

Abstract Submission for

32nd Session of Indian Art History Congress (IAHC)

Rendering of Indian Epics in Art and Culture

Tracing Indian Epics in Southeast Asian Art and Architecture: A Study of Cultural Transmission

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Abstract

The depiction of Indian epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata in Southeast Asian art is a testament to the deep historical ties between India and the region. From the 1st century CE, the spread of Hinduism and Buddhism, facilitated by trade and cultural exchanges, led to these epics becoming central to Southeast Asian culture. Their influence is evident in the region's art and architecture, where they were adapted and integrated into local traditions, enriching the cultural heritage of Southeast Asia.

These epics have been depicted in various forms, including bas-reliefs, sculptures, and paintings. The Ramayana, for example, is vividly portrayed in the bas-reliefs of the Angkor Wat temple in Cambodia, where the heroic exploits of Rama are immortalized in stone. Similarly, the story of the Mahabharata is intricately carved in the reliefs of the Prambanan temple in Indonesia. These artistic representations not only reflect the religious and cultural values of the time but also demonstrate how local artists adapted and reinterpreted Indian narratives, blending them with indigenous motifs and styles. Architecturally, the influence of Indian epics is evident in the design and symbolism of Southeast Asian temples. The mandala-like layouts of temples such as Borobudur in Indonesia and Bagan in Myanmar mirror the cosmic structure described in Indian texts, while their intricate carvings and iconography reveal the deep impact of Indian mythological themes.

The research identifies key historical periods, during which the Indian epics were introduced to Southeast Asia through trade routes, migration, and religious missions, while offering a study of

these epics and their depiction in various locations. The Ramayana and Mahabharata were not merely imported tales; they were reinterpreted and localized, reflecting the region's unique socio-cultural contexts. This process of adaptation is evident in the distinct iconography, narrative styles, and architectural motifs that characterize Southeast Asian renditions of these epics. The main findings of the study underscore the role of Indian epics as vehicles of cultural transmission, influencing not only the aesthetic forms but also the spiritual and philosophical dimensions of Southeast Asian art and architecture.

Key Words

Trade, Culture, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Folk Narratives, Other Religious Narratives, Sculpture, Carvings, Idea Transmission

About the Author

Khushi Kesari is the Program Officer at the History Lab, Advanced Study Institute of Asia, SGT University, Gurugram. She holds a Bachelor's (Hons) and Master's degree in History from the University of Delhi and is a Post-Graduate Member of the Royal Historical Society in London. She has multiple certifications from Institutes like NMI, IIMB, WIPO, NLU, and INTACH etc. With expertise in Culture, Heritage, History and project management, Khushi has authored articles, papers, and undertaken various multi-dimensional projects. Some of her notable works include "Woh Dilli" Project (A digital platform and handbook) launched by Gulzar Sahib, Dr Najib Jung and Dr Swapna Liddle, "The Tales of Tradition: The GI Atlas of India" launched by Prof (Dr) Unnat P Pandit, Controller General of Patents, Designs & Trademarks (CGPDTM), with one more book in process. Prior to this she has worked with several organisations like India Lost and Found, Enroute Indian History, 1947 Partition Archive, UN Volunteer Programme and the Asiatic Society for Social Science Research.
