

Educator Guide

FEATURED WORK OF ART



HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

This resource includes factual information, cultural context, glossary of terms, as well as prompts and discussion questions related to the *Thammat*, 63.4.

This resource is recommended for Middle School audiences and Social Studies subjects. Students will learn about the historical and religious context of this object to be able to relate and compare it to other historical cultures as well as their own culture and identity. These suggestions were informed by the Maryland State Department of Education 2024 standards.

[Thammat](#)

Unidentified artist

Thailand, 19th century

Wood, mirrored glass, lacquer, paint, gilding

Gift from Doris Duke Charitable Foundation's

Southeast Asian Art Collection, 2002, acc. no. , 63.4

BACKGROUND CONTEXT

Facts About the Work of Art

- The *thammat* is a long temple-shaped structure made of intricately carved wood, giving it a highly decorative look.
- Used in Thai culture as a pulpit for an **abbot** or **monk**, this kind of *thammat* would originally be housed within a temple complex devoted to Buddhism.
- Multi-tiered roofs are reserved for temples, palaces, and other important buildings and contain cosmological significance by taking the form of Mount Meru, with the tiers representing the tip of the mountain and its surrounding peaks. The faithful believe this sacred mountain is located at the center of the Buddhist universe. Given the roof and other elaborate elements of this *thammat*, it is likely that it was made for a temple sponsored by a member of the royal family.
- Nature in India, China, and Thailand influenced the geometric and floral patterns on the base and roofline. Flames decorate the perimeter of the roof, while the ornaments on the upper and lower ends of the roof portray stylized forms representing the heads of the multi-headed serpent deity (*naga*).
- *Thammats* are used for preaching on special Buddhist holidays and sometimes for debating (in which case there would be two *thammats* each with one seated monk), not for chanting and other devotional activities.

Cultural Context

- This *thammat* was made during the Rattanakosin Kingdom, which is the fourth kingdom in Thai history (1782–1932).
- Buddhism was the official religion during the Rattanakosin period. The king appointed the Supreme Patriarch, head of all monks.
- **Theravada Buddhism**, the form of Buddhism most popular in Thailand, emphasizes the importance of monasticism. To become a monk, one must take a vow of 227 laws, which regulates every facet of a monk's life. Buddhist monks trace their tutelage back to Buddha himself.
- Today in Thailand, monks sit in pulpits that are similar but usually smaller and less ornate than this one at the Walters Art Museum, and recite stories from the **jataka tales**, which describe the past lives of the Buddha. These tales relate aspects of the Buddhist Dharma, or religious teachings. *Thammats* still have religious significance today because Buddhist monks preach from these pulpits in many countries, including Thailand, India, Malaysia, and China.

GLOSSARY

Abbot: An abbot is the leader of a monastic community.

Jataka Tales: A collection of Buddhist morality stories written about the Buddha's previous lives and experiences on his road to enlightenment.

Lacquer: A liquid that can be applied as a protective layer on materials such as wood or metal.

Monk: A person who is a member of a religious order and lives in a monastery.

Theravada Buddhism: A sect of Buddhism that adheres strictly to the original teachings of the Buddha and asserts that one's enlightenment can only be achieved through one's own efforts.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[National Geographic Mapmaker](#)

PROMPTS AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. Examine this object. Describe the details, decorations, and anything else you notice about this object.
2. Based on your observations, infer what you think this object's function is and why.
3. This object was used by monks to preach. Examine where the monk would sit and describe what you think this indicates about the status of the monk.
4. The ideals at the center of Buddhism are called the three jewels: the Buddha (both the historical Buddha and the commitment to reaching enlightenment), the dharma (Buddha's teachings) and the sangha. The sangha is the idea of a spiritual community, where monks play a central role. People respect monks and provide them what they need to live as they are the central pillars of their community, or sangha. This thammatt is a way for the community to gather and learn the Buddha's teachings from monks. Reflect on your own community. Who are the pillars in your community? Which structures or places are central to your community?
5. While thinking about the identity and values of people that are central to your community, design a space that could act as a location for you and your community members to gather and connect.