

Master's pieces

A new gallery at the V&A, funded by a Hong Kong philanthropist, houses one of the world's largest collections of Buddhist works, writes **Justus Krueger**

Buddhist monks and nuns gather around a cluster of sculptures in the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London, sprinkling them with water dispersed with lotus leaves, chanting and bowing to the artefacts. It's an unusual ceremony for this venue but this is no ordinary occasion.

These monastics flow in from Hong Kong are taking part in the opening of a new permanent gallery dedicated to Buddhist sculpture – the first of its kind in Britain and one of the largest in the world.

Also at the opening is British sculptor Antony Gormley, who tells the audience that what they are about to see is "an art that is not about playing a part in a drama" – as western sculptures of the likes of Greek hero Theseus often suggest – "but about being".

On show are close to 50 fine depictions of the Buddha, all of them drawn from the museum's Asian collections; more than half have never been seen or have not been on show for decades because of a lack of space.

"The new displays combine some of the museum's most aesthetically important pieces," says John Clarke, the gallery's curator. "Virtually every one of these objects is of the highest significance in the study of Buddhist sculpture."

Highlights include the head of a Buddha statue from Afghanistan, crafted in the fourth century, that has European features and in a style

that betrays deep Greek influences. There are also sculptures with Chinese features, and Thai, Burmese and Indonesian art that hold a prominent place in this rare collection, which spans from the second century AD to the 19th century.

One of the main challenges in organising the gallery, which officially opened last month, was to gather artefacts from widely diverging art-historical and cultural backgrounds without losing their proper context, says Clarke.

Various ideas were collected and it was suggested the sculptures be arranged along the lines of a biography of the Buddha.

"But then we would have had to juxtapose artefacts from such different times and places that it would have been confusing for our visitors," says Clarke.

The gallery thus consists of four spacious rooms that represent the spread of Buddhism from India to Tibet and Nepal, to Southeast Asia, and finally to China and Japan – and the way the religion changed as it entered new cultural environments.

"The historical Buddha Shakyamuni is a major theme in the first room with displays of Indian and Sri Lankan works," says Clarke. By the time Buddhism entered the Himalayas, however, new doctrines such as Mahayana and Vajrayana had arisen. "Such doctrinal developments led to an increased emphasis on bodhisattvas, wrathful protectors and tantric deities."

Artefacts in the room dedicated to Tibetan and Nepalese Buddhism reflect that change, most strikingly in a gorgeous, gilded copper statue of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara from 14th-century Nepal.

Arguably the most visually spectacular object in the exhibition, however, is a large, nearly three-metre-tall gilded and lacquered shrine from Burma. "The shrine may have once belonged to the royal palace in Mandalay," says Clarke.

It features a crowned Buddha seated on a throne that is modelled after those of Burmese monarchs. "You can see how concepts of the Buddha's spiritual kingship overlap with the semi-divine earthly ruler," the curator says.

Buddhism is not purely spirituality; it has also played a political role – and there is a strong intellectual side to it, which is represented in the gallery's fourth and final room dedicated to Buddhist traditions from East Asia. It houses some of the exhibition's most stunning objects, among them a wood carving from the Yuan dynasty showing an *arhat*, a being, in Buddhist parlance, that has liberated itself from the wheel of suffering.

"This *arhat* is all about debate," says Clarke. "The Buddhas, on the other hand, are doing meditation. There is the idea that meditation is not thought, that it is beyond thought; and yet the *arhat* is engaging in reasoning. So he shows another part of the Buddhist path –

which is why we wanted to have him here."

The V&A has been planning to have a gallery devoted to Buddhist art for some time, and the goal was finally realised thanks to a large donation from the Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation, an organisation set up by Hong Kong philanthropist Robert Ho Hung-ngai.

Virtually every one of the objects displayed is of the highest significance in the study of Buddhist sculpture

John Clarke, curator

The foundation's aim is to support Chinese arts and culture worldwide, especially Buddhism. The organisation does not normally disclose figures for its funding projects but the museum says the donation came to around £2 million (HK\$23.3 million).

According to Clarke, the V&A's collection of Buddhist art has been accumulated over more than two centuries. "The core of it was the East India Company collection. They began, I think, in 1801, and all that material came to our museum in 1880," he says.

"Then we added to that, through

gifts and purchases, and we are still adding to it."

A cultural festival, *The Many Faces of Buddhism*, will run until May 17 to complement the opening of the gallery. The foundation says while the gallery opening will raise public awareness and interest in Buddhism, the satellite events will help present a wider perspective of its philosophy and teachings, making it relevant to modern life.

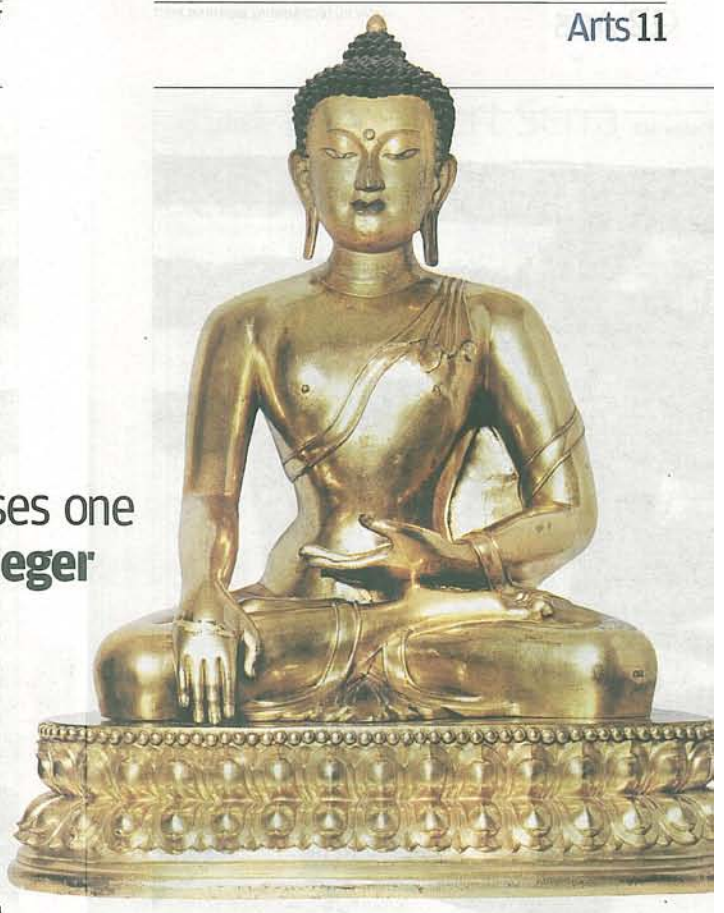
The US-based International Buddhist Film Festival (IBFF) is being held for the first time in Britain at the Barbican Centre. It will showcase 46 titles from 18 nations.

"This is world cinema with a Buddhist touch," IBFF executive director Gaetano Kazuo Maida says. "We reached out to filmmakers and archives on three continents to bring over a wide range of works that reflect the incredible diversity of expression and impact of Buddhist ideas today."

Buddhism's growth in the west of course is something the Robert H.N. Ho Foundation is interested in. It is funding Buddhist studies in various universities in the US, Canada and Hong Kong and plans to expand into Britain and Australia.

The foundation does not, however, see itself as a missionary body, neither with its university programmes nor its financing of the gallery in London.

"We don't try to influence people to become Buddhists," its founder says. "But if you are interested to learn, just go ahead."



Artefacts in the new gallery include *Veneration of the Empty Throne* from India (far left), a Buddha's head from Afghanistan (left), *Birth of the Buddha* from Pakistan (above), an *arhat* from China (right) and a gilded Tibetan Buddha (top right). Photos: Victoria and Albert Museum