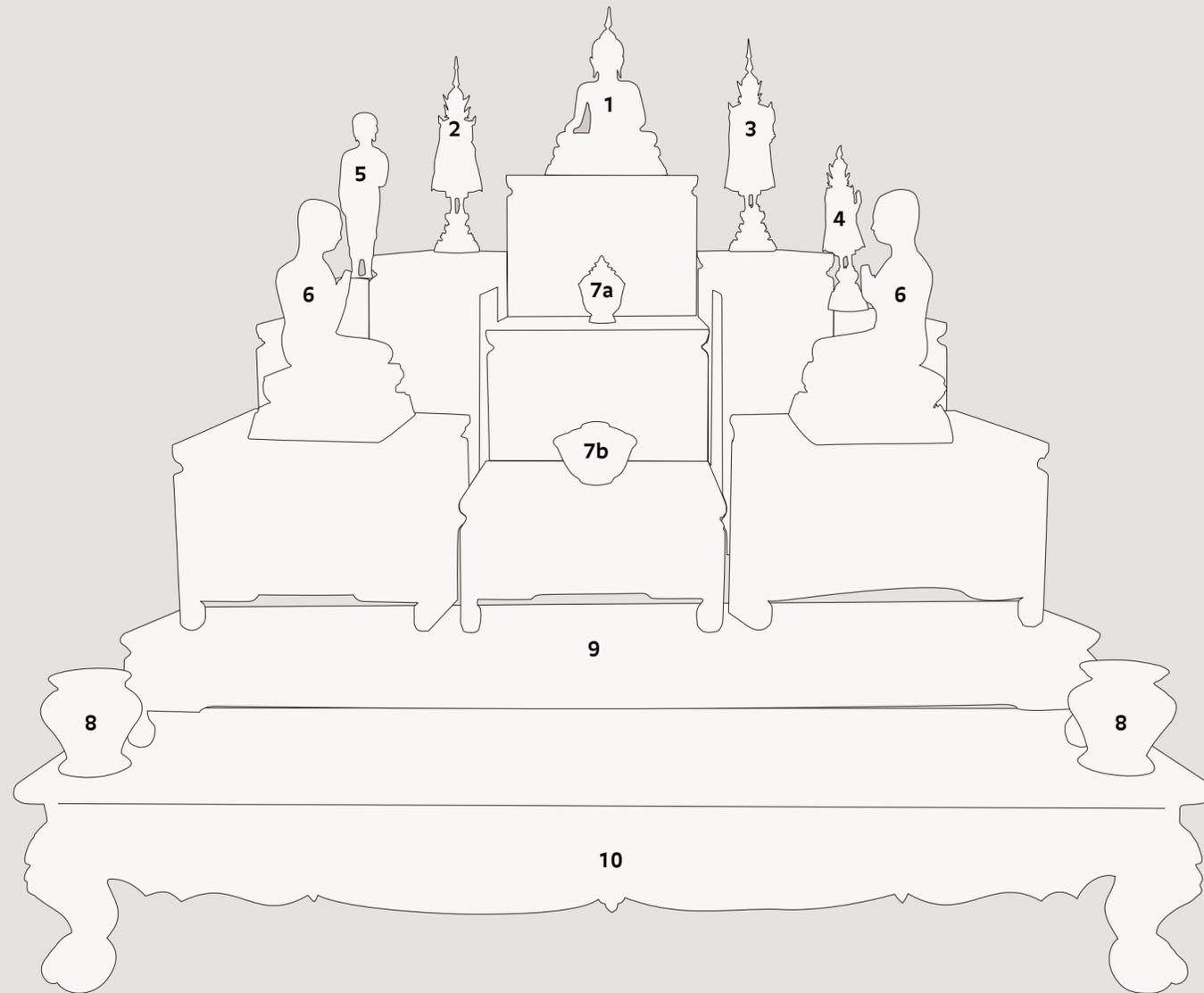


A THAI BUDDHIST ALTAR



IN THAILAND roughly ninety-five percent of the population is Theravada (meaning “the Teaching of the Elders”) Buddhist, one of the oldest surviving schools of Buddhism; many use home altars for worship twice a day, in the morning and again at night. The objects that comprise UMMA’s altar were not originally part of the same grouping but represent the types of objects that would have been found on a Thai altar dating to the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. The size and gilt decoration of the altar tables suggest that they were either used in a side altar at a temple (*wat*) or that they came from the home of a wealthy family.

Though there are no set requirements for Thai Buddhist altars, they usually contain numerous tables of different heights with at least one Buddha on the highest central table. Other tables support vases, pots, and candleholders, all of which are used for offerings such as flowers, food and drink, or incense. Offerings, presented in bowls (such as 7a and b) are given in groups of three to honor

the Triple Gem: the Buddha, his teachings (*Dhamma*), and the monastic community (*Sangha*). Within the Buddhist framework of the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*), offerings are thought to lead to progress towards release from the suffering that results from desire (or craving), which causes states such as anger, greed, jealousy, fear, distraction, and clinging to the body. Release from desire leads to a better birth or even the attainment of *nibbana* (or nirvana), which is a liberation from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

Because they nurture the qualities of generosity and virtue and give rise to contemplative gratitude and inspiration, offerings act as preparation for daily meditation and prayer. Regarding the image of the Buddha, lighting lamps, burning incense, offering flowers, and making prostrations also serve to engage the five senses, enhancing and accelerating the purification of the lay practitioner’s mind and deepening the commitment to the Buddha’s path.

1. Seated Buddha

Thailand, Bangkok period, 1782–present
19th century
Gilt bronze with glass inlay
2005/1.454

2. Standing Buddha

Thailand, Bangkok period, 1782–present
Early 20th century
Gilt bronze with glass inlay
2005/1.475

3. Standing Buddha

Thailand, Bangkok period, 1782–present
19th–20th century
Gilt bronze with glass inlay
2005/1.450

4. Standing Buddha

Thailand, Bangkok period, 1782–present
19th century
Gilded brass (or gilded copper alloy)
Anonymous gift, 1975/1.66

5. Phra Malai

Thailand, Bangkok period, 1782–present
19th–early 20th century
Gilt bronze
2005/2.453

6. Pair of kneeling monk devotees

Thailand, Bangkok period, 1782–present
19th–early 20th century
Lacquered and gilded copper alloy
2005/1.455.1–2

7a and b. Bencharong ware jars (*tho*)

China
19th century
Porcelain with overglaze enamel and gold painting
2005/1.465A&B, 1.467A&B

8. Vases

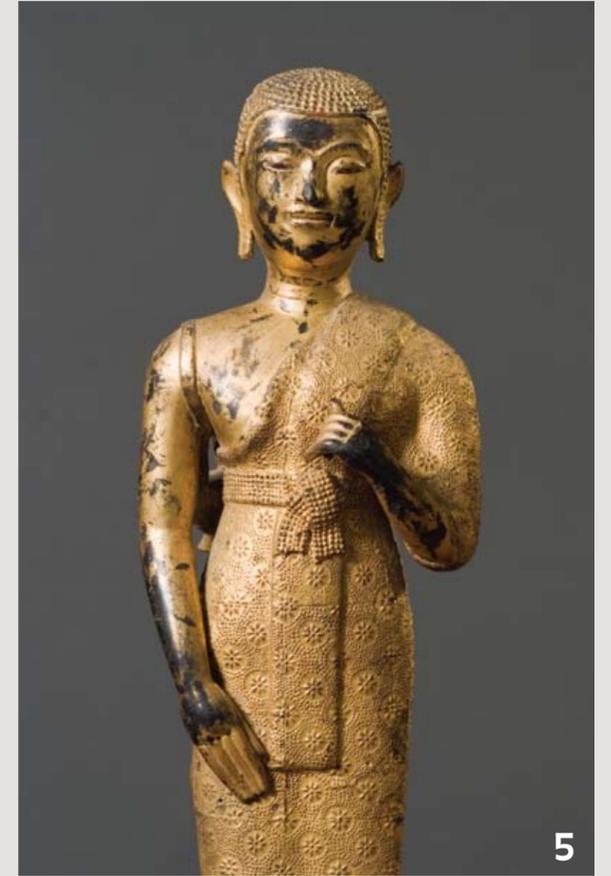
China
19th century
Cloisonné (metalwork with enamel décor)
2005/1.470.1–2

9. Ten-piece set of altar tables

Thailand, Bangkok period, 1782–present
19th century
Gilt and lacquered wood with mirrors
2005/1.466.1–10

10. Platform for altar tables

Thailand, Bangkok period, 1782–present
First half of the 20th century
Gilt and lacquered wood
2005/1.466.11



ELEMENTS OF A THAI BUDDHIST ALTAR

IT IS COMMON for Thai altars to have many images of the Buddha as well as images of devotees and attendants. Here, the central image of a seated Buddha (1) represents the type most commonly seen as the main subject of worship in Thai temples. He makes the gesture of calling the earth to witness his victory over Mara, the god of death and desire, the moment before he becomes enlightened. The three standing Buddhas that flank him gesture either with both hands raised (2 and 4), called “calming the ocean” by Thais, or with one hand raised, palm facing outwards (3), which means “fear not.” The kneeling devotees who make obeisance to the Buddha are two of his most important disciples, Mogallana and Shariputra (6). Their presence symbolizes the importance of using skillful means and knowledge in the search for enlightenment. Also in the back row is a figure with a begging bowl over his shoulder (5). This is Phra

Malai whose story was immensely popular in the nineteenth century; he was a Buddhist monk who achieved extraordinary powers through his accumulated merit and was able to visit numerous hells and heavens and then travel back to report on what he had seen. His accounts of these visits offered vivid reminders of the inevitable results of one’s actions and his story was widely used as a preaching text at funerals.

The ceramic jars and cloisonné vases (7a and b, 8) were made in China for the export market. They are typically Thai in shape and pattern and were produced in China using model books supplied by Thai. One jar (7a) has a top that mimics the spires of Thai Buddhist architecture, and the other (7b) is a more typical Chinese shape with a lid that can be turned upside down to create another bowl.

