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A groundbreaking exhibition time-travels back to the early centuries BC to tell how Buddhism spread across Asia. **Iola Lenzi** finds enlightenment at the ACM

'On the Nalanda Trail: Buddhism in India, China and South-East Asia' – in its final weeks at the Asian Civilisations Museum – signals a sea change in Singapore's approach to culture. As well as boasting world-class art, the show confirms the city-state's new-found confidence in 'made-in-Singapore' content. This exhibition, unlike many that have made headlines in the last few years (such as the current Greek display at the National Museum, or the Tyler Print Institute's Picasso etchings last year), has been researched and put together entirely by ACM's own team of art historians. The result is impressive, combining accessible information about Buddhism and the spread of the religion with new analysis of the relationship between South-East Asian, Chinese and Indian Buddhist expression. If that's not enough, a sacred Buddha relic is also on display.

Set in a darkened gallery at the rear of the museum's second floor, the exhibit highlights Buddha's life and the importance of Nalanda, one of the first great universities. The site was a centre for Buddhist teaching more than 800 years ago, and served as a hub for monks travelling from the farthest reaches of Asia's Buddhist world.

The journey here starts chronologically, presenting several superb examples of very early Buddhist art from India. One of the star pieces is the 2nd-century BC Sunga-period sandstone relief depicting an empty throne under the bodhi tree (Buddhist art refrained from representing Buddha in the human form until the 1st century BC), on loan from the Indian Museum, Kolkata. This sculpture – unique even in India – sets the tone of the exhibit, which brims over with objects that are seldom, if ever, allowed out of their respective permanent collections. It's a rare opportunity to see fragile silk paintings from Dunhuang on the Silk Road, or some of the earliest representations of Buddha from Gandhara (in today's Pakistan).

Obtaining so much loan material is a coup for the ACM and its international credibility. 'We have been very lucky to secure so many priceless pieces from prestigious private and public collections, including numerous fragile and light-sensitive works that never leave their home institutions, never mind the country,' says Dr Gauri Krishnan, exhibit curator and senior curator of the South Asia gallery and Research at the ACM.

But beyond its exceptional display, 'On the Nalanda Trail' breaks new ground by highlighting indigenous Buddhist art from South-East Asia, suggesting that



Rock-hard Don't mess with dvarapala, a door guardian from the Tang dynasty

our region was more than just a recipient of Chinese and Indian influences.

'Though scholarship centering on the relationship between Chinese and Indian Buddhist artistic expression is well established in the academic world, there is far less about the Indian/South-East Asian Buddhist connection,' says Krishnan. 'As a result, we wanted to tackle this theme in particular by illustrating the India/South-East Asia link materially. The show, among other things, puts Indian and South-East Asian Buddhist art side by side, underscoring the cultural and aesthetic cross-fertilisation that existed.'

Working with the seldom-travelled Indonesian national collection, Krishnan

highlights the relationship between the artistic expression of Indian Buddhism and that of Srivijaya, the little-known maritime kingdom that flourished on Sumatra from the 7th to the 14th century. Rather than a far-flung outpost of Buddhism, Srivijaya was in itself a centre, a stronghold of Vajrayana Buddhism; the kingdom not only sent its own people to Nalanda, but also drew pilgrims and scholars from other parts of Asia. 'So the relationship definitely worked in both directions,' says Krishnan. 'As well as South-East Asia gravitating toward India and China, the Chinese and Indians were culturally fertilised by South-East Asia. This area of history has not been much argued before.'



Gentle Guanyin Bodhisattva of mercy



Wise guys Buddhist deities in bronze

The hybrid of cultures is evident in a bronze torso of the Bodhisattva Maitreya (dated 8th to 9th century) from Palembang, southern Sumatra, on loan from the National Museum of Indonesia. The sculpture shows elements of indigenous Indonesia, but also the markings of Nalanda (ie headgear and facial features). A Sanskrit-inscribed copper plaque (dated 9th century) shows the close bilateral relationship between Indian and Sumatran kings of the period

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and Srivijaya's financial support of Buddhist monasteries in India around the time of the kingdom's apotheosis. Found at Nalanda in 1916, and now housed in the National Museum in New Delhi, the plaque is a key document for historians researching Srivijaya.

Through the combined display of extraordinary works of art and a skilfully structured storyline, 'On the Nalanda Trail' explores the complex history of the dissemination of Buddhism through China and South-East Asia. Beyond the breathtaking beauty of its art, this show speaks of the dynamics of exchange and the culture of tolerance that still characterises our region today. 'On the Nalanda Trail: Buddhism in India, China and South-East Asia' at the Asian Civilisations Museum closes on 23 Mar. A catalogue published by the Asian Civilisations Museum accompanies the show