

# Be- (and Re-) heading the Buddha: Understanding the artistic and social trauma of looting, and exploring methods of healing



## Thesis:

We connect through art to communities, cultures, religions, and heritage. Fundamental to our sense of identity, we build art into our constructions of nationhood. It is because of these deep connections that we feel the loss of art so profoundly. Looting and destruction of art is a global problem, particularly prevalent in areas such as West Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia. Through the lens of Southeast Asian (Thai, Cambodian, and Indonesian) art, this project argues: If the loss of art through violence causes trauma to the community, restoring, repatriating, and preserving art can be a catalyst for healing both social and cultural trauma. This requires understanding various roles of art; causes of looting; impacts of the loss; and what can and is being done. It is also necessary to engage with involved parties in both successes and failures to better understand the trauma that is caused and how we may heal the social and artistic wounds caused by looting.

**Keywords:** Art Market, Buddhism, Community, Culture, Looting, Preservation, Reconciliation, Repatriation, Restoration, Southeast Asia

**"In ruthless times when savagery and fratricidal wars brought our beloved Cambodia to grief, it was not only the people who suffered misfortune."  
– Prince Norodom Sihanouk, for the ICOM. <sup>4</sup>**

## Causes:

The rich artistic and architectural histories of Southeast Asian Empires such as the Khmer in Cambodia (9<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> c.), Sukhothai (13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> c.) in Thailand, and the Shailendra in Java, Indonesia (8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> c.) came under threat beginning in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as European colonial powers invaded and began to strip historical sites in the name of collecting and academic interest.<sup>11</sup> Reasons behind the looting and destruction of cultural and religious heritage are myriad. In the case of Southeast Asia's temples and statues, opportunists often take advantage of chaos and unrest. Centuries of colonial occupation, voracious art markets, and long periods of civil and political unrest left cultural protection measures and resources unavailable or insufficient. The looting of sacred art in Southeast Asia continues to the present day, enabled by smuggling rings. Poverty also contributes as thieves recruit locally to supply national and international markets, contributing to a global blight.<sup>3</sup>

## Context:

This project looks at the destruction of Buddhist (and to a lesser extent Hindu) art in Southeast Asia through the looting of statues, and consequences for the community. Looting causes both physical damage to the artworks and psychological and cultural damage to the community. This research addresses how the destruction of historical/ sacred monuments translates to social and cultural distress, and explores the significance of repatriation, restoration, and preservation practices. This project also confronts the roles and responsibilities of scholars and members of the art community in the ways we identify, address and resolve the effects of looting. Collectors and institutions have long justified and legitimized their possession of looted artworks as cultural stewardship. However, they are increasingly responding to public pressure to act as ethical and cultural ambassadors and repatriate culturally significant artworks. Looted art is further transformed through the lens of popular culture and commercial profit which may distort or deny the origins of the art and its relation to the culturally connected community. The looting and misrepresentation of Buddha heads serve as an example of how these cultural ambassadors are increasingly returning and restoring works looted long ago as acts of diplomacy and reconciliation.

Photo Left: V.R. Sasson. "Decapitated Buddha Statues at Borobudur," Borobudur, Indonesia. No taken date.<sup>9</sup>



The sight of broken and missing figures is familiar across Southeast Asia. The synchronicity of Buddhism and Hinduism means the looting extends beyond Buddhist art. However, while viewers generally understand (on some level) that statues in museum and auction collections have been looted, the commercial reinterpretation and popular consumption of Buddha heads through the art market belies the violent history of looting. On the other hand, mass produced, commercial Buddha heads and limbs are cheaply bought and popularly consumed to portray an ironically calm aesthetic. While these heads may not be authentic (i.e., looted from an actual statue), their symbolism is just as powerful as those exhibited in museums. A viewer of the cultural or religious community may also find them deeply offensive or hurtful.

## Restore:

**v. Bring back to its original condition<sup>1</sup>**

Reuniting a statue with its appendages or returning it home is emotionally healing to its original community. "Reheading" returns a visual completeness to the work of art as well as to its living community. It also provides a better understanding of how the sites looked in pre-colonial periods.

## Preserve:

**v. Keep or maintain without harm<sup>1</sup>**

Archaeologists and restorers often preserve sites as they find them. While research offers insights into the historical state of a site, rarely can we be absolutely certain that we are getting all of the details correct. Damaged and undamaged sites alike warrant protection as they stand now, mitigating further damage and preventing historically inaccurate restoration in the pursuit of "authenticity".

## Repatriate:

**v. Return a person or thing to the home country<sup>1</sup>**

Art world ethics, laws and opinions change over time. Excuses for not returning looted and trafficked art hinge upon ideas of assumed ownership: Who had the authority to sell the art originally? What to do with incomplete provenance? Repatriation acknowledges wrongdoing and emphasizes the growing importance of ethics in the art world. It also plays a vital role in cross cultural reconciliation.

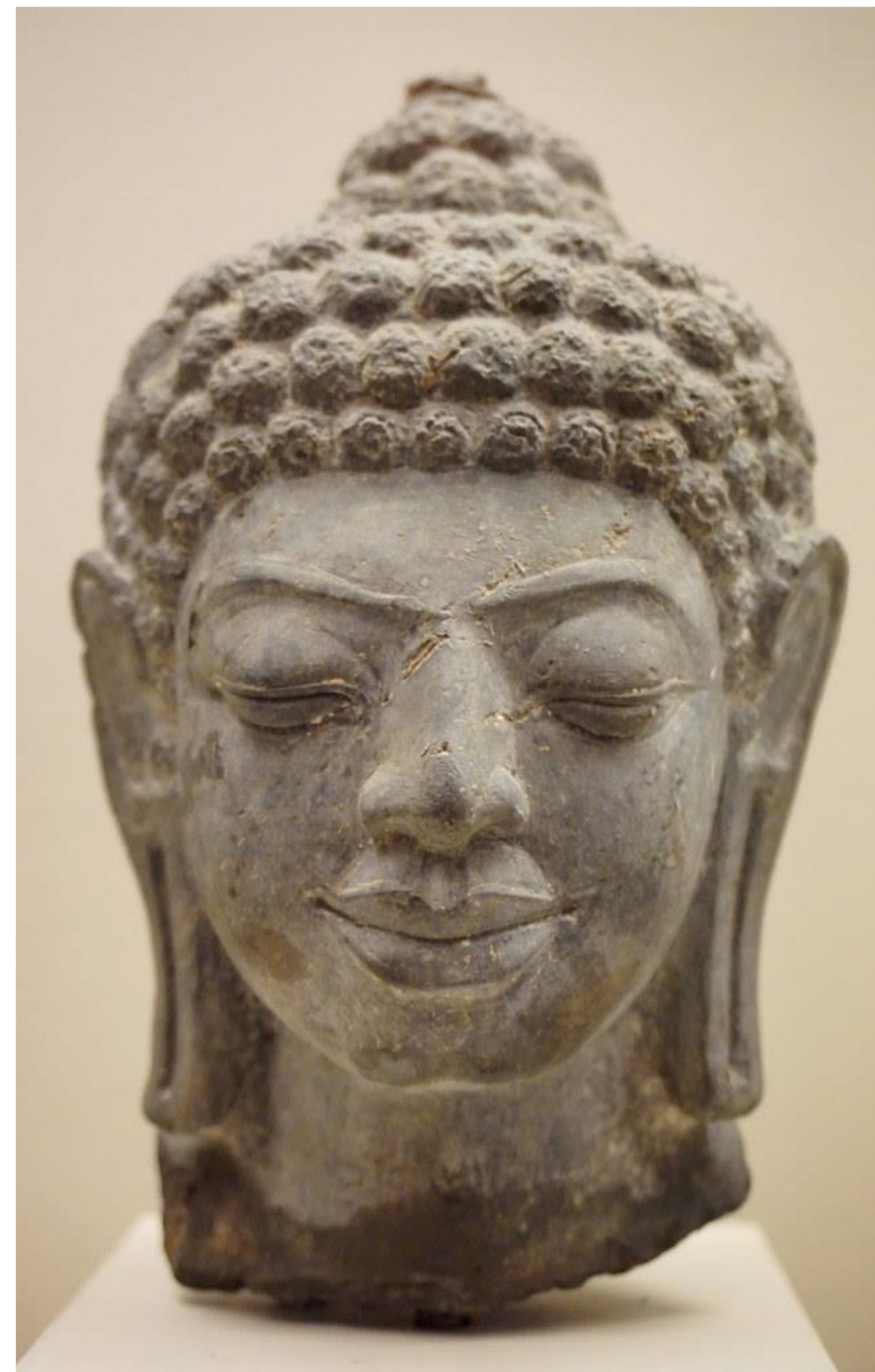


Photo Above: Anandajoti Bhikkhu. "005 Buddha Head", 8<sup>th</sup> Century. Held in National Museum, Bangkok, Thailand. Taken February 12, 2017. Licensed under CC BY 2.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>

Particularly noticeable in stonework are chisel marks at the base of the neck from removal. Additional damage from looting and trafficking are permanent additions to this and so many other pieces of art and cultural history.



Photo Above: Ali Eminov. "Meditating Buddha Head, a sculpture in Linden Gallery of Asian Arts." Taken July 10, 2011. Licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/>



Photo above: Randomix. "Statue" Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Taken June 10, 2010. Marked under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0. To review the terms, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/?ref=ccsearch&atyp=rich>

While returned statues and heads are frequently put into museums in their country of origin, where possible the figures are returned to their original temple or site and missing heads are reconnected to their bodies. In 2014, after 130 years apart, a Hindu statue's head is returned and reattached. The 7<sup>th</sup> century statue is to be displayed at a museum; head firmly set on its shoulders. Image not available.

## Healing:

If looting culturally significant artworks causes distress and trauma within the connected community, I hypothesize that a reversal would also be true. The repatriation, preservation and restoration of monuments and art could serve to heal the distress and trauma that comes from the degradation or loss of material heritage, written records and/ or sacred artworks, and facilitate reconciliation efforts, between communities and former colonial powers, for example. Restitution, such as returning heads to statues, also restores the physical damage done to the artworks through violent removal and defacement. It is also vital to recognize how social and historical contexts around these methods have changed and determine the right course of action by what is acceptable now rather than the middle of the previous century.

**"Their return...is an incredible event for the Cambodian people and the world."**

-Phoeng Sackona, Cambodian Minister of Culture and Fine Arts<sup>5</sup>

In an article by Sarah Cascone for ArtNet, the \$50 million hoard of antiquities that was trafficked from the country was returned by the collector's daughter after his death. The collection was invaluable to Cambodia's cultural history and its repatriation has been a shining example of goodwill over profit. However, the infamously contentious nature of the collection ensured that return was really the only option.

**"The theft and trafficking of cultural artifacts is a tradition as old as the cultures they represent."**

-Tatum King, US Homeland Security Investigations Agent<sup>6</sup>

A pair of sandstone lintels, both around 1000 years old, have been a point of contention for several years. Procedures and priorities for dealing with their return to Thailand differs greatly between the U.S. Government and the Asian Art Museum, highlighting the different agendas for the public, politicians, and institutions when it comes to taking these steps.

**"I am sure that, if Hanuman were alive, we would see a smile on his face showing his joy at being here among us where he belongs."**

-Deputy Prime Minister Sok An, Cambodia<sup>7</sup>

A 2015 article by the Khmer Times newspaper illustrates the importance of culturally significant art to the wider community on local and national levels. The article describes multiple ceremonies celebrating the return of a 10<sup>th</sup> century sculpture of the Hindu deity, Hanuman. While we call these statues "Art," we need to acknowledge that they are also seen as cultural and religious dignitaries, in a way acting as a sacred cultural authority and member of the community.

Photo Right: Wonderlane. "Red Buddha head" California, USA. Taken May 18, 2013. Marked under CC 1.0. To view the terms, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/cc0/1.0/>

Cultural appropriation has turned the buddha head image into jewelry, room décor, and plant pots. Mass produced likenesses flood the North American and European markets to represent an exotic and calm aesthetic seen in store displays, yoga studios, spas, and home living rooms. How often do we think of what this image might represent?



Photo Above: Un Yarat. "Chargé d'Affaires Julie Chung has her photo taken with the repatriated statues" at the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Taken October 1, 2014. Marked under CC BY-ND 2.0. To view the terms, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/2.0/?ref=ccsearch&atyp=rich>

Authenticators for the prestigious auction house Sotheby's advised against putting this statue up for auction as it was clearly stolen (its hacked ankles were matched to feet still *in situ* at Koh Ker temple, Cambodia). Despite this, it was presented in a prominent 2011 auction catalogue, and legal action involving the Cambodian and American government ensued. The case was highly publicized and while ultimately decided in courts, the weight of public opinion played an integral role in helping to establish the current idea of right and wrong in cases of contentious art ownership.

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