland Southeast Asia.

Equally important are the questions this bronze raises about provenience, provenance, and the modern circulation of Southeast Asian art in U.S. collections. Likely acquired in Bangkok during the mid-1960s—a period marked by intensive looting and market speculation—it passed through a well-known yet little-documented New York dealer and was subsequently linked, by certain authors without substantiation, to the so-called Prakhon Chai hoard in Buriram province. While a few related bronzes may have documented histories connecting them directly to this group, it is unwarranted to assume that all similar objects share the same trajectory and a general call for repatriation is therefore not feasible. This case underscores the pitfalls of site-specific attributions based on hearsay, stylistic assumptions, or market trends, and highlights the difficulty of reconstructing early Southeast Asian art history—especially for non-site-specific bronzes—without secure archeological context.

Although its precise provenience cannot be established, the AIC bronze nevertheless offers insight into the networks and practices that likely shaped its passage from Bangkok to New York and Chicago. It prompts reflection on the dual forces shaping our understanding of Southeast Asian art: the ancient religious and cultural milieu that produced these images and the modern collecting practices that

[43] Toward the end of his career, Wolff openly admitted that: "in many of the countries where he acquired art, its export was illegal and had to be done clandestinely", adding that "the fellows I [he] bought from knew how to get it out of the country". *Los Angeles Times*, 25 December 1990: https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-12-25-ca-7121-story.html.

[44] Wolff died in 1991, and despite repeated attempts to consult Ann Gray, his former secretary and longtime associate, his business archives remain inaccessible to researchers. This lack of documentation continues to hinder efforts to establish complete acquisition histories for museum objects associated with his name.

dispersed them globally. For the Art Institute, the bronze represents both a responsibility and an opportunity—to preserve and interpret an early Buddhist work while critically engaging with the ethical and historical complexities of its acquisition. Such transparent engagement is essential for confronting the uncertainties that continue to define the study of early Southeast Asia's material heritage and addressing them proactively is now a central obligation for Western museums and scholars alike.

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