

**Essays for Docents Project, 2007-2009
On the Occasion of UMMA's Expansion and Renovation**



Artist Unknown, Cambodia (Khmer)

Guardian Lion

buff sandstone

ca. 12th century

32 1/16 in x 13 3/4 in x 17 1/2 in

2004/2.12

Museum purchase made possible by the Margaret Watson Parker Art Collection Fund

Background

The Khmer Empire was the largest empire of Southeast Asia based in what is now Cambodia. Powerful from the 9th to the 15th centuries, the empire at times ruled over and parts of modern-day Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar, and Malaysia. Its greatest legacy is Angkor, which was the capital during the empire's zenith. Angkor bears testimony to the Khmer empire's immense power and wealth, as well as the variety of belief systems that it patronized over time. Modern satellites have revealed Angkor to be the largest pre-industrial urban center in the world, larger than modern day New York.

Object Information

----italicized text from labels by Anna Sloan

The lion is not native to South or Southeast Asia but rather a motif borrowed from ancient Persia, where it was a symbol of royal power. In the vast temple complexes built by the Khmer Empire in Cambodia, as well as in parts of Thailand and Laos in the ninth through thirteenth centuries, the central shrine was imagined as the throne of the deity (whether Buddhist or Hindu), and a pair of lions were placed flanking the stairway leading to that shrine. This lion dates to the twelfth century, when the Khmer capital city of Angkor was at the height of its political power and artistic brilliance. Although centuries of wind and rain have worn away the sandstone surface, the lion's patterned mane and facial expression still convey the sculptor's skill.

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Guardian figures were meant to protect the deity—Hindu or Buddhist—to whom the temple was dedicated.

Technique

Sandstone was the most commonly used medium for sculpture during this time, and besides some minor weathering and bacteria, most examples have held up fairly well throughout the centuries. We know that the technique of direct carving is what the Khmer sculptors used. First, the artist would rough out the form then gradually it would be refined to obtain the desired lines and volumes dictated by the aesthetic and religious canons of the era and region. In general pieces like UMMA's were carved from a single piece of sandstone, though later multiple pieces may have been used. The artistic skill of the period is evidenced in the precision found in the sculpture which is similar to that of jewelry.

Bibliography

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<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/24737/Angkor>