

WAT BENCHAMABOPIT
AND
ITS COLLECTION OF IMAGES OF THE BUDDHA

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WAT BENCHAMABOPIT is an old temple. It is not certain whether it was erected during the time of Ayudhya or of Bangkok. Originally it was a very small temple called Wat Lem (เมืองเมือง a projection of land), because it stood on a narrow piece of land between gardens and rice fields. It was also at one time called Wat Sai Thong (เมืองเมืองเมืองเมือง), and probably at that time the principal object of interest near by was a "Sai Thong" tree.

In 1827, during the reign of Phra Nang Klao, the Chief of Vieng Chan revolted and brought his army easily and safely down from Vieng Chan, by using the following stratagem. He told the Governors of the provinces along his line of route that he had received an order from the Government at Bangkok to bring down his army in order to help in the war against the Europeans. This was at the time of the first Anglo-Burmese war, and the time when the British Government had sent Capt. Burney on his mission to Siam to conclude a treaty. On account of these two events, the news had spread that the British were coming to wage war against the Siamese. This accounts why the Governors along the route from Vieng Chan southwards believed in the Chief of Vieng Chan's story. The more so, because they all knew that the Chief of Vieng Chan was an old favourite of King Phra Nang Klao. They gave him food and helped his army to come down without difficulty. When he had reached Korat and taken the town, the Chief of Vieng Chan declared himself openly as a rebel, but the Government at Bangkok received the news only after the town of Korat had been captured. An army was equipped in haste to march against the Chief of Vieng

Chan. While these preparations were being made, the news reached Bangkok that the rebel army had come as far as Müang Saraburi, but the Government at Bangkok was still in doubt as to the strength of the rebel forces and still unaware of their intentions, whether their aim was to capture Bangkok or not. So, full preparations were made for the defence of the Capital, and posts were established along the fields from Samsen to Hua Lampong. At that time Prince Krom Phra Bibit, the son of the King Phra Buddha Loes La (Rama II), was placed at the head of the forces at Samsen and established his headquarters in this temple. After the rebellion had been crushed, he restored the temple for the first time, and, together with four of his brothers by the same mother, erected five Phra Chedi in front of the temple, but at that time it was still a small village temple. Later, during the reign of King Mongkut, the latter gave it the name of Wat Benchabopit, that is to say, the temple of the five princes.

In 1899, when King Chulalongkorn began the construction of Dusit Park, he had to take over the ground of Wat Dusit to erect the Dusit Palace and the ground of another deserted temple to make Benyamas Road. King Chulalongkorn wished to follow the ancient custom of his predecessors, and to erect new temples in compensation for the loss of the old ones. But he thought that, if he added to the number of already existing temples by constructing new ones, it would be difficult to preserve them in good repair. He considered that it would be better to spend the money on one single large temple and decorate it elaborately. He selected for this purpose Wat Benchabopit, and ordered artists of fame, such as Prince Narisaranuvattivongs, to design the plan; the latter chose an ancient Siamese design to be executed in first-class white marble. Then His Majesty gave the temple the name of Wat Benchamabopit, which means "the temple constructed by the fifth King of the dynasty."

During the construction of the temple it occurred to King Chulalongkorn that the images of the Buddha to be placed in it should be selected from among numerous old and beautiful images made in various countries at different periods, and should be displayed in such a way that the public might acquire a knowledge of

Buddhist iconography. To this effect King Chulalongkorn ordered that a gallery should be erected in the temple, and entrusted me with the task of collecting images of the Buddha of various styles, and of arranging them in the gallery according to his desire.

The task of collecting these images and arranging them in the gallery was subject to a number of conditions: first, the images should be of artistic value; secondly, they should be different from each other; and thirdly, they should be of about the same size. These three conditions made it impossible to find ancient images alone for the purpose in view. The collection was thus made by two methods. By the first a search was made for ancient statues of Buddha in the provinces of Siam as well as in the capital. Whenever a statue of the required size was found, it was brought down to the temple, and search extended into foreign countries. The second method was that whenever a statue was found of the required style, but too small to be placed in the gallery, an enlarged copy of this statue of the size required was cast and placed in the gallery. The casting of these images was made exclusively by private persons who offered them to the King, because the creation of images of the Buddha is considered an act of religious merit.

But the difficulty was to find sufficient room for all these statues, for, as soon as it was known that the King had given permission to place in the gallery of Wat Benchamabopit images made according to the desired style, many persons were eager to cast images and to offer them to the King to be placed in the temple. This is why all the images in the gallery of Wat Benchamabopit are made of bronze; some are ancient and others have been cast from ancient models. They have been selected so as to represent the styles of the various periods of Siamese art as well as the styles of different countries.

It took many years to collect these fifty images, and the last one was only placed in the temple in the very year of the demise of King Chulalongkorn, who was thus able to see his work completed. If there were still sufficient room for them, there is no doubt that many more statues could be added to the collection, but the lack of space is the reason why the collection has had to be discontinued.

Besides the Bot and the gallery, the other objects of interest in Wat Benchamabopit are :—

1) The Bo tree planted behind the gallery. This is the first Bo tree which came from Buddhagaya to Siam. In ancient times, the seeds of the famous Buddhagaya Bo tree were brought from Ceylon. In recent times, in 1891, a Bo tree from Buddhagaya was brought, and planted in Wat Benchamabopit by order of King Chulalongkorn.

2) The residence of the chief priest, which is an ancient royal pavilion originally erected in the royal palace. It was the private residence of King Chulalongkorn during his stay in the priesthood. It was transported and re-erected at Wat Benchamabopit in its original state, and now serves as the residence of the chief priest.

King Chulalongkorn had expressed his desire that after his cremation the portion of the ashes which it is customary to throw into the water should be enclosed in the basement of the Phra Buddha Jinaraj. King Rama VI fulfilled the wish of his father. Wat Benchamabopit is thus an important temple for three reasons : (1) it is a memorial to King Chulalongkorn, (2) it is a first-class example of modern Siamese architecture, and (3) it is a museum of ancient images of the Buddha. In addition it has a school where religious doctrine and the Siamese language are taught.

A LIST
of
THE IMAGES OF THE BUDDHA AT WAT BENCHAMABOPIT.

In the 'Bōt'.

1. Phra Buddhajinarāja, seated with one leg above the other in the attitude of subduing Māra (the Prince of Evil). This statue, which is the central image in the 'Bōt,' is a copy of the Buddhajinarāja at Bisnulok cast by order of King Chulalongkorn in 1901.

2. Phra Nirarogantaraya, seated with one leg above the other, with two Nāga figures in human shape holding a parasol and a fan respectively. Sixteen images of this type were cast by order of King Rāma VI in 1916 to commemorate the 6th year of his reign.

3. A standing Buddha wearing the attributes of royalty. This is the biggest image in the Lopburi style known to be in perfect condition. It comes from Wat Devarāja Kunjorn, Bangkok, and is placed outside, behind the 'Bōt,' under a canopy.

In the 'Sala' in front of the Temple.

1. In the Northern Sala (Sala Than Yai), a Burmese image of the Buddha made of white stone, presented by King Chulalongkorn, when he founded the Temple.

2. In the Southern Sala (Sala Mom Chuei) an image of the Buddha seated under the Nāga, in the attitude of subduing Māra. The image bears an inscription dating from the period of Srīvijaya. Found by H. R. H. Prince Damrong at Jaiya and presented by him to King Chulalongkorn. It is surmised that there was originally no Nāga, because the Buddha in the attitude of subduing Māra is never found under the Nāga. In the latter form he always sits cross-legged. This Nāga must have been cast separately, and is of Khmer style.

In the Angles of the Outer Gallery.

1. South-western angle (southern face). A stone image from the Dvāravatī period bearing an inscription and found at Lopburi.

2. Western angle. A stone image from the Dvāravatī period, found at Lopburi.
3. Western face. A stone image from Ceylon.
4. North-western angle. A stone image from the Ayudhya period found at Lopburi.

In the Inner Gallery.

(N. B. No. 1 is on the left hand, when entering through the door to the south of the 'Bōt').

1. A standing Buddha wearing the attributes of royalty, in the Khmer style of the Lopburi period. This image in the attitude of Teaching was cast and enlarged from an old model.

2. Phra S'ākyasingh, seated cross-legged in the attitude of subduing Māra, in the style of the Chieng Saen period. Found at Chieng Saen.

3. An image of the Buddha seated cross-legged in the attitude of subduing Māra, in the style of the Chieng Saen period. Found at Wat Bang Plu, Dhonburi.

4. A standing Buddha in the attitude of forbidding his relatives to fight one another, in the style of Sukhodaya. Found at Wat Bang O Chang, Nondaburi.

5. An image of the Buddha seated cross-legged in the attitude of subduing Māra, in the style of the Chieng Saen period. Found at Wat Siri Pañña, in the North-Western Circle.

6. A standing Buddha, of Indian style, cast and enlarged from an ancient model, which was dug up in the Korat province.

7. An image of the Buddha seated cross-legged in the attitude of subduing himself by fasting. This image, which shows the (Greek) style of the Gandhāra sculptures, was cast after a stone original kept in the Museum at Lahore.

8. A standing Buddha in the attitude of calming the ocean in the style of the Ayudhya period. Found at Wat Yai, Bejraburi.

9. An image of the Buddha seated cross-legged in the attitude of subduing Māra, in the style of the Chieng Saen period. Found at Wat Phra Kong, Lamphun.

10. A standing Buddha in the attitude of forbidding his relatives to fight one another, in the style of the Lopburi period. Found at Bejraburi.

11. An image of the Buddha seated cross-legged, in the attitude of meditation, in the style of the Dvāravati period, cast and enlarged from an ancient original found in the bed of the Mūn River at Wang Palat, Korat province.

12. A standing Buddha of Japanese style, cast and enlarged from a model.

13. An image of the Buddha sitting with one leg above the other in the attitude of subduing Māra, of Khmer style, bearing an inscription. Found at Wat Si Chin, Dhonburi.

14. A standing Buddha in the attitude of calming the ocean in the style of the Ayudhya period. Found at Bejraburi.

15. An image of the Buddha sitting with one leg above the other in the attitude of subduing Māra, in the style of the Chieng Saen period. Found at Wat Ko Koet, Ayudhya.

16. A standing Buddha in the attitude of forbidding his relatives to fight one another, in the style of the Sukhodaya period. Found at Wat Mai Nagor Luang, Ayudhya.

17. An image of the Buddha sitting cross-legged in the attitude of subduing Māra, in the style of the Chieng Saen period. Found at Wat Luang, Muang Payao, Bayab Circle.

18. A standing Buddha, in the attitude of calming the ocean in the style of the Ayudhya period. Found at Bejraburi.

19. An image of the Buddha sitting with one leg above the other in the attitude of subduing Māra in the style of the U Thong period. Found at Wat Mahādhāt, Muang Sān.

20. A standing Buddha in the attitude of calming the ocean, in the style of the Ayudhya period. Found at Bejraburi.

21. An image of the Buddha sitting cross-legged in the attitude of subduing Māra, in the style of the Chieng Saen period. Found at Chieng Mai.

22. A standing Buddha in the attitude of forbidding his

relatives to fight one another, in the style of the Lopburi period, cast and enlarged from an ancient model.

23. An image of the Buddha sitting with one leg above the other in the attitude of subduing Māra, in the style of the U Thong period, cast and enlarged from an ancient model.

24. A standing Buddha in the attitude of Teaching, in the style of the Lopburi period, cast and enlarged from an ancient model.

25. An image of the Buddha sitting with one leg above the other in the attitude of subduing Māra, in the style of the Chiang Saen period. Found at Wat Phra Bat Tak Pha, Lamphun.

26. A walking Buddha in the style of the Sukhodaya period from Wat Mahādhāt, Bangkok.

27. A walking Buddha, in the style of the Sukhodaya period, from Wat Dhāni, Sukhodaya.

28. An image of the Buddha, sitting cross-legged, in the attitude of subduing Māra, of Burmese style. Found at Pagan.

29. A standing Buddha in the attitude of calming the ocean in the style of the Lopburi period, cast and enlarged from an ancient model.

30. An image of the Buddha sitting cross-legged in the attitude of subduing Māra, of Burmese style. From Rangoon.

31. A standing Buddha in the attitude of forbidding his relatives to fight one another, in the style of the U Thong period, cast from a reduced model of the image on the pediment of the 'bōt, at Wat Rājādhivās.

32. An image of the Buddha sitting cross-legged in the attitude of subduing Māra, of Burmese style. Found at Mandalay.

33. A standing Buddha in the attitude of Blessing, in the style of the Sukhodaya period, cast and enlarged from an ancient model.

34. An image of the Buddha sitting cross-legged, in the attitude of subduing Māra, in the style of the Sukhodaya period. Found at Wat Phya Krai (Jotanārām), Bangkok.

35. A standing Buddha in the attitude of forbidding his

relatives to fight one another, in the style of the Ayudhya period. Found at Wat Yai, Bejraburi.

36. An image of the Buddha sitting with one leg above the other, in the attitude of subduing Māra, in the style of the Ayudhya period. Found at Bejraburi.

37. A standing Buddha with the attributes of royalty, in the attitude of calming the ocean, in the Khmer style of the Lopburi period, cast and enlarged from an ancient model.

38. An image of the Buddha sitting with one leg above the other, in the attitude of subduing Māra, in the style of the Chieng Saen period. Found at Wat Phra Bat Tak Pha, Lamphun.

39. A standing Buddha, in the attitude of Teaching, in the style of the Lopburi period, cast and enlarged from an ancient model.

40. An image of the Buddha sitting with one leg above the other, in the attitude of invoking victory, in the style of the Ayudhya period, cast and enlarged from an ancient model.

41. A standing Buddha of Japanese style, cast and enlarged from an ancient model now in the National Museum.

42. An image of the Buddha sitting cross-legged in the attitude of subduing Māra, in the style of the Chieng Saen period. Found at Wat Sawang Arom, Muang Thung Yang, Utaradit province.

43. A standing Buddha in the attitude of calming the ocean, in the Khmer style of the Lopburi period, cast and enlarged from an ancient model.

44. An image of the Buddha sitting cross-legged in the attitude of subduing Māra, in the style of the Chieng Saen period. Found at Wat Arun, Dhonburi.

45. A standing Buddha in the attitude of Teaching, in the style of the Dvāravatī period, cast and enlarged from an ancient stone model.

46. An image of the Buddha sitting cross-legged in the attitude of Teaching (called Gandhārarath, used in the ceremony of calling down the rain), in Sino-Siamese style, of the Ayudhya period. Cast and enlarged from an ancient model now at Wat Yai, Bejraburi.

47. A standing Buddha, in the attitude of calming the ocean, in the style of the Ayudhya period. Found at Bejraburi.

48. An image of the Buddha sitting cross-legged in the attitude of meditation, in the style of the Chieng Saen period. Found at Chieng Saen.

49. A walking Buddha of Indian (Gupta) style, cast and enlarged from a walking Buddha found at Sarnath, and now in the National Museum.

50. An image of the Buddha sitting with one leg above the other, of Japanese style, from Japan.

51. An image of the Buddha sitting with one leg above the other, wearing the attributes of royalty, in the style of Haripuñjaya. Found at Wat Mahādhāt, Lamphun.

The 'Vihān Somdech'.

This 'vihān' was originally designed for the Library of Wat Benchamabopit. When the collection of images of the Buddha became too large to be housed in the inner gallery, some of these images were housed in the building itself.

The ground floor has been reserved for those images of middle size which were too small to be placed in the gallery, and for big images for which no more space was available in that gallery. The first floor will be reserved for images of small size, as it is intended to make of Wat Benchama a kind of annex to the National Museum, where various Buddhist images will be exhibited. At the present time, the installation is not yet complete, and the two most important images now kept in the 'Vihān Somdech' are :

1. Phra Fang, an image wearing the attributes of royalty, in the style of the Ayudhya period. This image, which is placed in an alcove, can be seen from outside. It comes from Muang Fang, north of Uṭaradit.

2. Phra Buddhanaṛasiha, cast by order of King Chulalongkorn from a model kept in the Royal Palace. This image is now in the centre of the first floor.



Behind the bôt

No. 3



Outer gallery
No. 1



Outer gallery
No. 2

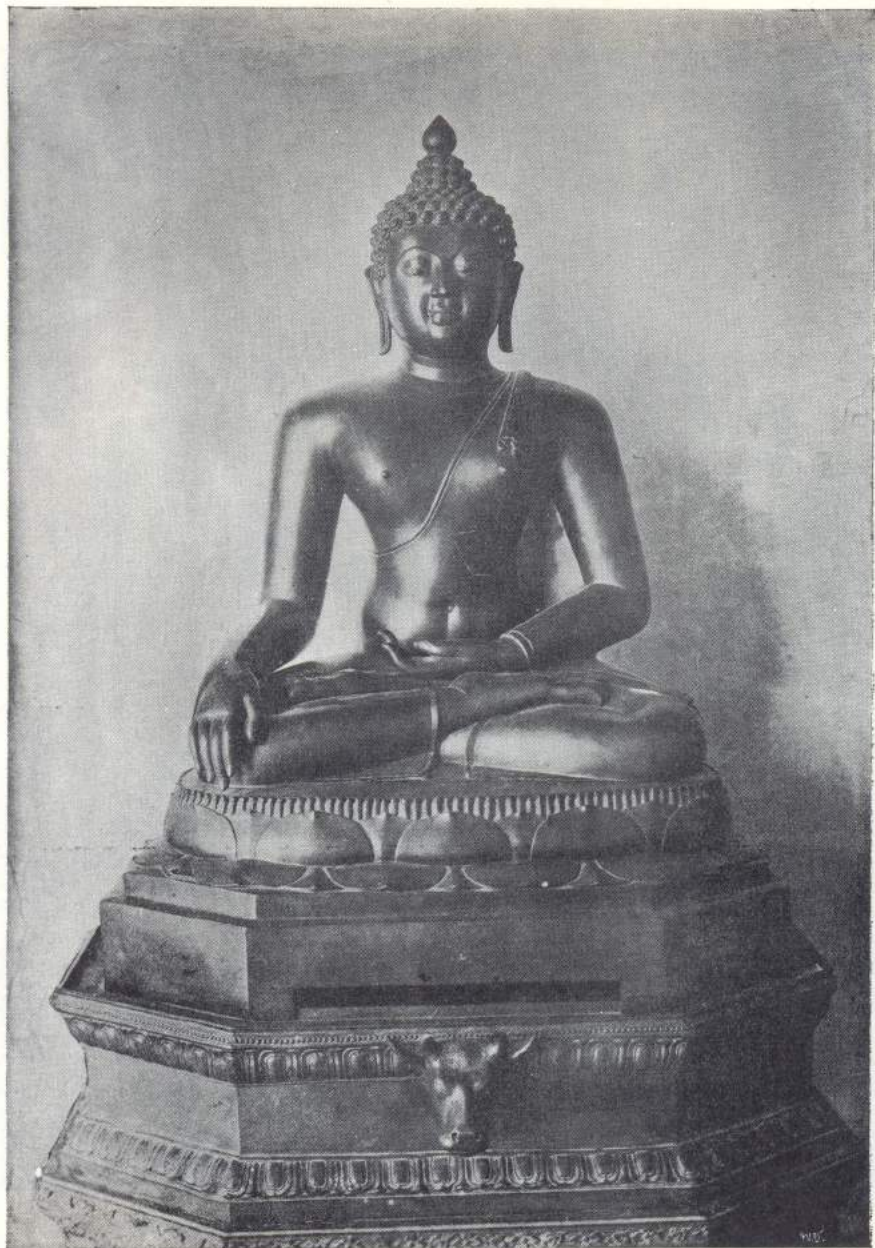


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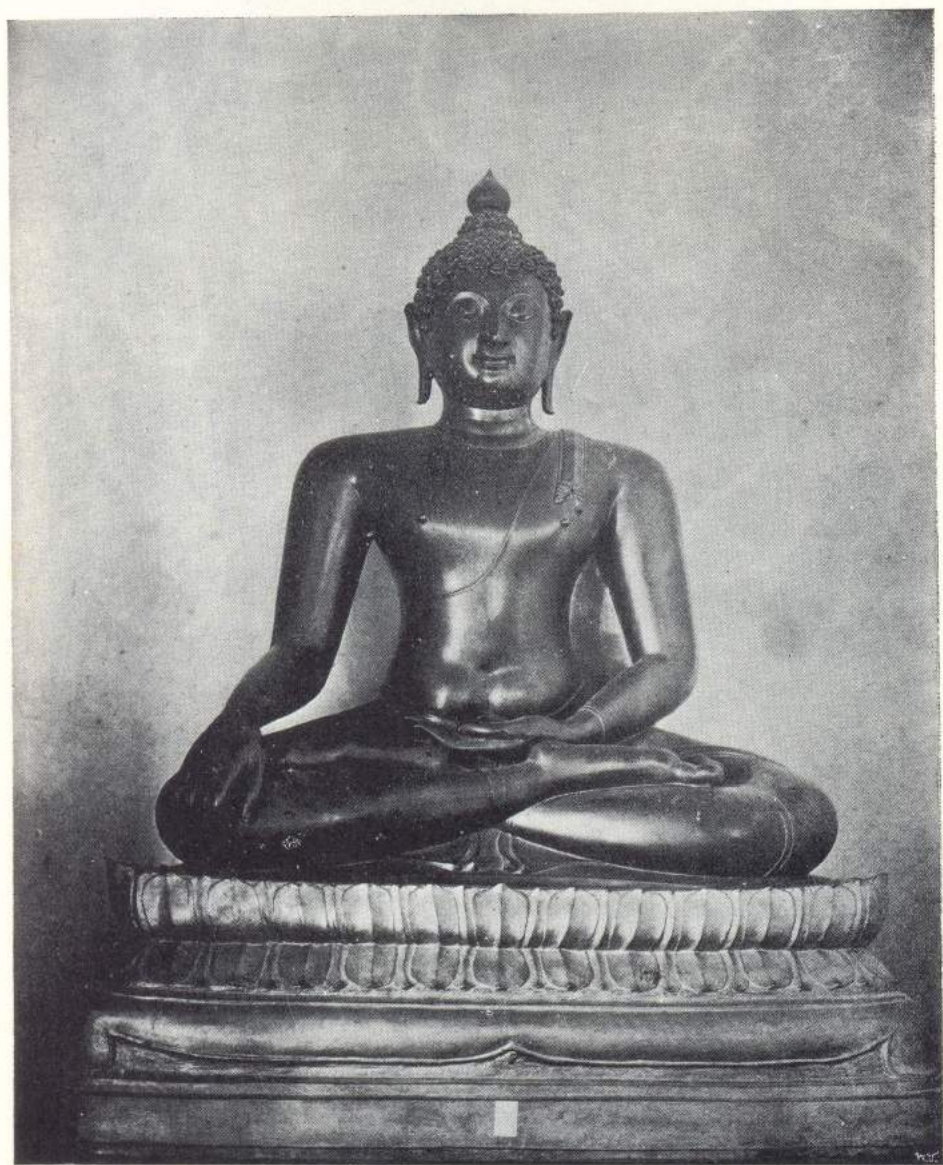


Outer gallery

No. 5



Inner gallery
No. 2



Inner gallery
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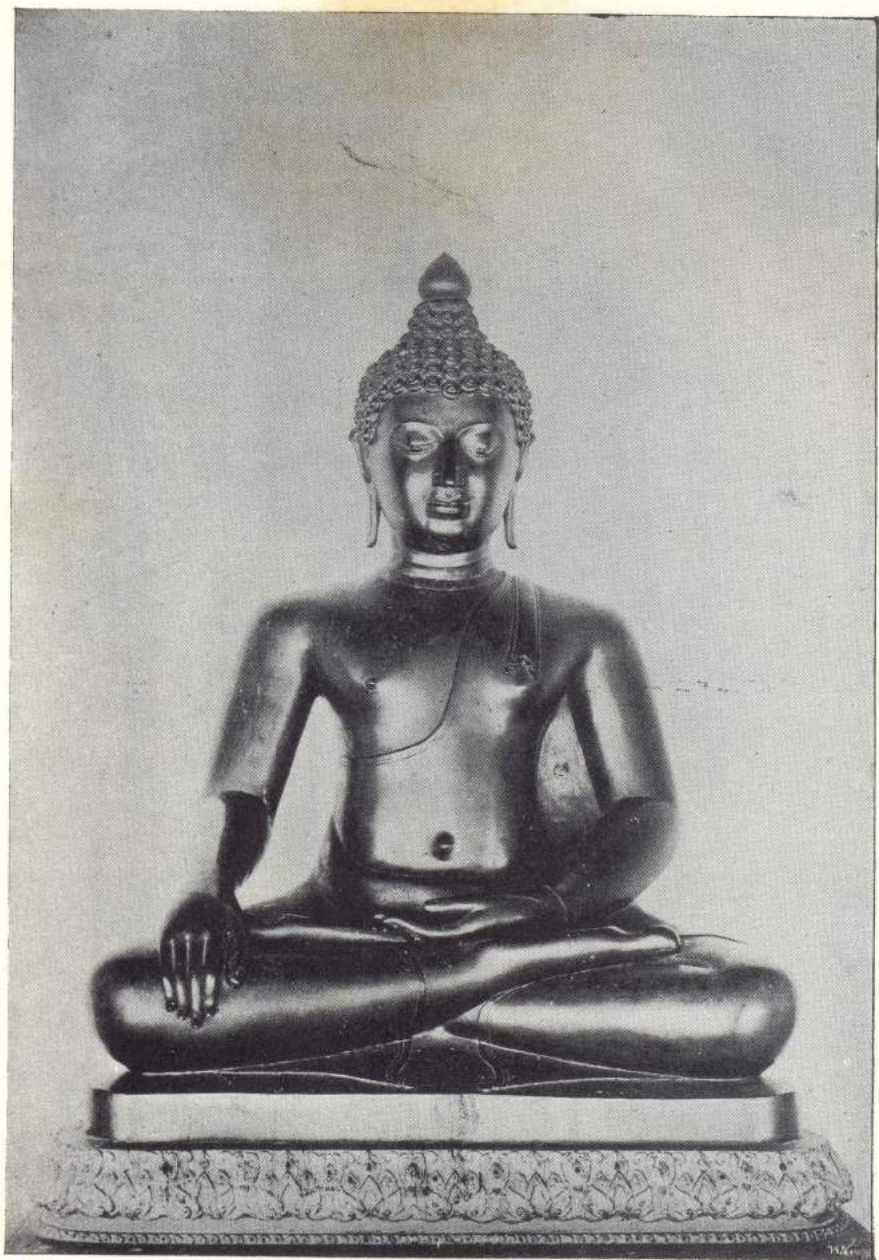
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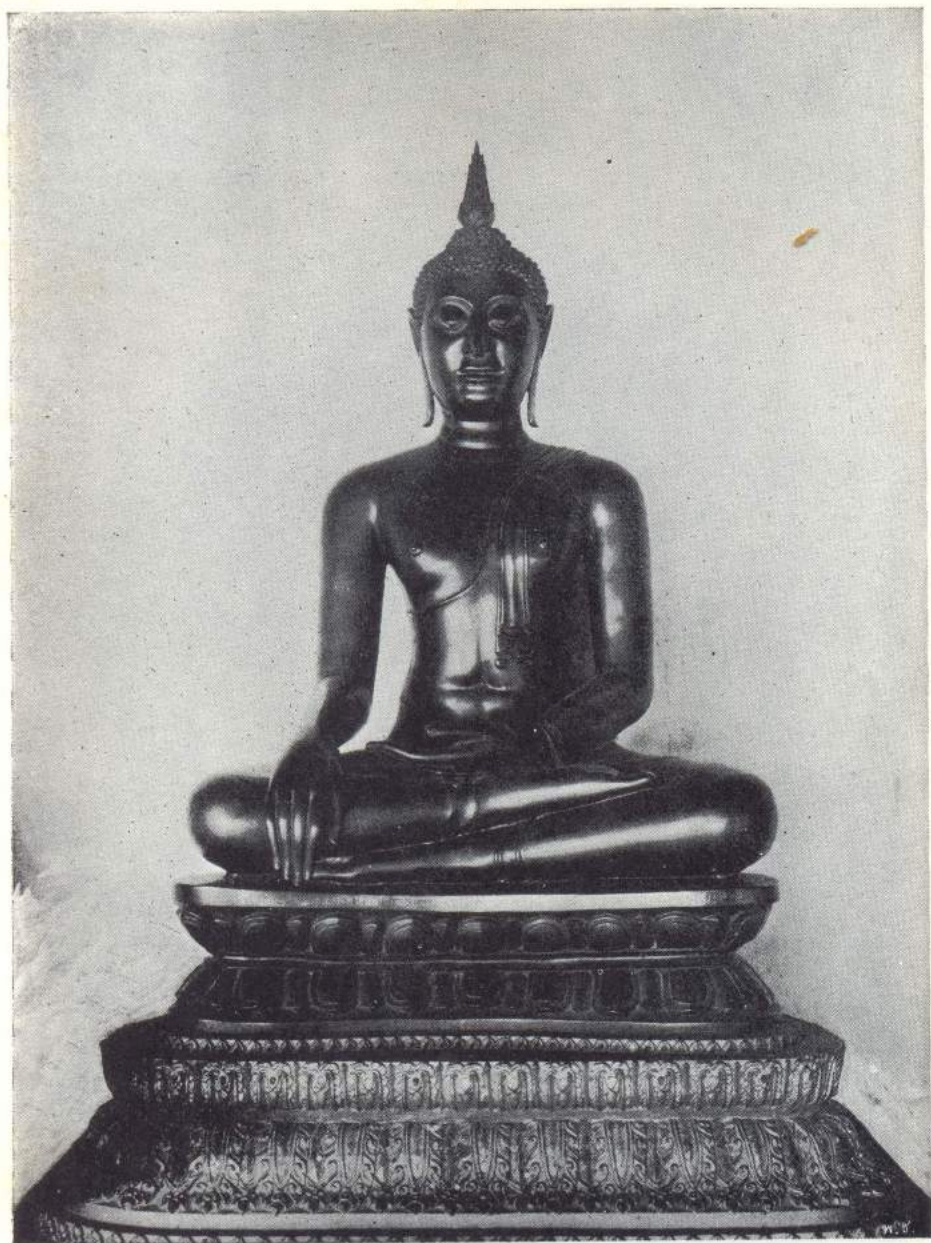
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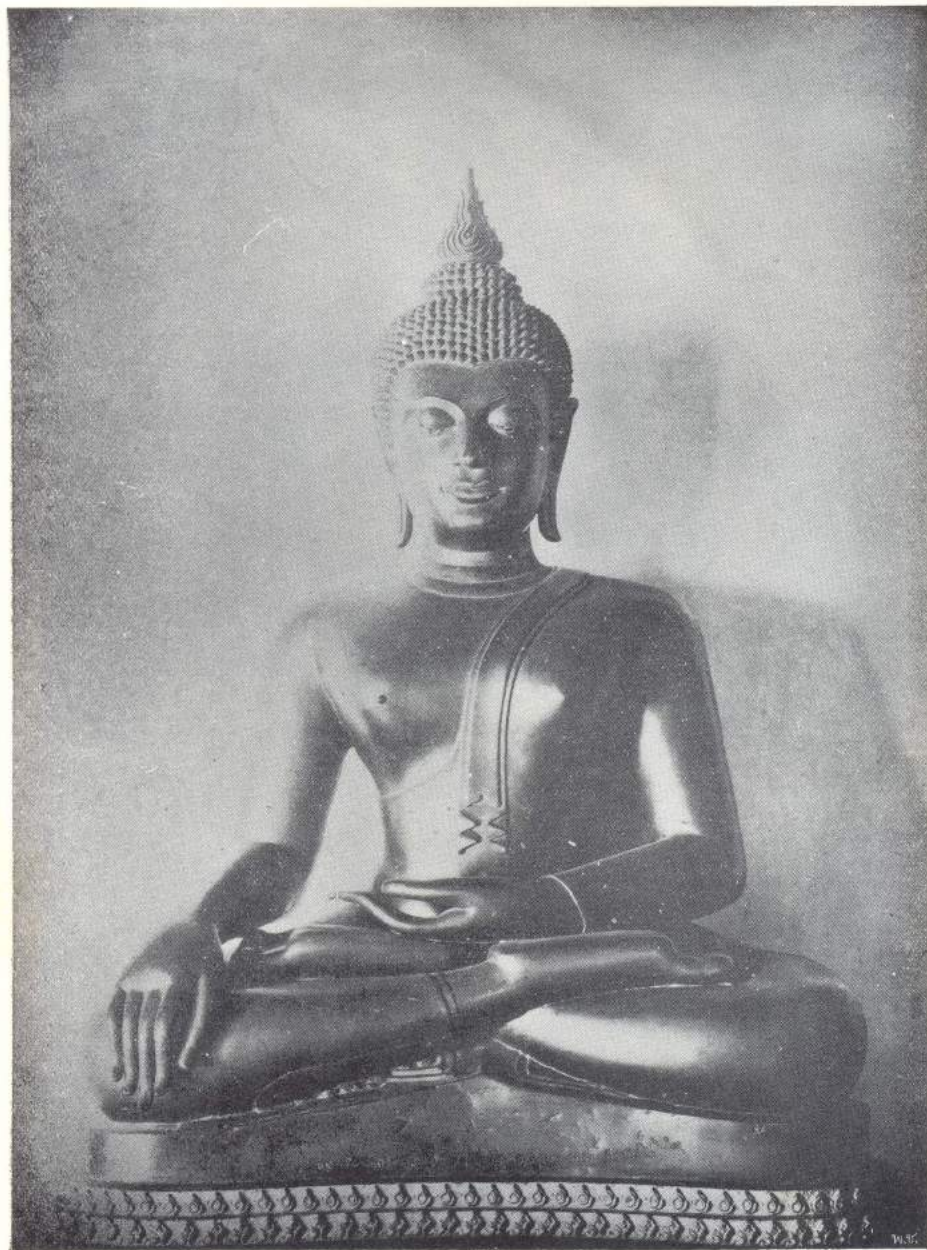
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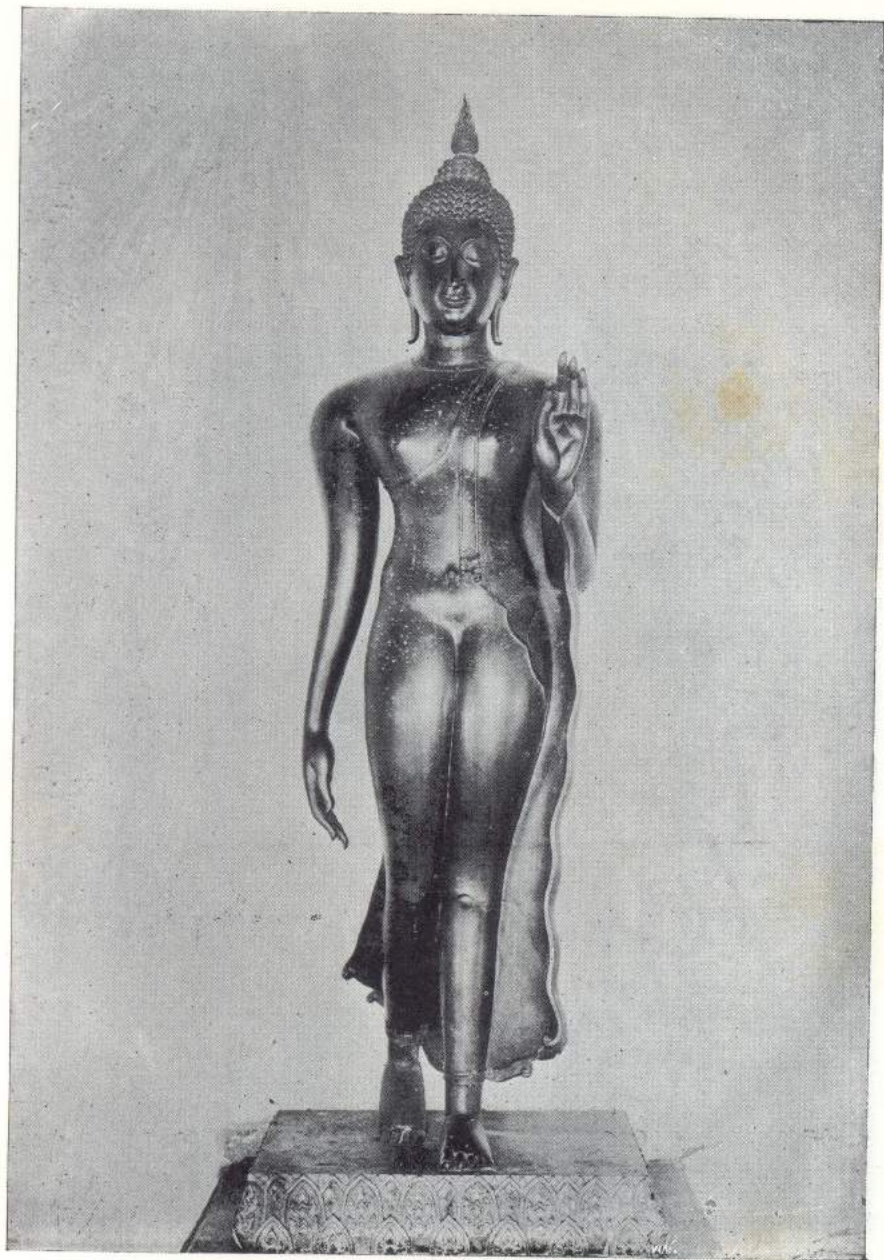


Inner gallery

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Inner gallery
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Inner gallery

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Inner gallery
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Inner gallery
No. 38



Inner gallery

No. 42

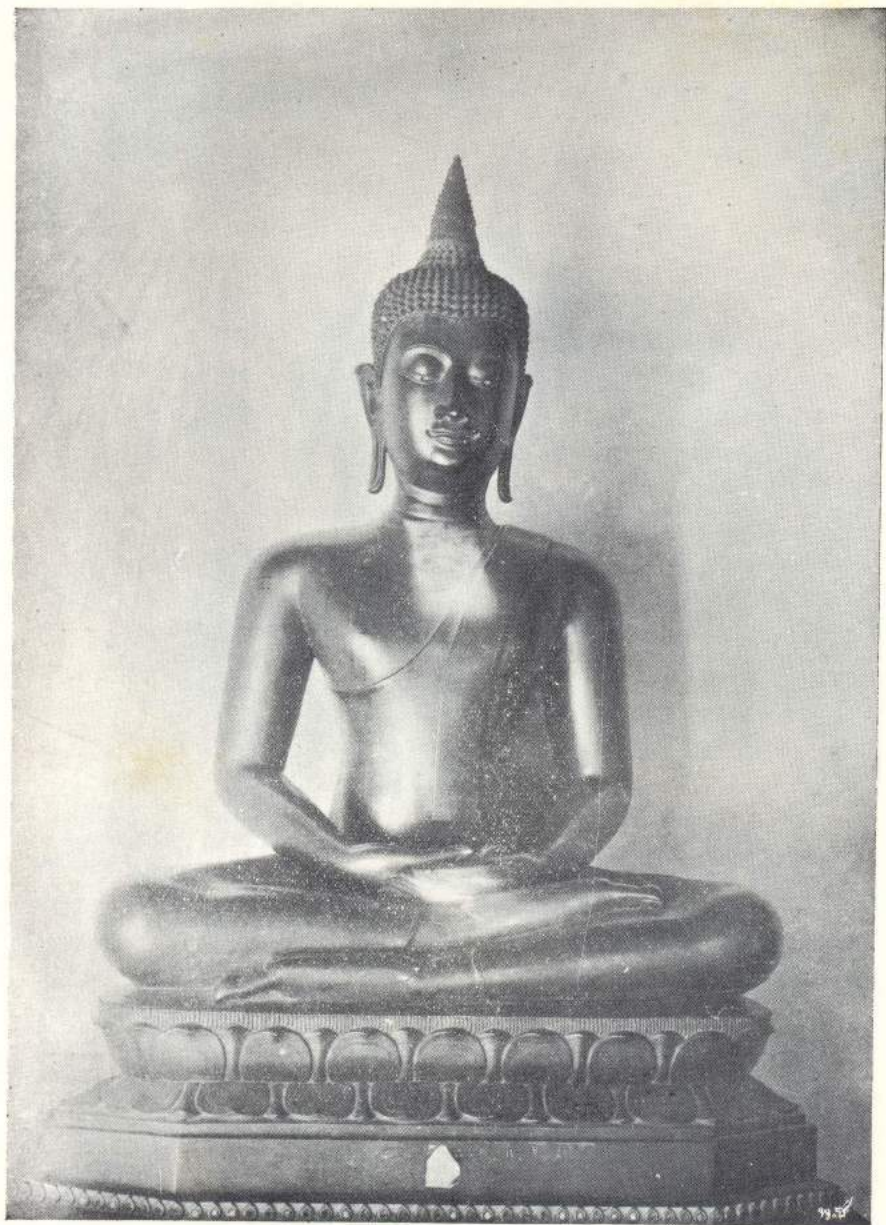


Inner gallery
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Inner gallery

No. 47



Inner gallery

No. 48



Inner gallery
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