

**MOVING OBJECTS: AN EXHIBITION AT THE ASIAN ART MUSEUM
(15 NOV. 2024–10 MARCH 2025, SAN FRANCISCO)**



FIGURE 1: Installation view, *Moving Objects* at the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, 15 Nov. 2024–10 March 2025 © Kevin Candland

Between 15 November 2024 and 10 March 2025, the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco (AAMSF) presented the exhibition, *Moving Objects: Learning from Local and Global Communities* [FIGURE 1]. This exhibition combined a video excerpting conversations with community members about the museum's collection and collecting history, mechanisms for collecting visitor feedback, and a display of four bronzes from northeast Thailand [FIGURES 2a–d].

On 17 June 2024, the Director General of the Fine Arts Department of Thailand wrote to the Asian Art Museum requesting that the museum facilitate the return of these statues to Thailand. After consultation with Thai experts and research in the Avery Brundage and the Spink & Son archives, the curatorial staff recommended that the AAMSF deaccession the works. As these bronzes were in the collection of the city of San Francisco, the deaccession



FIGURES 2a-d: Standing bodhisattva and buddha images; 7th–9th c.; likely from Plai Bat Hill, Buriram province, Thailand; bronze; formerly in the collection of the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco: (a) B65B57, H. 69.9 cm; (b) B65B70, H. 21.6 cm; (c) B66B14, H. 94 cm; (d) B68S9, H. 25.4 cm; not to scale; deaccessioned 22 April 2025 © AAMSF

process involved two votes separated by six months by the City and County of San Francisco Asian Art Commission, a governing board of the museum. The first vote to deaccession the statues occurred on 26 September 2024 and the second on 22 April 2025.

Between these two votes, the works were put on display for one final time in a special exhibition in San Francisco. These four bronze images, displayed at the AAMSF for the first time all together, anchored the exhibition. The accompanying texts described what was now known about where the statues were found, how they were removed and acquired by the museum, the deaccessioning process, and what may lie in their future. Didactic texts also credited the Thai scholars and researchers who have long been advocating for the repatriation of artworks to Thailand [FIGURE 3].¹

¹ For more on the social media efforts of this group, see Phacharaphorn 2021.

The artworks in question have long been known as “Prakhon Chai style” bronzes, a sobriquet that was given when sculptures of this type were discussed in early publications, as in Jean Boisselier’s article, “Notes sur l’art du bronze dans l’ancien Cambodge” (1967). However, the exact production center of these sculptures, Buddhist bronzes dating from the 7th to 9th centuries, is unknown, though they were likely made on the Khorat Plateau in northeast Thailand. A later publication by Emma Bunker (2002) disclosed the likely actual findspot of many of these statues near the Khmer temple known as Prasat Plai Bat Hill 2 (ปราสาท เข้าปลายบด ๒) in Buriram province. Much of the history of what we know about these sculptures has been recently summarized.²

² See Tanongsak et al. 2024. Tanongsak Hanwong has advocated for the return of objects taken from northeast Thailand for many years and was also involved in the previous successful repatriation

Looting

In the mid-1960s, a report of the discovery of the bronzes first appeared in a London newspaper article. However, the correct whereabouts of the temple was not disclosed until 2002 in an article by Emma Bunker, an art historian, who identified the site as the temple Prasat Hin Khao Plai Bat II. Bunker was a close associate of Douglas Latchford, a dealer, collector, and indicted smuggler of Southeast Asian art. With an office very close to the temple, Latchford worked with villagers to pillage the site. Knowledge of this looting is still remembered by people in the area. For over a decade the Thai archaeologist Tanongsak Hanwong has been interviewing villagers and compiling memories of the widespread plundering of antiquities. His and his partners' efforts have helped provide evidence for the current repatriation claims by the Thai government.

FIGURE 3: Wall text from *Moving Objects* at the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, 15 Nov. 2024–10 March 2025 © Kevin Candland

Sculptures, especially smaller metal images, have long histories of circulation in the ancient world. From around the 6th century, bronze images of Buddhist deities were produced in increasing numbers in both India and Southeast Asia (Brown 2014). They moved from artists' workshops to patrons, were gifted from donors to religious institutions, and could be taken on processions through communities. Throughout history, shifts in regional religious practices resulted in the destruction, disposal, repurposing, and/or burial of religious objects. Some scholars propose that the cache of Buddhist bronze sculptures found at or around Prasat Plai Bat Hill 2 may have been intentionally ritually interred in response to the growing cultural presence of Śaiva Khmer in the southern regions of northeast Thailand (Tanongsak et al. 2024: 185–186).

of two Khmer lintels to Thailand that were at the AAMSF. See: <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-03-26/archaeologist-thai-artifacts-san-francisco-asian-art-museum>.

Buddhist images were also looted during military interventions for centuries, both between regional powers within Southeast Asia and in later times by colonial forces. Perhaps one of the most famous examples of the complex circulations of a sacred image is the Emerald Buddha (*Phra Kaeo Morakot*; พระแก้วมรกต), the palladium of the Kingdom of Thailand, which moved multiple times in both its mythical and recorded past (Roeder 1999). In the more recent past archeological sites have been looted by local soldiers, villagers, tourists, dealers, and other individuals.

Thailand has had laws concerning cultural patrimony from the early 20th century.³ A 1926 law prohibits the export of cultural artifacts without permission. This law was replaced by the *Act on Ancient Monuments, Objects of Art, Antiques, and National Museums*

³ For an account of the development of Thai heritage laws, see Rewadee 2012.

in 1934, which decreed the creation of a register of buildings, monuments, and archeological sites of immovable cultural heritage. The *Act on Ancient Monuments, Antiques, Objects of Art and Natural Museums*, enacted in 1961, further defined objects of cultural heritage and continued to prohibit the unlicensed export of such artifacts.

In 1970, the general conference of UNESCO convened to propose guidelines of international cooperation with the aim of prohibiting and preventing the illicit import and export of objects of cultural heritage.⁴ This convention encouraged cultural institutions to seek evidence of provenance demonstrating that an artwork was outside its country of origin from before 1970 before acquisition. In reality, in the decades since the convention, dealers, collectors, and art institutions have not always adhered to these guidelines and some sellers created fake provenances to reassure buyers.

Over the past decade, U.S. enforcement agencies have been increasing their efforts in assisting in the repatriation of artworks from museum collections to Southeast Asia. The involvement of agents from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and attorneys from the Department of Justice, working in conjunction with countries in Southeast Asia, has recently facilitated the return of a number of sculptures to Thailand and Cambodia, especially

those associated with the dealer and indicted smuggler Douglas Latchford.⁵

The exhibition *Moving Objects* gave the AAMSF the opportunity to be transparent about the request for repatriation, the connection of these artworks to the indicted smuggler Douglas Latchford, and the city's mandated process of deaccessioning artworks. Didactic texts explained that research in the archives of Avery Brundage (1887–1975), the museum's founding donor, revealed that even at the time of their purchase in the late 1960s, Brundage had concerns about the legality of these bronzes' acquisition.

In July 1965, Brundage's advisor and curator, René Yvon Lefebvre d'Argencé (1928–1997), wrote to him saying, "it might be wise not to commit ourselves until we know more about this highly problematic statuary [either B65B57, FIG. 2a, or B66B14, FIG. 2c; FIGURE 4], from an archaeological standpoint that is".⁶ A letter from Brundage to Adrian Maynard of Spink & Son on 22 June 1967 mentions that he had received a letter from the Thai government stating that "one of the bronze figures we got from you [Spink & Son; either B65B57 or B66B14], has been removed from the country illegally", indicating that, as early as 1967, doubts about the legality of Brundage's purchase had been

⁵ There has been extensive media coverage of recent repatriations. See for example: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/15/arts/met-return-ancient-treasures.html>.

⁶ Avery Brundage began actively collecting Asian art in the 1940s. Part of his collection was pledged to the city of San Francisco in 1959 and more objects were donated throughout the 1960s until his death in 1975. The Asian Art Museum was opened in a newly built wing of the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum in 1966 and then moved to an independent structure in 2003.

⁴ Thailand has not yet ratified this convention. See: <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-means-prohibiting-and-preventing-illicit-import-export-and-transfer-ownership-cultural>.



FIGURE 4: Standing Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara; 7th–9th c.; likely from Plai Bat Hill, Buriram province, Thailand; bronze; formerly in the collection of the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, B66B14; H. 94 cm; deaccessioned 22 April 2025 © AAMSF

expressed. Maynard's response, on 26 June 1967, demonstrates how dealers were using the confusion over the findspot of these bronzes to their advantage. He wrote:

With regard to the second point [illegal removal], I am a little surprised that a Cambodian work of art can be considered to be illegally removed from another country; what exactly do they mean? If it could be proved to be a Thai piece rather than a Cambodian piece, then they might have a leg to stand on, but as far as I know the piece came from the Thai–Cambodian border and as such, can be played either way.⁷

Several factors had an impact on the AAMSF's decision to return these statues: the research of groups advocating for repatriation within Thailand, information provided by U.S. law enforcement, and desires to foster equitable and generative relationships with countries in Southeast Asia. A previous exhibition at the museum, *Lost at Sea: Art Recovered from Shipwrecks* (26 Nov. 2019–12 July 2021),⁸ also dealt with issues of provenance, looking in particular at the laws

and ethics regarding artworks excavated in marine environments. Feedback from that past exhibition, which was obtained through written comment cards, docent responses, and reactions from adult and student tour groups, indicate that provenance is a subject that deeply interests the museum's audiences today.

That opinion was mirrored in a community feedback report written the following year by Albert Tanjaya, a fellow in public affairs from the Coro Foundation in California. His unpublished report was based on a series of meetings with artists, docents, teachers, professors, non-profit leaders, and other members of Bay Area communities with connection to the AAMSF or with Asia. From that initial survey, a subset of individuals from a range of communities (scholars, community advocates, art workers) were interviewed on camera about their impressions of the museum and the history and future of its collecting and community engagement. Those interviews, conducted in 2023, were edited into a seven-minute video by graduate students of the University of San Francisco's Museum Studies department and shown in the gallery during the *Moving Objects* exhibition.

While on display, students from graduate programs at the University of California, Los Angeles, the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of San Francisco visited or used materials from the exhibition *Moving Objects* in their classwork. It received national and international press from National Public Radio in the U.S. and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.⁹ Over the course

⁷ It must be borne in mind that these pre-Angkorian bronzes are, of course, neither Thai nor Cambodian in a nationalist sense; the question of their ethnic manufacture—whether Mon or Khmer—is not at stake here. For similar contradictions regarding the geographic origin of another so-called “Prakhon Chai” bronze now at the Art Institute of Chicago and on the recent shifting administrative boundaries along the Thai–Cambodian border, see Revire, this issue—*Editor's note*.

⁸ See: <https://exhibitions.asianart.org/exhibitions/lost-at-sea-art-recovered-from-shipwrecks>.

⁹ See: <https://www.npr.org/2025/01/28/nx-s1->

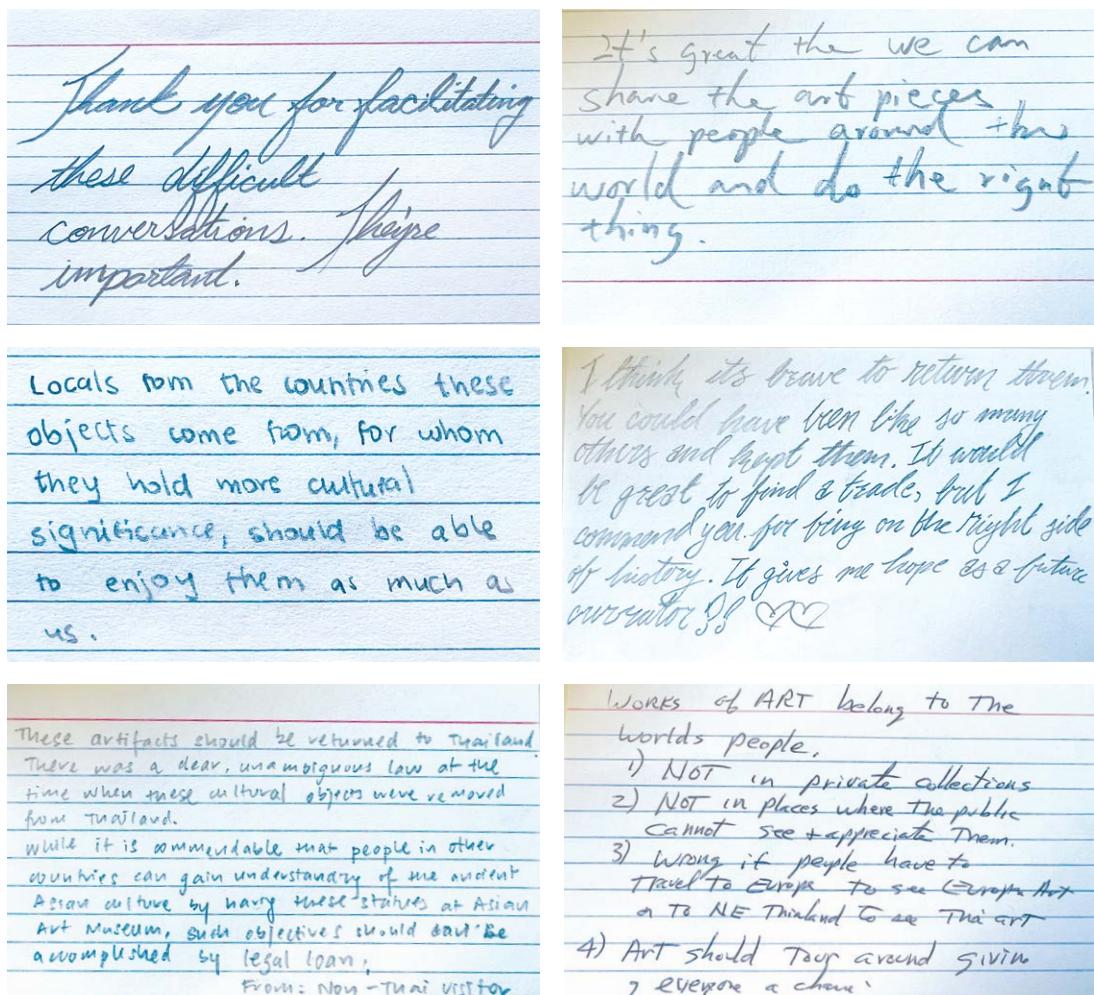


FIGURE 5: Comment cards from the exhibit *Moving Objects* at the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, 15 Nov. 2024–10 March 2025 © Natasha Reichle

of the exhibition, the AAMSF received over 600 comment cards. Of the cards that spoke directly to the themes of the exhibition, ten percent had questions or concerns about repatriation, while the rest expressed appreciation of the exhibition's public discussion of the topic and the museum's deaccessioning of the bronzes [FIGURE 5].

After the deaccessioning vote in April of 2025, the AAMSF contacted the Thai Consulate in Los Angeles. The museum is currently coordinating with the Department of Homeland Security and the Consulate to arrange transport of the sculptures. The highly anticipated repatriation will be an important milestone in the journeys these

5260960/thailand-art-heist-repatriation-san-francisco-museum; and <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/the-aih-transcript-for-january-29-2025-1.7446992>.

statues have taken from Southeast Asia to London, San Francisco, and then finally home again.

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